

# REVISITING THE SUBLIME HISTORY

DICKENS, CHRISTIANITY, AND *THE LIFE OF OUR LORD*

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## ABSTRACT

While the study of Charles Dickens's religion has produced various results, few would contest that Dickens's religious views are shaped by his peculiar emphasis on Jesus and the Gospels. As to the precise nature of his views and the degree to which his commitment to the Christian faith extends, however, a much lesser degree of consensus has been established. I attempt to demonstrate here that at the heart of his work is a conspicuous Christian worldview, which is grounded squarely in the imitation of Jesus and which pervades his life and his work in the most profound yet unobtrusive ways. I argue, then, that Dickens's *The Life of Our Lord* is a definitive source in the Dickens corpus for our understanding of his Christian thought and worldview. Moreover, as a serious expression of Dickens's understanding of Christianity, *The Life of Our Lord* also functions as an index to his Christian thought in the larger Dickens corpus.

Of first importance then, I attempt to establish the authority of *The Life of Our Lord* as a composition that will bear the full weight of such assertions. Then, I analyze its content as to its implicit theology in order to establish not only its thoroughgoing Christian character but also to demonstrate that it reveals Dickens's own genuine Christian conviction manifested in all his work. Drawing the work to a close, I attempt to demonstrate how *The Life of Our Lord* helps us to understand Dickens's churchmanship and his relationship to the church. In the end, I comment on its intended purpose as moral instruction for his children exemplifying his understanding of Christianity. The study demonstrates throughout how the Christianity embodied and articulated in *The Life of Our Lord* is consistently and naturally reflected in all of Dickens's work, whether fiction, journalism or correspondence.

*“If ever there was a message full of what modern people call true Christianity, the direct appeal to the common heart, a faith that was simple, a hope that was infinite, and a charity that was omnivorous, if ever there came among men what they call the Christianity of Christ, it was in the message of Dickens.”*

– G. K. Chesterton

## PREFACE

### I

When Dennis Walder published his *Dickens and Religion* in 1981, it seemed he had answered the call of K. J. Fielding almost two decades earlier for a more profound investigation into the religious thought of Charles Dickens (Walder xiii).<sup>1</sup> In the following year, Andrew Sanders published his *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist* in which he considered Dickens’s treatment of death and resurrection in the context of Dickens’s “vital and pervasive” Christianity, professions of which Sanders suggests are “constant and [...] heartfelt” (x). Then in 1984, a more theoretical study of Dickens’s use of biblical allusion in the context of his own understanding of Christianity appeared in Janet Larson’s *Dickens and the Broken Scriptures*. In these important works, the study of Dickens’s religion is advanced substantially beyond any previous work or works in Dickens scholarship. Still, even with the advancement provided by Walder, Sanders and Larson, Dickens’s *The Life of Our Lord*, a small but significant work that would seem to merit consideration in the larger discussion of his religious thought, remains to be seriously studied. It is the purpose of this present work, then, to revisit the discussion of Dickens’s religious thought with particular attention to his *The Life of Our Lord* and to argue that it is a carefully composed and legitimate expression of Dickens’s own faith. As such, it is a definitive and telling work, a careful study of which can contrib-

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<sup>1</sup> While others treated Dickens’s religion before Walder (see, for instance, Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971] or Burt Hornback, *“Noah’s Arkitecture”: A Study of Dickens’s Mythology* [Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1972]), they did so as an aspect of a broader study. Walder was the first in the latter half of the twentieth century to attempt a full and focused study of Dickens and religion.

ute a great deal to our understanding of Dickens's religious thought and the basic Christianity that underpinned his worldview.

My purpose here will not be to suggest that Dickens was a serious theologian or that he was actively engaged in the scholarly theological debate and formulation of his day. Nor will I suggest that it was Dickens's intent in *The Life of Our Lord* to compose a theological treatise or otherwise formulate a theology. I will, however, maintain that Dickens, as a thoughtful and serious layperson, was at least aware of many of the pressing theological and biblical concerns of his day. In that context, it would be fair to say that Dickens thought carefully about his faith, a faith that is reflected not only in *The Life of Our Lord* as he sought to teach his children about Christianity, but also in the larger body of his work to which *The Life of Our Lord* can be seen as an index of sorts. Moreover, I will maintain that, as we take *The Life of Our Lord* seriously as a legitimate expression of Dickens's understanding of Christianity and the life of faith, as we consider the content of *The Life of Our Lord* and how it can illuminate the larger body of Dickens's work, and as we observe especially his own editorial selection of material in his Gospel sources and his arrangement and rendering of that material, we can learn a great deal about his religious thought, particularly his own understanding of Christianity and the life of faith.

One primary aspect of this study will be to consider Dickens's work in the context of the theological and biblical literature of early to mid-nineteenth-century popular Anglicanism that helped to define the popular expression of Christianity in that same period. In situating Dickens's work within this context, I will purposely seek to engage primarily with the popular theology, biblical commentary and devotional literature of his day. While there are many fine works that seek to consider both the secular and religious fiction of the nineteenth century and how that literature helped to shape, and was shaped by, popular Chris-

tian thought,<sup>2</sup> my purpose here will be to consider the popular theology, biblical commentary and devotional literature accessible to and used often by laypersons and families for Christian devotion and study in the home as well as by those clergymen who prepared and delivered the sermons the laity heard. Clearly, this body of literature played a central role in shaping both nineteenth-century preaching and a popular lay understanding of theology, the Bible and the Christian life.

In engaging with this literature, I will concentrate on three particular categories: theology, biblical commentary, and Gospel harmonies (both adult and juvenile). To a lesser extent, I will consider sermons and devotional literature as well. To provide a broad and even portrait of this theological-biblical landscape, in each group I will include literature representative of the various church parties of the early to mid-nineteenth century. My priority, however, will be to consider the literature in these categories that was most widely read, or written by a well-known author of the time, and therefore most likely shaping religious thought. Because of Dickens's interest in and alleged association with Unitarianism, I will consider a variety of Unitarian writings as well.

Another important aspect of the present work that should be mentioned here is a technique I will call "genre lock". In using *The Life of Our Lord* as an index of sorts, I will often attempt to demonstrate how a given element of Christian thought articulated in *The Life of Our Lord* and found in his other work is an expression of Dickens's own understanding of Christianity. Particularly when citing the novels and other fiction, I will use genre lock to triangulate whenever possible material from *The Life of Our Lord*, and from

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Elizabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Robert Lee Wolff, *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977); Barry Qualls, *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction. The Novel as Book of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

Dickens's correspondence, speeches or journalism with the material from the novel to support my claim. Genre lock should not be seen simply as multiple attestation. While it is multiple attestation, it is more in that it is intended to demonstrate that the narrative point of view of a given citation in a novel is consistent with Dickens's worldview and his understanding of Christianity and the life of faith as expressed in the triangulated material.

## II

Without question, the nineteenth century was a time of religious and theological crisis and change. At times, it seems as if everyone was rethinking his or her religion and redefining his or her faith. And there was no shortage of religious and theological points of view from which to choose, especially in Dickens's day. For those of a more orthodox persuasion, the Establishment offered a wide spectrum of options within the High Church, Low Church or Broad Church; on the margins (at least according to many) were the Evangelicals, Methodists, and other Dissenters; further afield of mainstream religious thought was Unitarianism. There were also some who wanted to recast Christianity completely, to do away with what was thought in some circles to be obsolete and usher in a religion fit for a new humanity in a new and progressive age. Consequently, during the fourth and fifth decades of the nineteenth century, an insipient religious humanism and, behind the determination of August Comte's Positivism, the Religion of Humanity<sup>3</sup> began to offer new religious options outside the pale of even the broadest Christian thought.

I will maintain throughout the present work, and seek to demonstrate through the material presented, that the discussion of Dickens's religion belongs within the confines of

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<sup>3</sup> While Terence R. Wright points out that those subscribing to Comte's Religion of Humanity remained relatively very few in number, he argues that Comte's Positivism, and particularly his Religion of Humanity, was nonetheless influential in nineteenth-century England. See especially Wright 4-5.

the Establishment and that a passing interest in Unitarianism is as far afield of orthodoxy as Dickens would roam during his lifetime. Indeed, I will insist that Dickens's fundamental religious ideas were coming to maturity right about the time he was composing *The Life of Our Lord* and remained essentially consistent within the range of a popular expression of Anglicanism the remainder of his life. Certainly, Dickens's ideas about his faith continued to develop throughout his lifetime in dynamic fashion, but his fundamental understanding of Christianity and the life of faith remained substantially unchanged. In light of the vast religious possibilities open to Dickens in his lifetime, his foray into Unitarianism seems less than radical and his expressed criticisms of the Church seem to be, when considered in perspective, those criticisms of one within the fold of Christianity and not one outwith the fold.

Because Dickens's most extreme departures from a more or less orthodox Christianity seem to come in his flirtation with Unitarianism and because some will maintain that *The Life of Our Lord* may express such Unitarian thought, I will devote some time to dealing with the Unitarianism of Dickens's day and how it may or may not have shaped his work and his thought. For the most part, however, I will attempt to deal with the more or less mainstream popular Christian thought of Dickens's day and how he interacted with it.

### III

Gillian Avery said of *The Life of Our Lord*, "Some easy books look difficult; some difficult books look easy, and this is emphatically one of the second kind" (Dickens, *Holiday Romance* xxvii). In saying that, she reminds us that as we study *The Life of Our Lord* we must resist the urge to see it merely as an unremarkable attempt at a piece of children's literature by Dickens, or as little more than recollections of gospel narratives and simple platitudes for his young children. Indeed, as we begin to see *The Life of Our Lord* as Dickens

hoped it would be understood by his children and as we consider it a serious expression of his understanding of Christianity, we might begin to understand what Avery meant when she called *The Life of Our Lord* a difficult book that looks easy. In *The Life of Our Lord* we have a definitive source from Dickens himself that might open his work to us and provide us with new ways to see and appreciate his own understanding of Christianity and the life of faith.

## CHAPTER THE FIRST

### AN EASY ACCOUNT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

*“I put a New Testament among your books for the very same reasons, and with the very same hopes, that made me write an easy account of it for you, when you were a little child.”*

– from a letter of Dickens to his son Edward

“We are accustomed to summing people up when their career is over,” Noel Annan observed, “because we imagine that only then can we form a judgement on a man’s contribution to his times; but we will get a truer picture if we see people at the height of their powers when their achievements, or indeed their failures, are still before them” (Annan 1). Interestingly, in November of 1843, Dickens wrote to Forster, “I feel my power now more than I ever did” (1: 332), to which Edgar Johnson has responded, “It was no idle boast, [...]. His imaginative energy had never been more electric” (*Dickens* 1: 469). The 1840s, then, were years in which Dickens’s creative powers intensified to produce some of his most memorable work. Works of this period, such as *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Chimes*, and *David Copperfield* indicate that Dickens was, indeed, enjoying a dynamic period of artistic and imaginative power.

We learn further from Forster that this decade would become also a time of apparent spiritual upheaval and general unrest in Dickens’s life. It is commonly held that what Dickens experienced was a sort of crisis of faith or a season of spiritual ennui and dislocation (Forster 1: 389). Significantly, his work would suggest that, even though these were trying times in some ways for Dickens, they were, nonetheless, energizing and productive, at least artistically. “He felt no diminution of his creative powers,” wrote Fred Kaplan, “and his self-appreciative responses to the Dombey world he was creating reveal his awareness of being at the top of his form” (208). In spite of what Steven Marcus describes as bouts of restlessness and even desperate anxiety (271-92), this time of spiritual upheaval would be a positive and

galvanizing experience for Dickens, not a negative one. Certainly, *Dombey and Son*, *A Christmas Carol*, and *The Chimes* are not stories that vacillate or hedge on their spiritual or religious themes. On the contrary, they express Dickens's convictions with unprecedented clarity and deftness. If Dickens is not also at the height of his spiritual power during this period, he is certainly at the height of his spiritual acuity. As Annan suggests, then, it is the work of this period which might tell us a great deal about the person of Charles Dickens.

In the midst of this most productive and powerful period, Dickens also wrote the less familiar, and curiously disregarded, *The Life of Our Lord*. Often referred to as an "easy version of the New Testament," *The Life of Our Lord* was a work expressly written by Dickens for his children and one that he adamantly refused to publish. Written sometime in the 1840s,<sup>4</sup> it was first published in 1934 shortly after the death of his last surviving child, Sir Henry Fielding Dickens. In his will, Sir Henry expressed his desire for the family, upon his own death, to re-evaluate his father's ban on the publishing of this family Gospel. The family was not long in deciding to have it published and in March of 1934, Dickens's "New Testament" was published, in serial form first,<sup>5</sup> under the title *The Life of Our Lord*. A few months later it would be published in book form.<sup>6</sup>

*The Life of Our Lord* (hereafter, *TLOL*), contrary to Robert Hanna's insistence (*Charles Dickens*' 43-45), has not been a work that has attracted much scholarly attention in terms of generating any conspicuous discussion in Dickens studies.<sup>7</sup> Typically, Dickens

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<sup>4</sup> There is some question as to the exact dating of *The Life of Our Lord*, a question which will be taken up further below.

<sup>5</sup> In Great Britain, Associated Newspapers published it in their *Daily Mail*, while in the United States it was published in almost two hundred different newspapers. See Egan (47-50).

<sup>6</sup> In England, it was published by Associated Newspapers; in America, it was published by Simon and Schuster. See Egan (48). A rather full and valuable discussion of the history of the composition and manuscript of *The Life of Our Lord* can be found in the dissertations of Madonna Egan (40-51) and Robert Hanna (5-8), Hanna's being the most up-to-date.

<sup>7</sup> Hanna insists in his work that the unpublished dissertations as well as the notes and prefaces of the various

scholarship has addressed it only incidentally, and it is seldom taken as a work of any serious consequence. However, the more carefully *TLOL* is examined, the more one becomes convinced that it plays an important role not only in our understanding of Dickens's Christianity, but also in his entire body of work. It will be the purpose of this work, then, to take *TLOL* seriously as a legitimate expression of Dickens's religious thought and as a work that can lead us into the larger Dickens corpus with a view toward a clearer understanding of his thoroughgoing Christian worldview.

### §1.1 TAKING *THE LIFE OF OUR LORD* SERIOUSLY

The initial impact and continuing influence of the older skeptical views of, for instance, Humphry House or Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch concerning Dickens and religion<sup>8</sup> have had a formative impact on the way many have thought about Dickens's Christianity and thus, *TLOL*. Similarly, the negative interpretation of Dickens's religious parodies and caricatures that understands Dickens as expressly non-religious has played a role as well.<sup>9</sup> The one factor that seems to have had the greatest impact, however, is the general sense among many Dickens critics that his views were so vague and sometimes seemingly contradictory that he left no clearly formed expression and no consistent thought by which we

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published editions of *TLOL* constitute scholarly treatment of it. In the first place, it can be argued as to whether or not the notes and prefaces to the various editions of *TLOL* always represent scholarly commentary. In the second place, four unpublished dissertations have not drawn *TLOL* into the broader arena of scholarly discussion. In the third place, the literature demonstrates that no serious attempt to study *TLOL* has yet been published.

<sup>8</sup> House observed, "His practical humanist kind of Christianity hardly touched the fringes of what is called religious experience, and his work shows no indication of any powerful feeling connected with a genuinely religious subject" (131). See House's entire discussion, 106-32. Likewise, Quiller-Couch advised, as he attempted to come to terms with the "atmosphere" of Dickens's world, "To begin with, we must jettison religion; or at any rate all religion that gets near to definition by words in a Credo" (65). For Quiller-Couch, Dickens had "simply disregarded" religion and the religious issues that "were agitating men's thoughts" at the time.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, not all critics or scholars approach the subject of Dickens and religion negatively. Consider, for instance, Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), and Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982).

might judge more precisely his religious stance. In other words, what Dickens has left us is too ambiguous and eclectic to establish any satisfactory consensus concerning his religious thought and any coherent Christian worldview.

Andrew Sanders hints at this general sense among Dickens scholars in his Introduction to *Charles Dickens Resurrectionist* (ix-xiii), while Robert Newsom describes Dickens's religious views as so protean that they are scarcely intelligible as religious at all (*Charles Dickens Revisited* 70-71). It is Philip Collins, however, who seems to capture best this general impression when he observes, "It is probably useless to try to define some consistent position or development in his religious beliefs" (Collins, *Education* 54-5). As such, then, while it is accepted that Dickens was religious<sup>10</sup> in some sense of that word, it is generally believed that there is no consistent pattern in his Christian or religious thought and that it would be unwise to try to reconstruct one.

Against such an assessment, I will argue that we have had, since 1934, a deliberate and substantial expression of Dickens's religious thought in *TLOL*. While it is admittedly a seemingly simple piece, it nonetheless provides an outline of the fundamental elements that underpinned Dickens's Christian worldview. Accordingly, *TLOL* needs to be taken seriously in the scholarly discussion of Dickens's work. Functioning as an index of sorts, *TLOL* provides a clarifying voice especially with regard to the nature and essence of the Christian character of Dickens's own religious thought. And when we allow the rest of Dickens's work to be illuminated by *TLOL*, we observe, not the confused and eclectic religious picture generally alleged, but rather the coherent and consistent contours of a clearly focused and sub-

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<sup>10</sup> Walder's entire argument turns on maintaining the distinction between "the religious" and "the Christian" in Dickens. He insists that it is counter-productive to pursue the Christian elements in Dickens. A productive approach, says Walder, should deal with the broader religious elements (1-4). Walder states, "to begin with, it is more helpful to talk about the 'religious' aspect, or aspects, of Dickens's work than the specifically Christian" (1).

stantive Christian worldview.

It flies in the face of what is typically believed and asserted by many scholars to suggest that we have an essential and serious treatment of Dickens's Christian thought in *TLOL*. It is argued by many, in fact, that there is very little remarkable or noteworthy about it, especially in terms of theology or significant religious expression. There are good reasons, however, to believe that Dickens did intend *TLOL* to be a serious expression of his Christian thought, as well as the expression of the essence<sup>11</sup> of Christianity as he understood it. Three reasons in particular suggest as much. First, that *TLOL* was written by a father expressly for his children for their moral and religious instruction, a fact often used to dismiss any seriousness of purpose in *TLOL*, seems rather to point to Dickens's serious intent. Dickens was quite concerned about and involved in the religious instruction of his children, and that instruction was not something that he would have indiscriminately left to others or taken less than seriously. *TLOL* was a central part of that instruction and would have commanded his care and attention. Second, that *TLOL* is taken up with the presentation of the life of Jesus, so central to Dickens's worldview and his understanding of Christianity, suggests serious intention in its conception and composition. As I will argue, the life and teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels are the defining elements of Dickens's religious orientation and worldview. Third, that *TLOL* bears the marks of careful composition and painstaking crafting seem to indicate that Dickens was intent upon creating a narrative history of Jesus that would convey to his children a precise and deliberate expression of the es-

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<sup>11</sup> I use the term here in its broadest lexical sense to refer to that without which something, by its nature, cannot exist, or without which it cannot exist or continue in normal condition or form. There are some, like Janet Larson, who use the term "essentialist" to refer to a stripped down version of Christianity in which, according to Matthew Arnold, "the moral verities of the old religion" have been distilled through the "scientific appreciation of the facts of religion" (Knoepflmacher 5).

sence of what he understood to be “real Christianity”.<sup>12</sup> A more fully developed discussion of these considerations should help provide a clearer understanding of Dickens’s seriousness of purpose in *TLOL*.

### §1.1.1 FROM A FATHER TO HIS CHILDREN

That it was written for his children is often cited as a primary reason why *TLOL* should not be considered a serious attempt by Dickens to communicate anything substantial about his faith. For instance, when Robert Newsom observes of *TLOL*, “Given the intended audience, it is hardly fair to infer the specifics of Dickens’s faith from this slight work” (*Oxford* 500), he seems to imply that because *TLOL* was written specifically for Dickens’s children, it is somehow childish and simplistic and less than a serious expression of faith. Contrary to Newsom’s claim, however, it would seem more likely that Dickens would, in fact, attempt to provide the “specifics” of his faith to his own children; that he would try to express those essential aspects of the Christian faith, that in his mind, define it and make it worthy of allegiance. That seems to be the point of *TLOL*. It is a deliberate attempt to acquaint his children with the specifics of Christianity, as he understood it, in order that they might come to feel and know “real Christianity” for themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Comments by Dickens in a letter to the Reverend David Macrae in 1861 seem to make clear that he was involved in the religious instruction of his children, hopeful that they should come to know what “real Christianity” was; and *TLOL* played no small role in that instruction. Speaking of his children, Dickens wrote:

All of them, from the first to the last, have had a little version of the New Testament that I wrote for them, read to them long before they could read, and no young peo-

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<sup>12</sup> Dickens uses the phrase, “real Christianity”, in the oft-quoted letter to Rev. R. H. Davies (Forster 2: 469).

<sup>13</sup> If it be argued that Newsom means by “specifics” a more theologically detailed expression, I will argue below that the simple and straightforward nature of Dickens’s faith allowed him to express the specifics of his faith through *TLOL* and through his other work. As I will maintain below, simple does not imply simplistic.

ple can have had an earlier knowledge of, or interest in, that book. It is an inseparable part of their earliest remembrances. (128)

This citation suggests at least three things: 1) that Dickens was interested in relating the truth of Christianity to his children; 2) that he wrote *TLOL* to aid in doing that; and 3) that *TLOL* was written to be read to his children, thereby enabling Dickens to take a central participatory role in the religious instruction of his children.<sup>14</sup>

The same concerns and interests resonate through other correspondence of Dickens and reveal his intentions similarly. On 8 June 1860, for instance, Dickens wrote to J. M. Makeham:

I have always striven in my writings to express veneration for the life and lessons of our Saviour; because I feel it; and because I re-wrote that history for my children—every one of whom knew it, from having it repeated to them, long before they could read, and almost as soon as they could speak. (Forster 2: 469)

And to his son Edward (Plorn), he wrote:

I put a New Testament among your books for the very same reasons, and with the very same hopes, that made me write an easy account of it for you, when you were a little child. Because it is the best book that ever was, or will be, known in the world; and because it teaches you the best lessons by which any human creature, who tries to be truthful and faithful to duty, can possibly be guided. (Forster 2: 468)

In each case, these letters not only confirm the writing of *TLOL* for his children, but they also indicate that Dickens was involved in and concerned about their religious instruction. In this light, it seems reasonable to suggest that *TLOL* was the product of Dickens's fatherly concern for the religious instruction and spiritual formation of his children.

Perhaps the urgency that Dickens felt concerning the historical-political orientation his children would adopt provides insight into his concern for and seriousness of purpose in their religious instruction as well. Dickens seems to have taken upon himself the responsi-

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Hanna has presented in his dissertation a compelling argument for understanding *TLOL* primarily as a pedagogical tool read by Dickens to his children. See also Hanna, "The Life of Our Lord: New Notes of Explication" in the *Dickensian*. Compare Egan on this as well.

bility of making sure his children, particularly his six-year-old Charlie, had a “proper” understanding of British history, and began, apparently sometime around 1843, his *Child’s History of England*.<sup>15</sup> He wrote to Douglas Jerrold, 3 May 1843:

I am writing a little history of England for my boy, which I will send you when it is printed for him, though your boys are too old to profit by it. It is curious that I have tried to impress upon him (writing, I dare say, at the same moment with you) the exact spirit of your paper.<sup>16</sup> For I don’t know what I should do, if he were to get hold of any conservative or High Church notions; and the best way of guarding against any such horrible result, is, I take it, to wring the parrots’ necks in his very cradle. (*Pilgrim Letters*, 3: 482)

If, indeed, Dickens was so concerned about the political and historical orientation of his son, it certainly stands to reason that he would have approached the religious training of his children with at least as much interest and zeal. That kind of interest and zeal would seem to invest *TLOL* with a degree of seriousness of purpose that should not be too easily dismissed.

#### §1.1.2 JESUS: THE ONE ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN DICKENS’S “REAL CHRISTIANITY”

A second consideration, tied intimately to his concern for the religious instruction of his children is that *TLOL* is Dickens’s presentation of the life of Jesus. The person and the work of Jesus, particularly as set forth in the Gospels, were central to Dickens’s understanding of Christianity and the life of faith. In fact, for Dickens, Jesus was the determinative element of “real Christianity,” and the imitation of Jesus was, for Dickens the definitive mark of the real Christian. His deliberate attempt then, to compose a narrative account of the Gospel history of Jesus, even a juvenile one, would seem to be of particular import.

Any doctrinal or theological aspects of Christianity that Dickens might have entertained were subordinated to the moral-ethical concerns of the life of faith. Implicit in *TLOL*

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the serialization of *A Child’s History of England* was begun in *Household Words* in January 1851, eight years after he had written about it to Jerrold.

<sup>16</sup> Dickens was commenting on an article Jerrold had written for a monthly magazine, the *Illuminated Magazine*, that commented on social and (apparently) political issues. See note in *Pilgrim Letters* 3: 482.

is that it is written for the Christian mind, for a Christian audience, his children, who were all baptized into the Anglican Church. It was Dickens's great desire to animate or awaken the Christian conscience, through his work or otherwise, and in his mind, that was to be done not through dispensing doctrinal or theological information but by urging moral responsibility. While Jesus was both Saviour and Exemplar for Dickens, Dickens's own point of emphasis was the moral-ethical aspect of the life of faith in which Jesus was Exemplar.

It is quite clear from Dickens's work as a whole that his understanding of the life of faith in its practical expression consisted rather exclusively in the following of the teaching and the example of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Whether in his letters, his novels or his essays, when the subject at hand was religion, Dickens ultimately defaulted to the teaching of the New Testament—which for him was the Gospels—and the life and lessons of Jesus. It has been no generalization by Philip Collins to call him a New Testament Christian, or a Gospel Christian (Collins, *Education* 54).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the observation was more profound than Collins knew perhaps. Dickens's singular focus on the life and ministry of Jesus was the heart of his faith and it was essentially the whole of his faith. In one sense, of course, that makes his faith rather simple. However, to maintain that Dickens's faith was simplistic and shallow is quite another matter. As his work demonstrates, this simple faith was carefully reasoned and passionately articulated, not the least in *TLOL*, and found its expression in what Dickens genuinely understood as a practicable Jesus-centric ethic that he was anxious for his children to embrace and that he articulated in his conclusion of *TLOL*:

Remember!—It is Christianity TO DO GOOD always—even to those who do evil to

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Dickens's *Little Dorrit* 756; *Bleak House* 322-3; "Two Views of a Cheap Theatre" and "A Fly-Leaf in Life" in *The Uncommercial Traveller* 35-39, 353-357. See also letters to R.H. Davies in Forster 2: 469; to David Macrae in Macrae 127; to J.M. Makeham in Forster 2: 469; to Mrs. Charles Smithson in *Pilgrim Letters* 4: 108.

<sup>18</sup> Although, to call him a "Sermon on the Mount" Christian as Collins does, while understandable and tempting, may be a bit too narrow.

us. It is Christianity to love our neighbour as ourself, and to do to all men as we would have them Do to us. It is Christianity to be gentle, merciful, and forgiving, and to keep those qualities quiet in our own hearts, and never make a boast of them, or of our prayers or of our love of God, but always to shew that we love Him by humbly trying to do right in everything. (127-28)

If his children, or anyone else for that matter, could affectively apprehend and genuinely realize this idea, Dickens felt, everything else in the life of faith would take care of itself. For this purpose, Dickens wrote his “History of Jesus Christ” (*TLOL* 11) to present to his children the person and example of Jesus unencumbered by what he saw as the trappings and distortions of an institutionalized Christianity.

Perhaps it is Amy Dorrit’s passionate plea to Mrs. Clennam that tends to epitomize such a spirit in Dickens. Emphasizing, in particular, the disparity between her own “Jesus” ethic over and against the Old Testament ethic of Mrs. Clennam, Amy pleads to her:

Let me implore you to remember later and better days. Be guided, only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities. We cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him. There is no vengeance and no infliction of suffering in His life, I am sure. There can be no confusion in following Him, and seeking for no other footsteps, I am certain! (756)

Practically a thesis statement for *TLOL*, this citation captures the heart of Dickens’s thought, but it does not stand alone in its fundamental view. Indeed, it is representative of what we find throughout Dickens.

He wrote to Reverend F.W.H. Layton, 25 March 1847:

As I really do not know what orthodoxy may be, or what it may be supposed to include – a point not exactly settled, I believe, as yet, in the learned or unlearned world – I am not in a condition to say whether I deserve my lax reputation in that wise. But my creed is the creed of Jesus Christ, I believe, and my deepest admiration and respect attend upon his life and teaching, I know. (*Pilgrim Letters*, 5: 45)

Despite the naysayers of his day—and today, as well—Dickens did believe that his creed was the creed of Jesus Christ. He did believe that following Jesus’ example was the

distinguishing mark of the Christian and that that alone was sufficient in the life of faith.<sup>19</sup> It was this basic manner of thought that generated the conception and composition of *TLOL*. To fully grasp that his concept of Christianity is defined by his singular focus on the life and ministry of Jesus, and to take that seriously, is to begin to understand Dickens's faith, as well as the seriousness of *TLOL*.

As was noted earlier, this Jesus-centricity is intimately related to the fact that *TLOL* was written for Dickens's own children, for it was precisely this emphasis on the teaching and example of Jesus that not only formed the heart of Dickens's religious instruction to his children but also that guided him in their spiritual formation. Indeed, these two considerations coalesce to suggest even more emphatically the seriousness of Dickens's purpose in *TLOL*.

In *TLOL*, addressed to "My Dear Children," Dickens wrote from the very beginning, "I am very anxious that you should know something about the History of Jesus Christ. For everybody ought to know about Him" (11). Dickens's desire concerning the spiritual formation and moral development of his children was that they know about Jesus and imitate Him, and he was not reticent to encourage them in that endeavour. The already cited, familiar letter to his son, Edward, upon his departure for Australia implores him to follow the teaching of Jesus. "Try to do to others as you would have them do to you," Dickens wrote, "and do not be discouraged if they fail sometimes. It is much better for you that they should fail in obeying the greatest rule laid down by Our Saviour than that you should." Dickens continued further toward the end of the same letter, "You will therefore understand

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<sup>19</sup> In Dickens's mind those who were Christians would have embraced certain fundamental points of the doctrine of the Church to various degrees. The degree to which these fundamental theological points would have been held did not much matter to Dickens. They were simply a given and any sane person would have held them to whatever degree. What did matter to him was the tangible expression of a person's Christianity. Mere profession of faith or intellectual assent to doctrinal or theological facts was insignificant. "Real Christianity" was seen in a person's imitation of Jesus in behaviour and attitude.

[...] that I now most solemnly impress upon you the truth and beauty of the Christian Religion, as it came from Christ Himself, and the impossibility of your going far wrong if you humbly but heartily respect it” (Forster 2: 468). A similar letter to his son Henry (Harry) included the timely advice, “Deeply respecting it [the New Testament] and bowing down before the character of our Saviour, as separated from the vain constructions and inventions of men, you cannot go very wrong, and will always preserve at heart a true spirit of veneration and humility” (Hogarth 2: 394). In each of these letters, he reminded both Edward and Henry that he had written to each of his other sons, as they had gone away, quite similar words. Even in his will, Dickens’s thoughts turned to the spiritual formation of his children. “I exhort my dear children,” he wrote, “humbly to try to guide themselves by the teaching of the New Testament in its broad spirit, and to put no faith in any man’s narrow construction of its letter here or there” (Forster 2: 524). In each case, Dickens pointed to New Testament teaching as exemplified in Jesus as the unfailing rule for life and faith and encouraged his children to guide their lives and thinking by Jesus’ example.

For Dickens, the demonstration of “real Christianity” was not in subscribing to religious creeds or engaging in ecclesiastical exercises and pious behaviors; indeed, it did not involve any real connection to the Church at all. Rather, “real Christianity” was demonstrated in the effort to follow the example of Jesus as it was found in the Gospels. It is precisely this concept of Christianity that Dickens felt the urgency to instill in his children and that inspired him to write *TLOL*. Such genuine concern for their spiritual formation, not to mention the fact that *TLOL* was a document written exclusively for them and their own private religious instruction, points not just to its value as an expression of Dickens’s central spiritual concerns and his concept of the practice of Christianity, but to its serious intent as well.

### §1.1.3 *THE COMPOSITION OF THE LIFE OF OUR LORD*

The third consideration that points to the seriousness of purpose of *TLOL* is its composition. By design and intent, *TLOL* bears all the marks of conscientious and painstaking crafting and appears to have been a project in which Dickens invested no small amount of time or effort. As will be readily apparent in the brief outline of Dickens's method of composition here and in the fuller analysis below, *TLOL* was a carefully crafted and deliberately focused work. It is difficult to envisage such a work being composed with less than a serious purpose.

As mentioned above, *TLOL* was written sometime in the 1840s. We can only speculate as to the precise date of its completion, but we do know that one Sunday morning, 28 June 1846 Dickens wrote, concerning the work that lay before him that morning, to his friend John Forster. There were writing tasks, he wrote, “for Lord John [Russell] about the Ragged Schools” and “for Miss Coutts’ [...] charitable projects” to which he set his pen and completed. Then, just before he emphatically announced to Forster that he “began *Dombey and Son*,” he noted, in a rare and almost incidental reference to what would become known as *TLOL*, that he had “half of the children’s New Testament to write or pretty nearly.” He added, “I set to work and did that” (*Pilgrim Letters* 4: 573). Thus, 1846 is usually taken to be the year in which *TLOL* was written.

This letter has been determinative in encouraging a majority of scholars to assume that Dickens must have completed at least “half of the children’s New Testament,” or *TLOL*, in a few hours.<sup>20</sup> More importantly, following this line of reasoning, many scholars have been lead to conclude that the entire work was written in a relatively short time. This,

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<sup>20</sup> This is likely due to the note by the editors of the *Pilgrim Letters* stating that “the present reference suggests that he completed it [*TLOL*] in June [of 1846]” (4: 573).

unfortunately, too often tends to present scholars with one more reason to conclude that *TLOL*, being, as it is supposed, little more than a hastily conceived and composed children's Sunday School lesson, has little to tell us about Dickens or his religion. A careful assessment, however, of Dickens's crafting of *TLOL* points to a rather involved process of composition that almost certainly extended beyond a few hours or even a few days.<sup>21</sup> In fact, it is plausible to suggest that the formation and composition of *TLOL* could have spanned a number of years.

Setting aside the issues and nuances of genre distinction for now (I will turn to them specifically in the next chapter), it is of central importance to recognize Dickens's primary and almost exclusive use of harmonization in the formation and composition of *TLOL*. The work of harmonization is a time-consuming and often rather exacting task, and as *TLOL* is characterized by the work of careful harmonization, it is reasonable to conclude that Dickens took some pains with it and that it may even have developed over a period of time.<sup>22</sup>

While *TLOL* is made up of selected Gospel stories, linked together, sometimes by their Biblical setting, other times by Dickens's own arrangement, in a general chronological order that produces a reasonably smooth flowing narrative; and while he includes explanatory, hortatory, interpretive, and transitional passages; still, of the over fourteen thousand words of *TLOL*, roughly over eighty percent of them are given to episodes taken directly from the New Testament Gospels, harmonized by Dickens and paraphrased to a greater or lesser degree. So, we have essentially an abridged, paraphrased version of the New Testament

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<sup>21</sup> Gladys Storey, in her *Dickens and Daughter*, notes: "In November, 1846, he took his wife and family, Georgina Hogarth and the servants to Paris. They lived in a furnished house, 48 Rue de Courcelles, Faubourg St. Honoré. Here he wrote part of the little history of the New Testament for his children" (78). This would indicate that Dickens was still at work on *TLOL* five months after most scholars allege he finished it. It seems curious that the editors of the *Pilgrim Letters*, acknowledging Miss Storey's note, continue to insist, with no compelling reason, that *TLOL* was completed in June 1846.

<sup>22</sup> It seems noteworthy in this regard that *A Child's History of England* appears to have been in process almost 8 years. See Dickens's letter to Jerrold already cited (*Pilgrim Letters* 3: 482).

Gospel narrative composed nearly entirely of Dickens's own harmonizations of selected Gospel stories. It is this process of harmonization, with its necessary attention to the narrative and rhetorical details of each Gospel account, not to mention the need for chronological and episodic consistency, that is one of the most fascinating characteristics of *TLOL*. More significantly, however, it is this process of harmonization that suggests the seriousness of purpose with which Dickens wrote.

We can consider two examples in particular that point to this seriousness of purpose by allowing us not only to recognize Dickens's relative skill and resourcefulness in the practice of harmonization but also to appreciate the time and effort that would have been invested in such a project. The first example will illustrate Dickens's general adeptness at chronological decision-making and his remarkable sense of some of the broader issues involved in harmonization. A second example will highlight Dickens's skill in the more exacting task of the harmonization of passages, in this case, from the Synoptic Gospels<sup>23</sup> to form one continuous narrative.

While Dickens has been accused of carelessly and naively including two accounts of the Lord's Supper in *TLOL* (Piret 182; Egan 265), he has, in fact, dealt knowledgeably and decisively with what in the nineteenth century was a discussed and debated issue. Even prior to the nineteenth century, the seeming dissonance between John and the Synoptic Evangelists regarding the celebration of the Passover just prior to Jesus' crucifixion was at issue. The question was, were there two meals described in the Gospel accounts, a Passover meal in the Synoptics (Matt. 26.17-30; Mark 14.12-26; Luke 22.14-23) and another meal prior to the

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<sup>23</sup> The term "Synoptic" (or Synoptics) is used here and throughout in the normal sense to refer to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Passover described in John 13.1-30; or were these two one and the same?<sup>24</sup> The 1807 edition of Daniel Whitby's *A Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament* supports the view that there were two separate meals described in the Gospels. Whitby included an extended discussion of the issues in an Appendix to Mark 14 (1: 284-6), but commented simply on John 13:1, "That this was not the paschal supper, but a supper they were at before the feast of the passover, [see] ver. 1" (1: 483). On the other side, Hermann Olshausen argued that the Passover observed in the Synoptic Gospels was one and the same with the meal described in John 13.1-30. In his *Biblical Commentary on the Gospels and On the Acts of the Apostles* (1850) Olshausen commented on John 13:1:

The event to which John gives special prominence, in the period of this intimate fellowship, is the last meal of Jesus with his disciples. The identity of this δεῖπνον with the last Supper is supported, *first*, by the parallel Luke xxii. 27, which evidently relates to the washing of the feet, and fixes it in the time of the Supper; *secondly*, John himself (xiii. 21, ff., 38, ff.) mentions the same conversations, as, according to the other Evangelists, took place at the Passover; and, *finally*, this interview, which is perfectly connected in itself, is immediately succeeded by the departure of Christ to Gethsemane (xvii. 26, xviii. 1.). (4: 39)

These two examples from early- to mid-nineteenth-century commentaries help to illustrate that the harmonization of John and the Synoptics on this matter attracted the attention of scholars and divines alike. Considering the care Dickens seems to have taken in the composition and harmonization of *TLOL*, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that, through his own investigation, he was led to agree with those who saw two distinct meals described in the Gospels, and was neither careless nor naïve in including accounts of two meals.

Dickens's own rendering of these Gospel accounts suggests his recognition of the is-

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<sup>24</sup> In his *Das Leben Jesu*, D.F. Strauss discusses this issue from a negative point of view. Identifying the discrepancies between John and the Synoptics here, he remarks, "These divergencies are so important, that many expositors, in order to prevent the Evangelists from falling into contradiction with each other, have here also tried the old expedient of supposing that they do not speak of the same thing—that John intends to describe an altogether different repast from that of the synoptists" (614). While Strauss takes a skeptical view, his comments testify to the ongoing attention to this point of debate.

sue and further indicates his deliberate inclusion of two meals. Not only does he keep these meal episodes in separate chapters, but he also uses narrative and rhetorical strategies to maintain a distinction between the two meals.<sup>25</sup> John's account of the meal at which the footwashing takes place begins with the rather imprecise, "Now before the feast of the passover" (John 13.1). Dickens's temporal designation to introduce the story of John 13.1-20 is simply, "One night" (*TLOL* 87). Interestingly, he used a phrase similar to the Johannine account, "The Feast of the Passover being now almost come" (*TLOL* 90), to introduce his presentation of what is the Synoptic account of the preparation for the Passover meal and the meal itself. By eliminating the temporal designation used by John introducing the meal that followed the footwashing and by emphatically including a similar temporal designation to introduce the Synoptic account of the Passover, it seems that Dickens intentionally sought to keep the meal of John 13.1-20 distinct from the Synoptic account of the Passover meal.

A second example illustrates the more specific and precise work of harmonization. In chapter 7 of *TLOL*, a chapter that is developed almost exclusively from Luke's Gospel, Dickens prefaced the Parable of the Good Samaritan (found, of course, only in Luke) with an introduction harmonized from the Synoptics:

As Our Saviour sat teaching the people and answering their questions, a certain lawyer stood up and said, "Master, what shall I do, that I may live again in happiness after I am dead?" Jesus said unto him, "The first of all the commandments is, the Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. (65)

Even though Dickens interpolates his own setting in the clause, "As our Saviour sat teaching

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<sup>25</sup> For instance, Dickens includes Jesus' prediction of his betrayal only in his rendering of the Johannine meal while conspicuously omitting it in his rendering of the Synoptic account of the Last Supper.

the people and answering their questions,” it is obvious that he begins with Luke’s account of the Good Samaritan but cleverly harmonizes it with the account of the controversy stories of Matt. 22.34-40 and Mark 12.28-34. While Matt. 22.35 mentions a “lawyer,” only Luke refers to “a *certain* lawyer.” In Matthew and Mark the issue at hand is Jesus’ identifying “which is the first commandment of all” (Mark 12.28), whereas in Luke the issue is how one might obtain eternal life, or “live again in happiness” after death. After this initial sentence, however, Dickens departs from Luke and depends on Matthew and Mark. In the Lukan account, it is the lawyer who recites the greatest commandment in response to Jesus’ question, “What is written in the law? how readest thou?” But Dickens, in a rather disjunctive way, has Jesus answering the lawyer’s question immediately by stating the greatest commandment in a clearly Markan formulation: “The first of all the commandments is, the Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God [...]” (Mark 12.29). Only Mark includes the *Shema* (Deut. 6.4) in Jesus’ initial words of response to his detractors, which Dickens transposes here. We also find only in Mark the order of “heart-soul-mind-strength” (Mark 12.30), the same order Dickens uses. Similarly, only Matthew uses the phrase, “And the second is like unto it” (Matt. 22.39), and only Mark reports Dickens’s conclusion, “There is none other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12.31). Interestingly, Dickens’s manuscript shows that he began Jesus’ words to the lawyer with “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all” (25) from Matthew and Luke but then crossed it out and began instead with the Markan formulation.

It is a bit peculiar that Dickens saw the need to harmonize accounts here at all, but perhaps a clue to his doing so lies in the fact that, in his manuscript, he has underlined these words of Jesus—six entire lines. It is rare to find such underlined passages in the manuscript (other than his chapter titles) and it seems that underlining, when it occurs, is always for

emphasis. Considering, then, that this material is underlined, that it introduces the Parable of the Good Samaritan and that it includes the essence of The Golden Rule, it seems reasonable to conclude that Dickens has harmonized here to emphasize what he saw as a central aspect of the teaching of Jesus and a central lesson he would want his children to learn.

Concerning these examples, two observations are immediately pertinent. First, such examples represent Dickens's careful and knowledgeable skill—and sometimes inventiveness—in harmonization. From the broader issues of arrangement and continuity of narrative to the specific details of the harmonizing of selected Gospel stories, Dickens shows great care and interest. A second observation follows, and that is that the composition of *TLOL* was no simple undertaking. The selection of material, the arrangement of that selected material into a running narrative, and the painstaking work of harmonization all point to a much more involved task than has previously been acknowledged relative to *TLOL*. Unless Dickens was extremely familiar with the finer details of the Gospel narratives, the critical issues that surrounded the Gospels, and the chronological details of the life of Jesus, it is unlikely that this project was a “spontaneous composition.”<sup>26</sup> It is reasonable to conclude that Dickens took some pains with it and that it developed over a period of time. That Dickens would give himself to such a task and such a discipline is not insignificant and speaks to his seriousness of purpose in *TLOL*.

#### §1.1.4 SERIOUS PURPOSE – CONSCIENTIOUS DILIGENCE

A pattern of thoroughness and attention to detail is apparent in all Dickens's work, and especially in *TLOL*, and seems to be represented by his biographers as a trait of charac-

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<sup>26</sup> This is the phrase used by Lady Marie Dickens in the preface to the first British edition of *The Life of Our Lord* published by Associated Newspapers Ltd. She writes: “The simple manuscript is entirely handwritten and is in no sense a fair copy but a spontaneous draft” (7).

ter rather than simply an element of his work ethic toward commercial productions. His reputation as a perfectionist and the record of his habit of research is in a very real sense almost legendary. H. C. Dent, in his *The Life and Characters of Charles Dickens*, relates the following story concerning Dickens's preparation for writing *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was equally natural that, desirous as ever to be correctly informed as to his facts, he should apply to Carlyle for help. He requested from him the loan of a few reference books. Carlyle, who in spite of his bear-with-a-sore-head reputation could appreciate a joke, packed up all he had got—two vanloads—and forwarded them to Gads Hill [sic]. Dickens was not in the least dismayed; he read them all. (Dent 438-39)

While there are reasons to suppose that Dent may have embellished the story just a bit, it does recount an actual episode in Dickens's life<sup>27</sup> and it represents Dickens's work ethic.

“For *Hard Times* Dickens was so bent on ‘getting it right,’ ” writes David Craig, “that he went to Preston (in January 1854) for material and turned much of what he saw there straight into fiction.” Craig further observes, “It must also be said that Dickens had to go and gather copy because he had never known the industrial heartlands at first hand (apart from an occasional visit to relatives in Manchester)” (*Hard Times* 15-6).

Dickens himself wrote of his work on *Barnaby Rudge* that, “In the descriptions of the principal outrages, reference has been had to the best authorities of that time, such as they are; the account given in this Tale, of all the main features of the Riots, is substantially correct” (9). In *Bleak House*, in addition to his previously acquired knowledge of the Court of Chancery, it is clear that he took the time and trouble to be sure his portrayal of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, as well as the case of Gridley, was accurate according to actual cases (3); and of his description of spontaneous combustion in the same novel, Dickens wrote, “I took

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<sup>27</sup> This incident is corroborated by J.T. Fields. See Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. Richard Maxwell (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 399. See also Philip Collins, ed., *Dickens: Interviews and Recollections*, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1981), 313.

pains to investigate the subject” (4).

Clearly, Dickens was relentless about “getting it right” and was never one to give a project less than his best. In 1895, in a piece for *North American Review* entitled “Glimpses of Charles Dickens,” Charles Dickens Jr. recollected his father’s characteristic diligence:

My first experience, I think, of my father’s extraordinary energy and of the thoroughness—the even alarming thoroughness—with which he always threw himself into everything he had occasion to take up, was in connection with a toy theatre of which I was the proud possessor somewhere about the middle of the forties. (Collins, *Interviews* 1: 133)

He went on to describe how his father, with Clarkson Stanfield, began to create an original “home” production called *The Elephant of Siam*, complete with “several new scenes” which involved a careful attention to “the landscapes and architecture of Siam.” Dickens had become totally immersed in the project and persevered in it long after Stanfield had given it up. Charley then described further this remarkable energy as quite characteristic of and natural in his father:

This extraordinary, eager, restless energy, which first showed itself to me in this small matter, was never absent from my father all through his life. Whatever he did he put his whole heart into, and did as well as ever he could. Whether it was for work or for play, he was always earnest. Painting scenes for a toy theatre, dancing Sir Roger de Coverley at a children’s party, gravely learning the polka from his little daughters for a similar entertainment, walking, riding, picnicking, amateur acting, public reading, or the every-day hard work of his literary life—it was all one to him. Whatever lay nearest to his hand at the moment had to be done thoroughly. (Collins, *Interviews* 1: 133)

Whether in preparation for writing or at play with his children, Dickens was careful and conscientious and took an intense interest in whatever he set his mind to do, especially when his children were involved. Forster (2: 101), Johnson (661), and Ackroyd (452-3) all cite the specific instances in Dickens’s life to which the citation immediately above alludes. Natalie McKnight refers to this as the “playfulness” of Dickens as a father (134), and Forster captures this same playful spirit of Dickens when he observes of the “pleasant gatherings” in

the Dickens home, “The musical enjoyments and dancings, *as his children became able to take part in them*, were incessant” (2:101, my italics). Both in serious endeavours and simple family pleasures, Dickens enjoyed the company of his children and involved himself in their interests.

It would seem unlikely that an author with the work habits and personal diligence of Dickens, not to mention the love for his children and interest in their spiritual formation, would offer them nothing more than some casual musings on the life and teaching of Jesus written over the period of a few days at best. That Dickens would have wanted to “get it right” and would have taken care to develop a credible and creditable Gospel narrative for the religious instruction of his children, so obviously important to him, seems more likely. And if Dickens wrote with such seriousness of purpose, it makes sense that we should read *TLOL* with a seriousness that coincides with his.

### §1.2 THE CENTRALITY OF *THE LIFE OF OUR LORD*

As a serious expression of Dickens’s religious thought, *TLOL* plays a central role in helping us to understand the larger body of his work. I do not mean by that, of course, that it is somehow an esoteric key without which the meaning of Dickens’s novels is impenetrable. Rather, I mean that *TLOL* acts as an index of sorts, a reference point, that provides a clarifying voice with regard to the nature and substance of the Christian character of Dickens’s own religious thought and emergent worldview. As such, *TLOL* can help us to see in his novels a unity and coherence in what is often perceived as disparate fragments of a rather inconsistent Christian worldview. When *TLOL* is allowed to illuminate the novels, a rather reasoned and coherent worldview is revealed.

It seems natural that this should be so. As a narrative of the life of Jesus, *TLOL* presents a statement of the ideology that defines and undergirds Dickens’s Christian worldview.

In *TLOL*, Dickens has afforded us a unique opportunity to observe with relative transparency the elements that compose that worldview and the way in which they cohere. If we allow *TLOL* to lead us into Dickens's novels to clarify and act as an arbiter, we can begin to see a consistent worldview emerging from the narrative worlds of his novels. *TLOL* becomes the means, then, by which we can see in his novels the parts of Dickens's religious thought become a consistent whole. In this way, *TLOL* is not only a definitive source, but it also becomes a bridge to a fuller understanding of Dickens's Christian worldview.

An outline of the worldview that emerges from *TLOL* will prove a useful tool in helping to demonstrate how *TLOL*, as an index or a reference point, can be used to bring clarity to aspects of Dickens's work that are typically seen as inconsistent, ambiguous, and, at times, contradictory. The following outline will identify the six fundamental elements that represent that worldview.

In the first place, implicit in *TLOL* is God, the heavenly Father, who providentially looks to the affairs of the lives of men and women, who has established a moral world of right and wrong, and who holds men and women morally accountable to Himself and His established moral standard. Second, in such a moral world of right and wrong, inasmuch as men and women are moral beings, it is incumbent upon them to do what is right. Moreover, they are to do the right not simply because doing so brings the reward of heaven after death, but more importantly because doing what is right is an end in itself. Third, in such a moral world, men and women sometimes do wrong, some only on occasion, others as a persistent habit of life. Those who would desire to be rid of the guilt and consequences of this wrongdoing, or sin, must seek the forgiveness of God and, whenever it is applicable, the forgiveness of the person wronged. Judgment awaits those who obstinately refuse to seek forgiveness and otherwise violate the standards of good and right in God's moral world.

Fourth, inasmuch as men and women are accountable to God and His moral standard, they have in Jesus the exemplar through whom they observe how to discharge their moral responsibility and to do the right. Not only are they to seek to be guided by the teaching of Jesus, but also more importantly, they are to imitate Him in his moral and relational example.

A fifth element specifically relates to Jesus as a relational example. Jesus is the pattern for the basic attitudes and behavior of human beings toward one another. One of Jesus' outstanding character traits in *TLOL* is his concern for and attendance upon the needs of his fellows. As such, he is the exemplar of how human beings are to act toward one another. They should be humble, unassuming, and ready to lend a hand; the true mark of duty and loyalty to God is the degree to which human beings fulfill their duty toward their fellow creatures.

The sixth element in the worldview of *TLOL* concerns the supernatural and the spiritual. God's world is a locus of supernatural events and influence. Healings are performed, evil spirits are cast out, the dead are raised, and other miraculous events occur. More pointedly, Jesus effects the salvation of humanity by dying on the Cross, is raised from the dead in order to sit at God's right hand, beseeching His pardon for sinners, and ultimately will return to judge the world.

Such a worldview, represented as it is in *TLOL*, captures the character of Dickens's religious thought and is that which undergirds Dickens's conception of the life of faith. And if we continue to bear in mind that, 1) *TLOL* was written expressly to instruct; 2) that it was written with serious intent and was expected to be taken seriously by his audience; and, most importantly, 3) that it was intended to articulate the basis of what Dickens believed to be a Christian worldview and the heart of the life of faith, we can begin to appreciate its value as a point of reference for a clearer understanding of the expression of Dickens's

Christian thought in his other work. More precisely, we can better see how *TLOL* may illuminate the novels and be arbiter in terms of bringing clarity to and revealing consistency in the Christian thought expressed in them. A few examples will serve to illustrate.

We might consider first, for instance, the question of judgment in Dickens, particularly judgment upon perpetrators of evil and wrong.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, it is assumed or implied by some that an eschatological judgment in which, after death, men and women stand before God and are judged according to their deeds played no part in Dickens's worldview. Michael Piret argues that, "He [Dickens] was more inclined to think of judgment in temporal terms, even as an inward matter" (127). He points to the fates of Bill Sikes and Jonas Chuzzlewit as specific examples of those whose judgment and punishment were purely temporal, sometimes even psychological. We could certainly add to his list the likes of James Carker, Rigaud and Quilp. Thus, for Piret, and others like him, Dickens's view of judgment is "earth-bound" and "temporal" with any "otherworldly dimension" eliminated (129-30).

On the other hand, we are confronted, both in *A Tale of Two Cities* (331, 344) and *Barnaby Rudge* (145, 339), for example, with the notion of an eschatological Day of Judgment in which men and women are called to account for their actions. Such references as these would seem to stand in tension with the view represented by Piret above. Employing the general principle, then, that the more "difficult" reading may be determinative, it would seem reasonable to assume that the more extreme scenario, i.e., an eschatological Day of Judgment, would represent Dickens's thought. The matter seems to become more precisely settled, however, when *TLOL* is appealed to as a reference point. For, in *TLOL*, we find

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<sup>28</sup> I will deal in some detail with Dickens understanding of Judgment and Evil below. Here, I simply mean to use this example to help establish the centrality of *TLOL*.

clear reference not only to an eschatological Day of Judgment when Jesus will return to judge the world (122), but also to a warning of sure judgment and punishment in the after-life awaiting those who lack generosity and compassion for the poor (74).<sup>29</sup> In both instances, there is clearly a recognition of eschatological judgment, the former which emphasizes Jesus as eschatological judge and the latter which points to past deeds as the basis upon which judgment is passed. Thus, *TLOL* presents in two distinct narrative episodes theologically nuanced material that brings needed commentary to bear, in this case, on the question of judgment and the apparent contradictions in Dickens's view of judgment.

Here, *TLOL* has brought clarity to seemingly conflicting voices, and it has done so by doing two things. First, it has functioned as arbiter, providing through its established doctrinal standard the resolution of apparent theological discrepancies. *TLOL* supplies a reference point here, and, as an expression of Dickens theological thought, allows the reconciliation of two apparently inconsonant views. Second, and importantly, *TLOL* allows us to gain greater clarity regarding Dickens's understanding of judgment by broadening the categories of our thinking to accommodate Dickens's considerations of various facets of the dynamics and workings of God's judgment. From one perspective, evil is dealt with temporally; from another, ultimate judgment is yet to come. Sometimes in Dickens, judgment comes in a temporal or even psychological manifestation (narratively, more often than not, for the sake of closure for the reader), and it is accurate to reckon it so; but such instances by no means preclude a judgment beyond the temporal. So, it is not uncommon to see in Dickens references to an eschatological Day of Judgment. God, who has established moral accountability, will have the last word, to be sure.

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<sup>29</sup> Piret unconvincingly dismisses both of these citations in *TLOL*, the first as "hasty and unexplained" (119) and the second only as a "dramatic location for the socially edifying tale of Lazarus and the rich man" (117). I discuss both of these passages in more detail below.

A second example of *TLOL*'s clarifying function deals with Dickens's understanding of sin and forgiveness. It is sometimes alleged that Dickens had no real concept of or framework for personal sin. House has remarked that, in Dickens, "wickedness is not regarded as an offence against a personal God" (*All in Due Time* 183-4). Yet, we do find in the novels what appear to be at least intimations of personal sin and the need of forgiveness from God, whether at the deathbed or just in the course of daily life. When Harriet Carker reads "the blessed history" to Alice Marwood, the words "fallen," "shame," and "error" (*DS* 871) couched in the larger description leave the impression that more than crimes are addressed here. Similarly, the nocturnal rendezvous between David, Mr. Pegotty and Martha (*DC* 652) as well as the charged exchanges between Mary Rudge and her estranged husband (*BR* 109-10; 445-6) include dialogue suggestive of sin and forgiveness beyond just a temporal or human plane. Nevertheless, in most cases, it is left to the individual interpreter, and depends to a large degree on his or her own personal view of Dickens's religious orientation, to decide just how to understand such language and dialogue.

If we again allow *TLOL* as a reference point, however, a clearer picture emerges. Sin, as articulated in *TLOL*, is a besetting obstacle that stands between a person and heaven (61). In *TLOL*, sin can refer to criminal activity, but it is not so limited. Sin can also include any general wrongdoing from hard-heartedness to lying to immorality, or it can be simply "not minding [one's] duty towards God" (20-3; 69). In order to have the sin (and the obstacle) removed, forgiveness from God is necessary. As a deliberate and serious expression of Dickens's Christian thought, *TLOL* is clear concerning sin and forgiveness in both implicit teaching and overt declaration.

If, in fact, Dickens conceived of sin and forgiveness in such terms as I have outlined here, it is quite likely that those occasions from the novels to which I have alluded above are

grounded in this conceptual framework. I am not suggesting, by any means, that Dickens has any intent here other than to tell his story. I am suggesting, however, that here we find one more example of the consistency of his Christian worldview brought to light by the theological insight provided by *TLOL*. The fundamental theology that emerges from *TLOL* finds a consistent expression in the narrative worlds of his novels.

On a broader scale, it is *TLOL* that highlights the larger significance of the role of Dickens's Christian worldview and of his understanding of the life of faith in his novels. So often, his overarching concern for the poor, for children, for inhumane social conditions, and his general concern for justice and right are seen often only as humanitarian compassion quite removed from any real Christian conviction. In other words, some would suggest that Christianity in Dickens is irrelevant. With or without it, nothing would really change. Neither the presence nor absence of Christianity would change his narrative worlds or his worldview. However, seen in terms of the faith statement articulated in *TLOL*, the humanitarian compassion that so characterizes Dickens is a genuine compassion and a concern grounded firmly in and emerging from his understanding of the message of the Gospels and in the life and teaching of Jesus. Dickens's words to Macrae are noteworthy in this regard:

With a deep sense of my great responsibility always upon me when I exercise my art, one of my most constant and most earnest endeavours has been to exhibit in all my good people some faint reflections of the teachings of our great Master, and unostentatiously to lead the reader up to those teachings as the great source of all moral goodness. All my strongest illustrations are derived from the New Testament; all my social abuses are shown as departures from its spirit [...]. (127)

Here, Dickens was protesting against the view that his work, while treating hypocrisy as it deserved, did not adequately represent genuine and heartfelt Christianity. In response, he tried to remind his critic of the orientation from which his work arose. In doing so, he revealed that important aspect of his writing to which I am seeking to draw attention: that it emerged from a consistent and substantial Christian worldview that he unapologeti-

cally embraced and which is deliberately outlined in *TLOL*. It is from this point of view, then, that his stories emerge and upon which his humanitarian compassion is based. Once more, *TLOL* plays an important role in providing a clearer understanding of Dickens's faith in the larger body of his work.

In a similar fashion, his characters, some who seem a bit over-idealized at times, can be understood more readily through the lens of *TLOL*. Dickens believed that his good characters were in fact, representations of what a genuine Christian should be. In the letter to Macrae already cited, Dickens continued:

All my good people are humble, charitable, faithful, and forgiving. Over and over again, I claim them in express words as disciples of the Founder of our religion; but I must admit that to a man (or woman) they all arise and wash their faces, and do not appear unto men to fast (127).

*TLOL*, of course, articulated the precise details of that. So, we are not left wondering at the characterization of Esther Summerson or Amy Dorrit or even Little Nell. In Dickens's mind they are heroes and heroic because he understands them to be "true disciples of the Founder of our religion." In that way, they may be over-idealized but they are so because they represent what Dickens supposes a true disciple to be. It is Dickens's way of showing us in concrete terms what it means to be a Christian.

While by no means exhaustive, the above survey indicates some of the ways in which *TLOL*, as an index, serves to reveal a unity and coherence in Dickens's worldview as it emerges from the novels. It is quite true, as Walder points out, that "Dickens was not a religious novelist" (15), and my purpose here is not to attempt to make him one. However, Dickens would have thought of himself as a Christian who writes novels, and the thoroughgoing Christian worldview that is articulated in *TLOL* would unavoidably surface not only in the novels, but also in the rest of his writing. As the direct expression of that Christian worldview, *TLOL* provides an indispensable point of reference from which to examine

Dickens's work and gain an even greater appreciation for his understanding of Christianity and the life of faith.

### §1.3 THE LITERATURE ON *THE LIFE OF OUR LORD*

#### §1.3.1 TRADITIONAL DICKENS STUDIES

Of those who have included *TLOL* in critical discussion, only a few have taken it seriously as a work deserving scholarly investigation. In 1963, Noel Peyrouton wrote what is probably the seminal article on *TLOL*. His article was, as he stated in his title, “some notes of explication”, presenting *TLOL* as a piece worthy of consideration. Commenting on the basic content of *TLOL*, Peyrouton noted that it is easy to consider it as “a Gospel according to Dickens, an interpolation which, although written for his children, omits nothing essential of the author's own adult view. But this seems hardly reasonable; Dickens was much more sophisticated than this” (103). His article then went on, in part, to point out what was undeveloped and underdeveloped in *TLOL*. “Dickens was unable or unwilling,” wrote Peyrouton, “to come to a conclusion about the Virginity of Mary, the Divinity of Christ, the Fatherhood of God, or the Holy Ghost.” Notwithstanding, he was quick to add, “Moreover, I am convinced he did not believe the distinctions ultimately significant” (106). For Peyrouton, while “Dickens has left out much that we would have put in”, it must be remembered that “Dickens was not a biblical scholar” (111). Accordingly, Peyrouton allowed *TLOL* the dignity of serious consideration and recognized, at least dimly, that it might have some value for better acquainting us with aspects of Dickens's religious thought.

Also in 1963, Philip Collins addressed *TLOL* in his *Dickens and Education*, devoting six pages to a discussion of it. In a chapter considering both *TLOL* and Dickens's more familiar children's work, *A Child's History of England*, he used *TLOL* as an opportunity to ad-

dress Dickens's religious inclinations. Collins, early recognizing it for the insight it might provide in helping us understand Dickens's thinking on education, dealt with *TLOL* in a thoughtful manner. A bit more skeptical of its religious value than Peyrouton, he nonetheless praised Dickens "for taking this amount of trouble over his children's religious education," but added, "*TLOL*, though done conscientiously and for praiseworthy motives, is an undistinguished piece of writing" (59).

While Collins's work on *TLOL* is tidy, and while he situates it nicely in the context of Dickens's religious thought, nonetheless, he intentionally declines to make any definite statements about its theological content and value, and commends others for exercising the same restraint. Instead, he suggests what have now become three of the standard clichés concerning *TLOL*: 1) It is based on Luke's account;<sup>30</sup> 2) it may reflect his Unitarian sympathies; and 3) Dickens seems to ignore important doctrinal issues such as Incarnation and Atonement. Collins's critique is perhaps summed up in his observation, "*TLOL* is not an inspired work [...] but it is well adapted to the childish understanding, and though it omits much that is important in Christianity it lays the emphasis firmly on the fundamentals of its spirit and ethic" (60).

When Peter Ackroyd discusses *TLOL*, like Collins he uses it as an opportunity to discuss Dickens's religion, a discussion which is fresh and thought-provoking but is not as substantially developed as one might wish. When he does comment directly on *TLOL*, he astutely observes from Dickens's correspondence that *TLOL* is "a story to be read aloud" (504). However, he includes some rather unfortunate inaccuracies as well. For instance, early on he observes of Dickens that, "He called it *TLOL*" (504). Dickens actually never ti-

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<sup>30</sup> Madonna Egan seems to have been the first to note the inaccuracy of this common misapprehension. Moreover, anyone who looks carefully at *TLOL* discovers with only minimal effort that Dickens borrowed regularly from all the Gospels. Janet Larson and Peter Ackroyd are guilty of this same misapprehension.

tled the work and referred to it variously in his correspondence as “the children’s New Testament,” “an easy account of the New Testament,” and “that history of the life and lessons of our Saviour.”<sup>31</sup> *TLOL* was the title it bore in its initial publication of 5 March 1934. Also, Ackroyd surprisingly reiterates the very obvious misconception that Dickens composed *TLOL* “largely drawing upon the Gospel according to Luke” (504).

Nevertheless, in his discussion of Dickens’s religious orientation, Ackroyd doesn’t hesitate to point to Dickens’s image of Jesus being “of the orthodox New Testament variety” (506), and that “certainly the Redemption and the Resurrection were articles of his faith” (507), two observations clearly pertinent to *TLOL*. Furthermore, he indirectly hints at the significance of *TLOL* to Dickens studies when he observes, “It can fairly be said, then, that the New Testament was at the core of Dickens’s own religion” (505). When he turns to a direct assessment of *TLOL*, his only substantial comment is that it “reflects the sentiment which he had inscribed upon a silver cup presented to the Unitarian minister, Mr. Tagart, ‘For his labours in the cause of that religion which has sympathy for men of every creed and ventures to pass judgment on none’” (504).

Like Collins and Ackroyd, Gillian Avery, in her introduction to the 1995 Everyman’s edition of *Holiday Romance and Other Writings for Children*, addresses *TLOL* mostly as a jumping-off point to discuss Dickens’s religion. Still, her work is noteworthy and insightful. Curiously, though, in a sort of mistake reminiscent of the one alleged to have been made by Georgina Hogarth,<sup>32</sup> Avery first says that *TLOL* was written in 1846 (Dickens,

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<sup>31</sup> See Egan, Piret and Hanna on the title of *TLOL*. Although the discussion seems to me superfluous, those who engage in it provide a good sense of their concerns. While Piret’s is the most vigorous discussion, it is severely biased toward his own conclusions. Egan’s and Hanna’s discussions provide the needed balance to Piret’s.

<sup>32</sup> Those who argue for dating *The Life of Our Lord* in 1846 allege that the suggestion of a possible 1849 dating lingers because of the 1849 date on the medallion on the case that originally held the manuscript of *The Life of Our Lord*, mistakenly affixed there by Georgina Hogarth.

*Holiday* xix) and seven pages later says Dickens wrote it in 1849 (xxvi). Obviously, this is an inadvertent mix-up, but it reminds us that the task of dating can be a precarious one and can be easily and unintentionally misdirected.

Avery refers to *TLOL* as “emphatically” a “difficult book that looks easy” (*Holiday* xxvii) and adds, “If we take it as a simple paraphrase of the Gospels, we shall find little interest in it, and also miss the point” (xxvii). Unfortunately, rather than using this provocative assessment to guide us into *TLOL*, Avery launches into a discussion of Dickens and the Broad Church, with a focus on the latter. When she returns to *TLOL*, she has left herself all of twenty-five lines to discuss its supernatural elements, its portrait of the Christ, its anti-sacramental character, and its moral-ethical focus (xxviii). Apparently an observation that emerges from her impressions of *TLOL*, she concludes, “For all his willful theological idiosyncrasies, he is firmly rooted in Christendom” (xxviii). We can only wish she had said more.

Not all scholars are as receptive as Collins, Peyrouton, Ackroyd and Avery, however. Edgar Johnson’s 1953 biography of Dickens confines comment on *TLOL* to an end note, at the back of his second volume and emphasizes its rather inconsistent theology and its Unitarian tendencies (2: Notes, 1 [50]). Sue Zemka’s 1997 study of *TLOL*, in her *Victorian Testaments*, takes a serious approach in the context of her cultural and gender studies method, but sees Dickens sentimentalizing the Gospels, infantilizing Christianity, and emasculating Jesus. Her basic assessment of *TLOL* as a theological-biblical work is that it “is not a remarkable achievement in either theology or children’s literature” (120). In *Dickens and Religion*, Dennis Walder pays *TLOL* scant attention. His two references to it are incidental and add little to our knowledge of it. Likewise, Robert Newsom has little to say about *TLOL* in his *Dickens Revisited* (70-71), but comments more substantially on it in *The Ox-*

*ford Reader's Companion to Dickens*. He perceptively observed there that *TLOL* was written to be read aloud, an aspect of the work that Robert Hanna had previously developed more fully in his work. Newsom defaults, however, to the same common over-simplifications that are shared by many who consider *TLOL*: That it is "Unitarian in outlook," that it is "theologically rather inconsistent," and that, "Given the intended audience, it is hardly fair to infer the specifics of Dickens's faith from this slight work" (*Oxford* 500). Like Collins, Newsom tends to make his observations in a rather qualified manner and provides very little to commend or advance the study of *TLOL*.

Some critics are much less discreet. Janet Larson is ruthlessly dismissive of *TLOL* in the few pages she devotes to it in her otherwise noteworthy *Dickens and the Broken Scriptures*, but her treatment of it is uninformed and generalized to the point of distortion (10-12). She is content to see it in terms of Dickens's alleged Unitarian sympathies, demonstrates little awareness of its intended audience, and portrays it as an inept and muddled attempt at an "essentialist" gospel. She alleges that Dickens "freely [...] moves material around to suit his thematic purposes" (10), and chooses for her example of such free transpositions Dickens's use of "Father! Forgive them! They know not what they do!" as Jesus' response to his scourging rather than as a declaration from the Cross. This is, in fact, a rare instance of Dickens transposing something to where it does not belong, and in any event it is a rather insignificant feature.<sup>33</sup> Larson restates the common misconception that Dickens's *TLOL* is based on the Gospel of Luke, and curiously suggests that, had the manuscript been published in Dickens's lifetime, "it would have brought down on his head the very controversy

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<sup>33</sup> Egan astutely comments on this transposition, "This is one of the few instances of Dickens's significantly rearranging the sequence of Gospel events, and his blending of the evangelists' accounts has been too consistently careful and accurate for this shift to be an error. Clearly, it is important to Dickens that his children understand that Jesus responds to mistreatment and suffering with merciful forgiveness. [...] The powerful words 'Father, forgive them...' have precisely the effect Dickens seeks here; the prayer of Jesus is appropriate and well-motivated in Dickens's use of it" (301-2).

that his revised New Testament tries to settle” (11). Given his audience and his intended purpose in writing, it is unlikely that Dickens was trying to settle any controversy. In almost every way, Larson has misunderstood *TLOL* and sorely mistook its purpose. Her assumption that *TLOL* was one of many nineteenth century “efforts to ‘reconceive the Christ’” is indicative of much of her misleading generalization and her carelessness in assessing this work in its time. As I will show in the following chapters, Dickens’s effort is a rather conventional and orthodox approach to the Gospels.

Like many of Dickens’s critics, Larson’s basic failing comes from her misconstrual of Dickens’s response to Christianity and the Church in his day. “The Gospel according to Dickens,” she insists, “attempts to stabilize ‘varying interpretation’ of the New Testament by substituting one of his own that raises more questions that it resolves, while it implicitly makes his private ‘accommodation’ to the attenuated authority of the New Testament as God’s self-revelation in Christ” (12). Although he may have been aware of it to some degree, we have no evidence to suggest that Dickens was engaged in the major continental theological discussion of his day. Much of what Larson assumes to have been in popular circulation was only incipient in the 1840s and then only within a small corner of academia. It is doubtful that Dickens would have been conversant within the academic discussion of such concerns. Only in his later years (after 1860) did historical-critical concerns in biblical studies become issues in England on the broader public scale in which Dickens might have comfortably interacted with them. Unfortunately, Larson has not fully understood the subtleties of the theological-academic landscape of the early to mid-nineteenth century and how Dickens responded to them.

As scholars have dealt with *TLOL*, whether in the acerbic posture of Larson or the disinterested calm of Collins, apart from a few, they have almost unanimously traded in the

over-simplifications that have become the currency of criticism and discussion for *TLOL*: the lack of any substantial theology within it; its Unitarian intimations; the limitations imposed upon it by its intended audience; and its misrepresentation of the Gospels. It is little wonder that *TLOL* has consistently failed to find a place in serious Dickens scholarship.

### §1.3.2 THE NEW DIRECTIONS IN STUDIES ON THE LIFE OF OUR LORD

In the midst of such a wide-ranging atmosphere of responses, however, there have been scholarly attempts in the form of doctoral dissertations to provide *TLOL* with the critical attention it deserves. In 1976, Jan Hodge examined it as part of his critical study, *The Gospel Influences on Dickens's Art*. Madonna Egan wrote her doctoral dissertation on *TLOL* in 1983, analyzing its affinities to the four New Testament Gospels and addressing rather thoroughly the religious views in it. Michael Piret followed Egan's dissertation with a similar work in 1991 containing a critical study and annotated edition of his own. In 1995, Robert Hanna produced his dissertation analyzing *TLOL* primarily as a pedagogical tool used by Dickens in family worship. These works actually represent a new direction in the study of *TLOL*, in that they undertake a serious and thorough examination of it. While they recognize its limitations, they see it as integral to our understanding of Dickens, his work, and his faith. Unfortunately, these works remain unpublished, and for all intents and purposes, unacknowledged in scholarly circles, further highlighting the fact that efforts to take *TLOL* seriously remain peripheral to Dickens studies generally.

#### Jan Hodge

Jan Hodge's work is a broader critical study of Dickens's religious sentiments as expressed through his art, and Hodge brings his insight to bear on *TLOL* in his second chapter. He is at his best when he works within the parameters of his overall project: evaluating

and assessing the effectiveness of Dickens's communication of his faith and conviction through his artistic sensibilities. While his analysis of *TLOL* becomes a bit tendentious and labored as he discusses rhetorical and narrative strategies, his initial observations and survey of the content of *TLOL* (65-88) are, nevertheless, creditable considering that his overall purpose is not a theological analysis of the piece.

Even though his main task is to consider the Gospel influences on Dickens's art, Hodge is quite up to the task of taking on some of the more difficult issues of *TLOL*. He is ready, for instance, with an answer to those who insist on its Unitarian emphasis, but unfortunately is satisfied with establishing only that Jesus is the Son of God. While this is surely central to the discussion, unless there is something that might corroborate Son of God as a designation of deity, it may not suffice of itself to settle the issue. Most, if not all, nineteenth-century Unitarians would have given qualified assent to Son of God as a legitimate title for Jesus.

Hodge commits the typical and expected errors. As to the date of writing, Hodge takes the letter to Forster as determinative and assumes that Dickens finished *TLOL* in June 1846 (138-9). His overall sense of the piece is that it "is in no sense Dickens's attempt at a full and mature explication of Christianity" (65); neither does Hodge demonstrate any sense that he is considering a retelling of the Gospel story dependent upon the harmonization of selected Gospel episodes. Although he does recognize, if only in a limited way, the importance of Dickens's selective process to the meaning and intent of *TLOL* (69-70), he seems to ignore that it is a retelling and not a Dickens creation. For Hodge, *TLOL* is not so much a source of Dickens's Christian thought as it is simply a piece of his art that has been influenced by his Christian ideas. As such, in including *TLOL* in his study, Hodge has inadvertently placed himself in the curious position of essentially evaluating the Gospel influences

on the Gospel.

As Hodge continues his analysis by considering the rhetorical strategies of the Gospel authors, his work becomes more theoretical and removed from meaningful contribution to the study of *TLOL*. When he suggests, “If the Gospel narratives thus offered Dickens the strategy of their paradigm-form, so too did they offer him their tactics” (108), he overestimates Dickens’s knowledge not only of Gospel studies, but also the development of nineteenth-century Gospel studies in general. Furthermore, he also fails to recognize that Dickens was composing a narrative largely dependent on harmonization and that he was, necessarily, dependent on the forms and conventions of his sources, the Gospels themselves. Likewise, in his discussion of Dickens’s inclusion of the parables of Jesus in *TLOL*, he goes a bit over the top in asserting, “Dickens intuitively understood the parabolic method of Jesus better than did the Gospel writers themselves” (83). This assertion is joined by quotations of Joachim Jeremias on the redactional layers of certain parables and Hodge’s implicit suggestion that Dickens was quite aware of such an evolution, utilizing this knowledge to help him craft his own presentation of the parables. Here again, Hodge has seemingly mistaken the inherent qualities of Dickens’s sources for critical knowledge and his abilities in the area of biblical studies.

### **Madonna Egan**

Perhaps the most significant work of the past two decades has been Madonna Egan’s 1983 *Telling ‘The Blessed History’: Charles Dickens’s The Life of Our Lord*. Egan should be recognized for setting the standard of careful and systematic analysis of *TLOL*. Her work is a comprehensive one in which she has taken *TLOL* seriously and has justified doing so. She has also, although not overtly, called attention to the centrality of *TLOL* in Dickens’s work. Her introduction, which has since been supplemented with needful corrections by Michael

Piret in 1991 and again by Robert Hanna in 1995, nevertheless, remains noteworthy as the first attempt to trace the history of the manuscript from its writing to its final location in the Dickens Collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia. Likewise, her careful attention to the manuscript itself and her knowledge of it is pioneering, especially in the great care she took to decipher Dickens's corrections. Perhaps one of her strongest, yet subtle, contributions is that she has kept the pedagogical emphasis of *TLOL* always before us. Although she does not make it central to her thesis, as does Hanna, she rightly keeps before us the fact that *TLOL* was written for Dickens's children and that central to his purpose is teaching them who Jesus was and what he did.

Egan's work remains a necessary source for anyone who desires to study not only *TLOL*, but Dickens's religion as well. In the closing comments of her work, she has spoken for all who have pursued such interests when she remarks, "Discussing Dickens and religion without incorporating the insights provided by *The Life of Our Lord*, can no longer be justified" (412). Her work vindicates the claim because she took *TLOL* seriously and because she recognized in *TLOL* a serious expression of Dickens's Christian thought.

#### Michael Piret

In 1991, Michael Piret offered his contribution to the study of *TLOL* in the form of his doctoral dissertation, *Charles Dickens's "Children's New Testament": An introduction, annotated edition, and critical discussion*. Early on, Piret makes the promising observation, "If we read it [*TLOL*] carefully, and let it lead us into his life, his letters, and his other writings, we can expect to learn a great deal about his attitude toward religion" (vii). Very soon, however, his work dissipates into a litany only of what Dickens did not believe based on what he omitted from *TLOL*. In many respects, Piret's work is the example par excellence of the negative approach to *TLOL*, not unlike some of those we have already encountered.

Piret begins his dissertation with a premise that subtly and purposefully directs his entire work. In commenting on Dickens's reply to a "convinced advocate of slavery" in America, Piret interprets Dickens's view of the Bible. The slavery advocate, about to use the Bible as his authority for the justification of slavery, asked Dickens if he believed the Bible. Dickens replied that he believed the Bible, "But," he added, "if any man could prove to me that it sanctioned slavery, I would place no further credence in it" (Forster 1: 250). Dickens's reply, says Piret, "sprang very naturally from the critical attitudes he held towards all kinds of authority, religious authority included. He demanded the right to go his own way. If authority [in this case, the Bible] accorded with his convictions, fine; if not, it would have to be set aside" (vi).<sup>34</sup> Piret's underlying assumption is that Dickens used the Scriptures as nothing more than a secondary text and as a source for proof-texting his own views when it was expedient. In other words, the Bible was not authoritative for Dickens in any real obligatory way and was simply one of any number of books that might be consulted for proof-texting his religious views and worldview.

Beginning from this premise, then, it is quite easy for Piret to suggest, as he does, that in *TLOL* Dickens is "fracturing and recasting" Christianity to serve his own purposes and whims. "Creating his own narrative of the life of Christ," Piret suggests, "afforded Dickens the opportunity to teach his children precisely the version of Christianity that he wished them to receive, to mold their religious attitudes in the nursery after the pattern that suited him best" (22). This is certainly true. Any father who might be moved to attempt what Dickens did would surely select not only the material he wanted his children to learn and know but also would likely try to mold their religious attitudes according to his own

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<sup>34</sup> I would suggest, rather, this is a carefully directed hyperbole to draw attention to just how heinous a crime against humanity the institution of slavery was.

and to what he thought best. It is really no surprise that Dickens, too, should do this. However, that does not require us to suppose, as Piret implies, that Dickens was playing fast and loose with the Scriptures. And it surely does not of necessity imply a disconnect between Dickens serving his own purposes and telling his children the truth as he understood it.

To observe, then, as Piret does, “So, likewise he took the opportunity to select exactly what he wanted from the New Testament—deleting, adapting, interpreting—shaping for the children his version of an acceptable religious outlook” (24) is not only to misunderstand what Dickens was attempting in *TLOL* but also to misrepresent it as well. What we will find, rather, in *TLOL* is a deliberate and careful attempt to retell the story of Jesus as it emerges from the Gospels in a manner unencumbered by what Dickens would have understood as man’s interpretations and narrow constructions.

In spite of his negative approach, Piret’s work has served the serious study of *TLOL* by raising the difficult questions and issues that, of necessity, must be addressed if a meaningful study of *TLOL* and Dickens’s Christian thought is to be undertaken. For instance, Piret raises the questions of the quality of Dickens’s Christian belief, the method of his composition of *TLOL*, and the nature of his connection to Unitarianism, all in a penetrating manner that demands our attention and careful answers. Still, for the rigor Piret brings to the study of *TLOL*, he argues throughout his work that Dickens demonstrates a “general tendency to naturalize or eliminate the otherworldly dimension of Christianity” (238). Thus, he is only too ready to eviscerate *TLOL*, as well as Dickens’s Christianity, by removing both the supernatural and the genuinely spiritual elements. Perhaps Dickens’s tendency was not to naturalize or eliminate the otherworldly dimension of Christianity but only to put it in its proper place in order to attend to weightier matters (Matt. 23:23-24).

## Robert Hanna

The most recent attempt to consider *TLOL* on the larger critical scale has been Robert Hanna's 1995 dissertation, *Charles Dickens' The Life of Our Lord as a Primer for Christian Education*.<sup>35</sup> While his work is a significant contribution to the study of *TLOL*, it does exhibit some of the same shortcomings as his peers. Concerning the date of composition, for instance, Hanna affirms the consensus view by citing Dickens's letter to Forster, thus, in Hanna's words, "establishing the year of composition as 1846" (52). Similarly, he adopts the standard posture when he writes, "A general paraphrase of an edited New Testament scarcely reveals one's 'deepest religious convictions'" (56). Notwithstanding, Hanna's work is important for other reasons and provides a fresh and significant perspective on *TLOL*.

Hanna's most valuable contribution to the study of *TLOL* is his identifying it as a pedagogical tool used by Dickens for religious instruction and family worship, and meant to be read to his children and heard by them. While several scholars have noted that *TLOL* was a document meant to be used to teach his children and a few have recognized that it was to be read aloud to them, only Hanna has developed this in a comprehensive and resourceful way. That it was a document meant to be read and heard reminds us that *TLOL* served two complementary roles for Dickens and his children: 1) it possessed the authority of a fixed text and at the same time 2) it retained the flexibility and adaptability of an oral presentation.

Four more things in particular make Hanna's dissertation a valuable tool for researchers. First, an exhaustive "annotated bibliography" of sorts, in his second chapter, is of value not simply for its identification of various editions of *TLOL* but more importantly for

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<sup>35</sup> In 1998, Hanna published *The Dickens Family Gospel: A Family Devotional Guide*, a book based on the fourth chapter of his dissertation. As the dissertation contains critical material not included in the book, my concern will be with the dissertation, particularly his introduction and first three chapters.

supplying reference to the wealth of information contained in the introductions within those volumes. Similarly, his survey of reviews of *TLOL* in the popular press from 1934 forward serves the researcher with an invaluable catalogue of primary sources. A third useful component is his appendix of a chronological list of book and magazine editions of *TLOL*. Finally, a thorough and informative history of the manuscript correcting and expanding Egan's previous work brings a significant aspect of the study of *TLOL* up to date.

#### §1.4 CONCLUSION

If *TLOL* can be considered a serious and substantive expression of Dickens's Christian thought and worldview, then we have before us an indispensable and, as yet, virtually unused source of considerable significance to the study of Dickens's religion in particular and Dickens studies in general. In reviewing the literature and the present state of scholarly study on *TLOL*, I have implicitly suggested at least some of the work yet to be done by those who would undertake further study of *TLOL*. This present project attempts to extend the effort of those mentioned and to make some contribution to that further study by providing insight from the field of biblical studies.

To begin, then, I have endeavoured to show here how *TLOL* is a serious and important part of Dickens studies by identifying its seriousness of intent and its referential significance. Its distinctive value rests in its deliberate and serious expression of Dickens's Christian thought, and as I will further demonstrate below, that value extends to its role as an index to the larger Dickens corpus. *TLOL* illuminates Dickens's work in such a way as to bring clarity and consistency to it, while at the same time compelling us to examine Dickens's writing as more specifically Christian rather than merely "religious". Consequently, when taken seriously, *TLOL* can bring unique and direct insight to our understanding of Dickens's Christian thought and worldview.

TELLING THAT GRACIOUS AND COMPASSIONATE HISTORY

*“I have remembered Who wept for a parting between the living and the dead.  
I have bethought me of all that gracious and compassionate history.”*

– from *David Copperfield*, Chapter 53

If we accept that *TLOL* is a serious expression of Dickens’s religious thought and that it tells us something significant about his understanding of Christianity and the Christian life, our task, then, is to consider its content carefully and precisely. An especially productive starting point for such a task will be an analysis of its form.<sup>36</sup> By 1) considering *TLOL* against the historical context and related forms of religious literature of his day, by 2) paying particular attention to both his dependence on and use of his Gospel sources and by 3) noting his deliberate and purposeful selection and arrangement of that material, a clearer understanding of Dickens’s form will emerge. At the same time, such an analysis will not only provide an introduction to Dickens’s purpose and intent in *TLOL* but also will pave the way for a closer scrutiny and clearer understanding of its theological content.

Even the most cursory reading of *TLOL* will reveal that it is Dickens’s attempt to present the Gospel story to his children. As I have tried to show in the previous chapter, however, *TLOL* was not simply a collection of personally memorable Gospel episodes or anecdotal musings on Gospel events. Rather, it was a planned and carefully crafted narrative composition with specific intent. The analysis of form which I will pursue in this chapter will illuminate such crafting and reveal that, while *TLOL* formally shares characteristics of both Gospel harmonies and Lives of Jesus, Dickens composed his own relatively unique version of a rather common nineteenth-century form of religious literature for children.

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<sup>36</sup> By form, I mean to refer to the genre or generic (not generic) models and ideas Dickens has employed to compose his narrative together with the way in which he has selected and arranged his material.

As the following representative titles suggest, this body of religious literature might best be classified broadly as juvenile Gospel narratives. However, as the authors' own understandings of their purposes indicate, this body of literature is far from uniform. Henry Ware's historiographic interests and his inclination toward commentary in his 1833 composition, *The Life of the Saviour*, are characteristic of a Life of Jesus, as his title indicates. Significantly, Ware, in his preface, refers to his work as both harmony and history (vii). Lucy Barton's *The Gospel History of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (1837) was identified in her preface as a "Biographical Narrative of the Gospel History" (ix). Her work is characteristically interpretive, explanatory and hortatory but nevertheless is composed within an historical narrative frame that gives it, like Ware's *Life of the Saviour*, the feel of a Life of Jesus. Still, it is clear from a reading of *The Gospel History* that, unlike Ware, Barton is concerned more about doctrinal teaching and belief. The anonymous female author of *Gospel Stories: An Attempt to Render the Chief Events of the Life of Our Saviour Intelligible and Profitable to Young Children* (1833) refers to her work as simply "Gospel Stories" (1-2), and by design this work is structured as a collection of separate stories selected from the Gospels. Like Barton's *Gospel History*, and Ware's *The Life of the Saviour*, *Gospel Stories* is intended to be a teaching tool to aid in the spiritual formation of children, just as its extended title implies.<sup>37</sup>

Each of these, in its own way, like Dickens's *TLOL*, is an attempt to tell the Gospel story, and while together they share broader affinities, *TLOL* remains distinctive in some significant and definitive ways. As we will see in a fuller examination below, Barton, Ware, and the author of *Gospel Stories*, on the one hand, compose their narratives by presenting the elements of a preconceived conceptual framework against the backdrop of the Jesus story to

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<sup>37</sup> The three juvenile Gospel narratives introduced here have been selected not only because they are representative of this genre, but also because they represent three different traditions within nineteenth century Christianity in Great Britain. Henry Ware was a Unitarian, Lucy Barton a Quaker and the anonymous author of *Gospel Stories* appears to write from an Evangelical or Anglican Evangelical perspective.

create a work that serves that conceptual framework. Dickens, on the other hand, attempts to replicate in *TLOL* as nearly as possible the story of Jesus, allowing only his selected episodes from the Gospels to shape and determine a portrait of Jesus. In other words, Dickens is more interested in the story itself and for its own sake, and rejects the imposition of a preconceived conceptual framework that, in his mind, would prejudice a portrait of Jesus derived from the Gospels alone.<sup>38</sup>

As pointed out above, Dickens's *TLOL* shares affinity with both Gospel harmonies and Lives of Jesus (as do the others already mentioned, to a greater or lesser degree). Yet, in terms of what is commonly understood about both of these genres, it would be difficult to situate *TLOL* satisfactorily within either one. As we consider this question of the form or genre of *TLOL*, it will be beneficial to consider first what Dickens himself understood his work to be. This will involve considerations both internal and external to *TLOL*, and a good place to begin might be the title of the work. As the examples of the various works above suggest, the title should at least be taken into account when considering a work, as it may provide some clues to the author's formal intent. In the case of *TLOL*, however, *The Life of Our Lord* is not the title Dickens directly supplied. In fact, as far as we know, Dickens gave no formal title to the work, and this lack of authorial title has led to various suggestions as to what a proper and representative title should be. As we pursue this matter of title more thoroughly, we will discover that our findings do, in fact, relate directly to our consideration of the form of *TLOL*.

Robert Fleissner, in a short article in *American Notes and Queries* (1983), rejected the title *The Life of Our Lord* and suggested "The Little Testament" instead (39). Similarly, Mi-

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<sup>38</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Dickens is any less dependent upon his own presuppositions than the other authors named here. As I will attempt to demonstrate below, however, Dickens does compose a much more stark and unembellished narrative than the others.

chael Piret in his dissertation on *TLOL* also takes exception to the existing title<sup>39</sup> because, as he maintains, “*The Children’s New Testament* [Piret’s preferred title] is not *The Life of Our Lord*” (7). In support of his preferred title, Piret insists that, “the Children’s New Testament” is “the only phrase for which there is positive evidence of authorial use in reference to the text” (6). However, he seems to have overlooked significant references that suggest otherwise. It is true, as Piret is quick to point out, that when Dickens refers to *TLOL*, he sometimes refers to it as a “New Testament.”<sup>40</sup> In two important instances, however, Dickens refers to *TLOL* as a history or life of Jesus: First, in the letter to J.M. Makeham (Forster 2: 469), he refers to it as a “history” of “the life and lessons of our Saviour”; and second, in the first two sentences of the book itself, he points to his desire that his children “know something about the history of Jesus Christ” (11). Carefully considered, this idea of *TLOL* as a history of the life and lessons of Jesus begins to commend itself in a much more convincing manner than does Piret’s “Children’s New Testament.”

Consider, first, that Dickens seems to understand the Gospels as containing a “history” that possesses significance in and of itself even apart from the New Testament. Note for instance, his observation in *The Uncommercial Traveller*: “In the New Testament there is the most beautiful and affecting history conceivable by man” (38). It is clear from the context here that Dickens has in mind the story of Jesus in the Gospels and not the New Testament as a whole. Dickens, in fact, is often given to referring to the Gospels as a “history.” He makes reference to “the blessed history,” obviously the Gospels, in *Dombey and Son* when Harriet Carker reads to Alice Marwood “the eternal book for all the weary, and the heavy-laden” (871); David Copperfield finds solace in the “gracious and compassionate

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Hanna is another who has argued that *The Life of Our Lord* is not a proper or representative title for Dickens’s work. See Hanna, 25.

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, the letter of 28 June 1846 to Forster (Forster 1: 457); letter to Macrae (Macrae 128); letter to his son Edward (Forster, 2: 467-68).

history” of the Gospels as he anticipates Dora’s inevitable death (731); and it is the “beneficent history of the New Testament” of which Arthur Clennam is deprived in his religious experience as a youth (*Little Dorrit* 42). In each case, it seems that Dickens is more interested specifically in the history of Jesus in the Gospels rather than simply in the New Testament generally. In view of these examples, it is certainly plausible to suggest that Dickens more often than not was referring to the Gospels whenever he spoke of “the New Testament.”<sup>41</sup>

Considering also the basic subject matter of the selection of material he chose to include in *TLOL*, it would seem reasonable to conclude that Dickens understood and intended his composition not as a New Testament but as a history of the life and lessons of Jesus. Apart from a few brief references to the early chapters of the book of Acts in his short epilogue, there is no indication in *TLOL* itself that Dickens was concerned with anything in the New Testament other than the Gospel accounts of Jesus. His entire narrative is given to the life and teaching of Jesus as it comes from the Gospels. All that is included in *TLOL* from the rest of the New Testament, or church history for that matter, has only to do with bringing his narrative of the life and history of Jesus to a natural and appropriate conclusion.<sup>42</sup> Without question, everything about *TLOL* argues against those who would challenge

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<sup>41</sup> The fact that Dickens sometimes refers to *TLOL* as a New Testament seems to affirm this. Even given the epilogue of *TLOL*, there is no reason to believe that Dickens thought he was writing a New Testament rather than the Gospel story.

<sup>42</sup> In the final scene of chapter 11 in *TLOL*, Dickens includes a gesture to I Cor. 15.6: “Jesus Christ was seen by five hundred of His followers at once” (121). His account of the Ascension, which he takes from Luke and Mark, includes some details from Acts, the most significant being that Jesus will one day descend from heaven to judge the world. His epilogue includes only brief mention of the following events up to the conversion of Saul: the appointment of Mattathias to replace Judas (Acts 1.15-26); a general allusion to the ministry and preaching of the early Church, especially Peter and John, in Acts 2-4; Peter’s imprisonment and miraculous deliverance (probably Acts 12.1-19, but cf. Acts 5.17-21); the account of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5.1-11); the martyrdom of Stephen and Saul’s persecution of the Church (Acts 7.54-8.4); the conversion of Saul (Acts 9.1-31). The final paragraph of his epilogue before his conclusion is a description of the perseverance and martyrdom of the early Christians. In all of this, it is clear that Dickens understood it as part of the life and lessons of Jesus.

the validity of the existing and accepted title. Dickens's intent was undoubtedly to tell the story of the life and lessons of Jesus, not to write a "Little Testament" or a "Children's New Testament". It makes sense, then, that Sir Henry Dickens would refer to it as "the history of Our Lord's life" (Henry Dickens, *Recollections* 41; Henry Dickens, *Memories* 29) as well as "my father's 'Life of Our Lord'" in his will (*TLOL*, Simon & Schuster 10).

In view of what we have considered, and quite against insistence to the contrary, *The Life of Our Lord* remains a more than suitable title, and as such can provide some initial orientation to the question of form, however slight. Dickens's appeals to the New Testament, for all intents and purposes, were appeals to the Gospels, and his interest in the Gospels was specifically the life and teaching of Jesus. So, when it came to his composing something that might benefit his children and aid in their spiritual formation, Dickens chose a retelling of the Gospel story composed in a continuous narrative made up of selected harmonized episodes from the four Gospels to relate the life and lessons of Jesus—a life of our Lord. And it is this basic approach, then, which is accurately represented in the given title, that calls to our attention the two genres with which *TLOL* shares certain affinities and which influenced its form: Lives of Jesus and Gospel harmonies.

In the previous chapter, I briefly discussed Dickens's use of harmonization in the composition of *TLOL*. Such a discussion certainly invites an examination of the form and structure of *TLOL* and its relationship not only to Gospel harmonies on the one hand, but also to Lives of Jesus on the other. Because of Dickens's almost exclusive dependence on harmonization in the composition of *TLOL*, it is tempting to understand it as a harmony of the Gospels, and yet, it is clear that *TLOL* possesses certain characteristics of a Life, while it lacks certain characteristics of the harmony. In the discussion that follows here, I will consider both the harmony and the Life in order to understand their differences and to observe

their affinities with *TLOL*.

## §2.1 *THE LIFE OF OUR LORD* AND LIVES OF JESUS

Both the harmony and the Life have been attempts, using radically different methodologies, to compose an accurate, historical portrait of Jesus. Still, while the harmony and the Life coexist as unlikely partners, prior to the Enlightenment harmonization of the Gospels was understood, in Britain especially, as the acceptable method by which one might compose a Life of Jesus. Indeed, in Great Britain, the harmony would have been understood as a legitimate Life of Jesus until the late nineteenth century. Dickens's *TLOL* is situated at a unique juncture in history when a transition in the critical study of the life of Jesus from harmonies to Lives was about to begin. From this side of history, *TLOL* appears formally (and methodologically) closer to a harmony than to a Life, but because of the historical context in which it was written, it could just as easily be understood, both formally (and methodologically) as an attempt at a Life. Whatever the form of *TLOL*, a careful look at this issue is important in that it can 1) help to confirm our earlier observation as to the seriousness of purpose of *TLOL* and 2) provide insight into how to best study and understand *TLOL* as an introduction into Dickens's work and his Christian thought.

Modern Lives of Jesus had their genesis in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment historical studies that in essence began to appear with the fragments "Concerning the Story of the Resurrection" and "The Goal of Jesus and His Disciples" by Hermann Reimarus published posthumously in 1774-1778 and Schleiermacher's lectures on the life of Jesus initially delivered beginning in 1819. It was not until the 1860s and after, however, that Lives of Jesus flourished behind the impetus of David Friedrich Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, published in 1834 and translated into English in Great Britain by George

Eliot in 1846 as *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*.<sup>43</sup>

Critical Lives of Jesus of the sort of Strauss' reconstructed a biography or history of Jesus that challenged the historical accuracy of the Gospels as well as the traditional portrait of Jesus that emerged from them. Employing the developing historical-critical method, Lives attempted through means of historiography to reconstruct a Life of Jesus that went beyond the Gospel narrative and would reveal the true Jesus of history. As such, the Life was a critical work encompassing a combination of historiography, biographical interest, commentary and argument. In the end, what was produced would read very much like a commentary on the Gospels rather than a New Testament Gospel. Lives concerned themselves with asking questions of history and the historical Jesus, and proposing answers. Although various nineteenth-century Lives could have very diverse aims and agendas, in each case the task seems to have been the attempt to reconstruct a more historical and thereby more accurate understanding of Jesus' life than was reflected in the Gospels and taught by the Church.

Reimarus attempted early on to establish such a reconstruction in *The Goal of Jesus and His Disciples*. He wrote, "In a word, the apostles departed completely and entirely from their Master both in teaching and living and they abandoned and perverted his religion and purpose and introduced an entirely new doctrine" (62). Reimarus was willing to accept the historical viability of the Gospels, if properly studied and understood according to his own presuppositions, but found in the rest of the New Testament a distortion of what Jesus really sought to teach. For Reimarus, Jesus was a failed Jewish preacher and would-be Messiah. His death was not redemptive—rather, it was the result of tragic miscalculation. Of Jesus' words from the Cross, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me!", Reimarus

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<sup>43</sup> While Strauss' *Leben Jesu* did set the tone for lives of Jesus, it would be the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860 that would finally help establish the historical-critical approach to the Scriptures as an acceptable method in Great Britain and pave the way for a proliferation of British Lives of Jesus.

wrote:

[They were] a confession, which could naturally mean nothing other than that God had not helped him achieve his goal and design as he had hoped. Therefore it had not been his purpose to want to suffer and die, but that he establish a secular kingdom and release the Jews from their captivity, and since God had forsaken him in that, his hope had come to nothing. (95)

Moreover, Jesus was not the founder and teacher of a new religion. He was simply a preacher. Reimarus observed:

The intention of Jesus' preaching and teaching, then, is directed toward a change of mind, toward sincere love of God and the neighbor, toward patience, gentleness, self-denial, and the suppression of all evil desire. There are no exalted mysteries or points of doctrine which he explains, proves, and proclaims. There are just moral teaching and simple duties of life [...]. (40)

In the end, Reimarus hoped to discredit Christianity showing it to be false and based on the lies and deception perpetuated by the Church, especially concerning Jesus. While Reimarus' work did not demonstrate the kind of critical scholarly rigor we undertake today, it was nevertheless a radical challenge in its time to the historicity of the Jesus of the New Testament as taught by the Church.

It was Strauss, though, who set the standard for nineteenth-century Lives with his comprehensive mythical approach to the Gospels and the life of Jesus in his monumental *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*. Although he was not the first to use the mythical approach in the study of the Gospels, he was the first to employ it in a comprehensive fashion.<sup>44</sup> Strauss attempted at once to dismantle both the nineteenth-century rationalist and supernaturalist interpretations of the Gospels, proposing in their places that the Gospel history generally should be understood as myth. Defining myth, Strauss wrote, "It is the representation of an event or of an idea in a form which is historical, but, at the same time

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<sup>44</sup> Strauss qualifies this idea: "It is not by any means meant that the whole history of Jesus is to be represented as mythical, but only that every part of it is to be subjected to a critical examination, to ascertain whether it have not some admixture of the mythical" (li).

characterized by the rich pictorial and imaginative mode of thought and expression of the primitive ages” (53). For Strauss, the Gospels did not report historical events, but rather represented timeless religio-philosophical concepts in imaginative religious language and imagery. Ultimately, Strauss believed that, through his mythical approach, “the innumerable, and never otherwise to be harmonized discrepancies and chronological contradictions in the gospel histories disappear, as it were, at one stroke” (57).

Clearly, Strauss was hoping to establish a new methodology as much as reshape the understanding of Jesus. Leaving aside here Strauss’ complex Hegelian understanding of Jesus and the Christ event, it is important to understand that Strauss rejected what he called the double presupposition of the church: “First, that the Gospels contained a history, and secondly, that this history was a supernatural one” (li). Doing so allowed him to determine “whether in fact, and to what extent, the ground on which we stand in the Gospels is historical” (li). Moreover, it was Strauss’ conviction that the main requirement for undertaking such a work as his was an emotional and intellectual freedom from “certain religious and dogmatical presuppositions” (lii). Thus, he set upon his quest for the historical Jesus, his life of Jesus critically examined.

Reimarus and Strauss, then, as pioneers in the quest for the historical Jesus, inaugurated also a new era of the historical-critical approach to the Gospels and the resulting trend in the production of historical Lives of Jesus. As we will see, however, the trend was slow to take hold in Great Britain and there is no evidence to suggest that Dickens or those of his contemporaries whom we have included in this discussion were by any means attempting to reproduce Lives in the same vein as Reimarus and Strauss.

## §2.2 *THE LIFE OF OUR LORD* AND GOSPEL HARMONIES

It almost goes without saying, then, that Dickens’s *TLOL* is certainly not a Life in

the way that Strauss' *Leben Jesu* was or Reimarus' *The Goal of Jesus and His Disciples*; nor does it share affinity with J. R. Seeley's later *Ecce Homo* of 1866 or even Père LaCordaire's *Jesus Christ* (1870), which was in Dickens's library at Gadshill. Clearly, it was not Dickens's intention to write a Life in the sense that these others are Lives, and while Dickens writes that his work is a "History," his is not a history in the way the others attempt to be. In fact, Dickens is quite satisfied with the history of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels; he is not asking historical questions or proposing a new methodology; he is not providing commentary on critical issues; nor is there any critical or historical treatment of the Gospel texts. This is not to say that all Lives must take the same radical or critical approach of Strauss or Reimarus; but it is to suggest that there is a marked difference between the method of composing a critical Life of Jesus and the method of composing the sort of Gospel narrative that Dickens set out to write.

Generally, Dickens found the history of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels to be accurate and reliable, and to be the story he chose to relate to his children. Indeed, Dickens went about assembling his history by harmonizing selected passages from the Gospels and arranging them in a narrative that tells, or retells, the story of Jesus. This is precisely why it is tempting at first glance to understand *TLOL* as a harmony of the Gospels. Surely, Dickens's almost exclusive use of harmonization in the composition of *TLOL* could justify such an understanding.<sup>45</sup> And perhaps a cogent argument for such an understanding could be presented—but not without qualification.

By the time Dickens composed *TLOL*, the genre of harmony had enjoyed a long

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<sup>45</sup> See my initial study of *TLOL*, Gary Colledge, "The Life of Our Lord Revisited" *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction*, Vol. 36, Eds. Stanley Freidman, Edward Guiliano, Anne Humpherys, and Michael Timko (New York: AMS Press, 2005).

history extending as far back as the second century C.E.<sup>46</sup> The harmony, in many ways, is a rather complex work that seeks to combine and weave together, or harmonize, into a single continuous narrative the events and the story of the four New Testament Gospels. As such, harmonies were early attempts to deal with the historical figure of Jesus, and in that way share a unique yet tenuous relationship with Lives. As has already been stated, prior to the Enlightenment (and in Great Britain, prior to 1860), the harmonizing of the four canonical Gospels was the accepted method of constructing a biographical account of the life of Jesus. An important and significant difference between harmonies and Lives,<sup>47</sup> however, is that harmonies were constructed upon the basic presupposition that the Gospels were reliable historical records revealing a true picture of Jesus and according to “the proposition that the four canonical gospels are in fundamental or absolute substantive agreement (*consensus evangelistarum*) in their presentation of the life of Jesus” (Patterson 61).

Dickens seems to have accepted these basic and key presuppositions as he went about the task of composing *TLOL*. Surely, his almost exclusive use of harmonization was the product of such presuppositions. Furthermore, he seldom, if ever, departed from the narrative of his Gospel sources, his pedagogical and hortatory passages reflected the point of view of the account to which they were attached, and even his interpretive passages were consistent with the more conservative and traditional preaching and commentary of the day.

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<sup>46</sup> Tatian’s *Diatessaron*, the first known harmony, was composed ca. 150 C.E.

<sup>47</sup> See Mark Allen Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998). Powell distinguishes between harmonies and Lives: “A Life of Jesus might draw heavily upon harmonization of the Gospel accounts but it differed in at least three ways. It would (1) typically impose some grand scheme or hypothesis upon the material that allowed everything to be interpreted in accord with a consistent paradigm (for example, ‘Jesus was a social reformer’ or ‘Jesus was a religious mystic’), (2) exclude material in the Gospels that did not fit with this paradigm, submitting the biblical record to the author’s critical judgment of what seemed most likely to be correct, and (3) include reflection about Jesus not derived from the Gospels, attempting to fill in gaps in the biblical record with the author’s own projections concerning Jesus motivations, goals, or self-understanding” (13). See also Daniel Pals, *The Victorian Lives of Jesus* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1982), 19-30; and Stephen Patterson, “Harmony of the Gospels,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, et al. Vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 61. Both Patterson and Pals maintain the distinction between harmonies and Lives, but more loosely than Powell.

As such, Dickens was surely influenced by the basic principles upon which a harmony is composed, and there is much to commend to our thinking that *TLOL* shares its greatest affinity with the harmony. Nevertheless, before any conclusions are drawn in this regard, we should consider all of this against the background of the unique transitional context of the early to mid-nineteenth century.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, while continental theology was pioneering the historical-critical approach to the Gospels and thus turning the tide of Jesus studies toward Lives and determinedly away from harmonies, theological thought in England had become preoccupied with Anglican ecclesiastical issues. More significantly, English theologians and churchmen were resistant to and dismissive of the new continental theology and methodology. This meant that, for the most part, this new approach had little impact on British theology and that the new critical approach exhibited in Lives of Jesus, even with the publication of Eliot's translation of Strauss (1846), enjoyed little scholarly or popular credence prior to 1860.<sup>48</sup> After 1860, the theological landscape had changed dramatically and a harmony would have been received much differently. In these later decades of the nineteenth century, as the following citation from A.M. Fairbairn points out, the harmony was becoming almost obsolete as a legitimate academic or scholarly approach to the Gospels and historical Jesus studies. Writing in 1894, Fairbairn compared the theological library of the cleric of the 1830s with that of the later scholar's:

But what a contrast does the workshop of a living theologian present to the library of the older divine! Dogmatics and apologetics have almost disappeared from it, and in their place stand books on almost every possible question in the textual, literary, and historical criticism of the Old and New Testaments. Harmonies have almost ceased to be, and instead we have discussions as to the sources, sequence, depend-

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<sup>48</sup> Not until after the publication of *Essays and Reviews* (1860) and the attending controversies did British theology begin to utilize and grapple with, on the larger scale, the methodological advances in theological and biblical studies.

ence, independence, purpose, dates, of the four Gospels. Lives of Christ by men of all schools, tendencies, churches, abound, each using some more or less rigorous critical method (18).

Fairbairns's observations here seem to affirm our suggestion that Dickens composed and utilized *TLOL* in a time of theological transition in which 1860 had become the fulcrum point. In Great Britain, prior to 1860 the harmony as a life of Jesus would have demonstrated not only scholarly command but also intellectual integrity. After 1860, Lives of Jesus carried the day among scholars and academics in Jesus and Gospel studies as the first wave of historical Jesus studies established its place in British theology.

Dickens's use of the Gospels, the structure of his narrative and his almost exclusive use of harmonization to compose his narrative suggest not only that he chose an approach more akin to that of a harmonist than to one writing a Life, but also that the harmony may have been a strong influence in shaping *TLOL*. In such a context, then, it could be said that Dickens, on the one hand, utilized a methodologically primitive pattern, in terms of nineteenth-century critical biblical scholarship. Yet he employed, on the other hand, a still very common and respected form in terms of nineteenth-century mainstream British scholarship that in itself speaks emphatically not only to his basic theological orientation and his view of the Gospels, but especially to the fact that he saw in the Gospels a reliable, historical record of an authentic, historical Jesus. It is by no means clear to what degree Dickens knew or was even concerned about the scholarly subtleties of the interface between harmonies and Lives; nor would that have been necessary in order for him to compose his narrative. The evidence does suggest, however, that he was aware of the harmony as a distinct genre and that he deliberately employed the method of harmonization in an adept and familiar way to present the Gospel story to his children.

It seems, then, that Dickens saw harmonization of the Gospels as a meaningful and

productive way to communicate to his children what he thought they should know about Jesus. This basic method must have been attractive to him as he attempted to communicate to his children what he believed about Jesus while at the same time he sought to remain true to his conviction that his children understand Jesus and the Gospels apart from “the interpretations and inventions of Man” (Forster 2: 468). Only a straightforward telling of the Gospel history of Jesus would do, and the only way to accomplish that would be to attempt to replicate the story as the Gospels related it, making use almost exclusively of the harmonization of selected New Testament Gospel episodes.

This process of harmonization may initially seem to be a rather simple task. After all, the harmonizer is simply combining common narratives of the New Testament Gospels, it seems, into a continuous narrative. A bit of perspective is brought to bear upon this process, however, by Edward Greswell, the writer of one of the more important Gospel harmonies of Dickens’s day. In 1830, Greswell appended to his own harmony three substantial volumes of dissertations on the principles by which a harmony of the Gospels should be composed.<sup>49</sup> In his Preface, Greswell noted concerning the composition of his harmony:

Had he [the author, Greswell himself] fully comprehended, indeed, the true nature and extent of his undertaking, and into how wide a field of research and disquisition he would insensibly be led, he must have shrunk back from the attempt with a well-founded distrust of his ultimate success [...] and perhaps he may consider it a fortunate circumstance that he was too inextricably involved in the task [...] when experience had convinced him of its magnitude and its difficulty. (1: v.)

This, of course, is not to suggest that Dickens embarked on the same sort of project to which Greswell applied himself, or with the same technical knowledge, but it does suggest

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<sup>49</sup> Daniel Pals, in his *The Victorian “Lives” of Jesus* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1982), refers to Greswell’s work as perhaps “the last word in the harmonist’s technique” (Pals 24). Greswell’s harmony and his work on harmonization are commonly held to be some of the more notable works of the nineteenth century in this discipline. See also the similar works George Townsend, *The New Testament, Arranged in Chronological and Historical Order*. 3d ed. 2 vols. (London: C. & J. Rivington, 1828) and John David Macbride, *Lectures Explanatory Of the Diatessaron, or The History of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Collected from the Four Gospels, In The Form of A Continuous Narrative* (Oxford: W. Baxter, 1835).

the kind of work that is involved in harmonization. Significantly, *TLOL* displays evidences that Dickens was cognizant of at least the fundamental aspects involved in harmonization and that he took care to be attentive to them. Even had Dickens not been formally aware of the fundamental aspects of harmonization, he demonstrated in his work an intuitive knowledge of such work.

Dickens's use of harmonization in *TLOL*, seen against such a background, indicates that his work is more complex than it might appear at first glance. Indeed, a more thorough examination of his work shows careful craftsmanship, attention to the details of the Gospel accounts, and knowledge, either formal or common, of some basic concerns of harmonization. In preparing and composing *TLOL*, Dickens would have faced decisions concerning chronology, arrangement, and duration: not only the length of Jesus' ministry as portrayed in the Gospels, but also the relative chronology and arrangement of events, and the synthesis of common reports of events. Ultimately, it is also possible that he may have concerned himself with such questions as to whether or not the Gospels report events in a basic chronological sequence and what the nature of the relationship between the Synoptics and John was.

While it can be argued as to whether or not *TLOL* is a harmony, what is certain is that Dickens depended heavily on harmonization in the construction of his narrative. We have already seen two instances of his use of harmonization in chapter one. Here we will want to take a further look at some specific situations with which Dickens was faced as he crafted *TLOL* and how he made use of various techniques of harmonization to do so.

At the very basic stage of planning and preparation for *TLOL*, Dickens would have had to make decisions as to how he would order those events he chose to include. Because of his methodology and because he trusted the historicity of the Gospels, he would have had to

consider particular events, not only as individual events, but also in terms of their relationship to events in all the Gospels. In other words, he would have had to make decisions concerning the chronological ordering of events for his narrative. In this regard, his placement, for instance, of the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter prior to the raising of the son of the widow of Nain, the calming of the storm on the lake of Galilee, the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac, and the confrontation with the sinful woman at Simon's house is noteworthy in that it challenged the chronology of some of the authoritative harmonies of the day including Edward Greswell's Greek *Harmonia Evangelica* (1830) and Johann Griesbach's Greek *Synopsis Evangeliorum Matthaei Marci et Lucae cum Ioannis Pericopis Parallelis* (1776).<sup>50</sup> This is one instance of many that calls attention to the fact that Dickens was making decisions about chronology that were wholly his own.<sup>51</sup>

At first glance it might be supposed that the peculiar placement of the Jairus story can be accounted for simply by Dickens's following of Matthew's order to this point. But a closer inspection shows that Dickens is likely following Luke and Mark to this point, particularly considering his inclusion of Luke's account of the miraculous catch of fish and the events of Jesus' ministry in and around Capernaum which follow. Even then, Dickens's placement of the raising of Jairus' daughter is unique. In any event, an attempt to synchronize Dickens's arrangement with the authoritative harmonies of his day ultimately fails and seems to indicate that his arrangement of material stems from his own perception of the

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<sup>50</sup> The same is true of some of the more popularly accessible harmonies of Dickens's day including Edward Bickersteth's *Harmony of the Four Gospels* (1832) and Robert Mimpriss's *A Harmony of the Four Gospels* (1832).

<sup>51</sup> Consider, for instance, the placement of his reference to the Sermon on the Mount (30). It certainly makes sense that the Sermon would precede the healing of the leper, as it does in Matthew. Yet, according to the chronology of most harmonies of Dickens's day (including Greswell and Griesbach) the Sermon comes much later, and after the healing of the leper. That Dickens seems to be following Mark and Luke at this point (and not Matthew) makes this transposition even more curious, but nonetheless provides a good example of Dickens's own arrangement of his material. Another example of Dickens's own arrangement is his seventh chapter (65-78), which is given to parables and which ignores any chronological order for the sake of a more thematic or topical order.

chronology of the Gospels.

Dickens also would have had to make decisions about how he would report the various passages he selected for inclusion in *TLOL* that are attested in two or more of the Gospels. In some instances, very little ingenuity would have been necessary. The story of the calming of the sea, for instance, is reported by all three Synoptic evangelists (Matt. 8.18, 23-26; Mark 4. 35-39; Luke 8.22-24). Initially, it appears that Dickens may have used either Matthew or Luke as a primary source, as they are both brief compared to Mark. However, he seems to borrow discrete elements from all three Gospels, which he harmonizes into a single running account of the story. While all three Evangelists include the detail that Jesus was asleep during the storm, only Luke notes immediately that “He [Jesus] fell asleep” and Dickens follows him verbatim. Dickens’s transitional phrase, “By this time the crowd was so very great that Jesus Christ went down to the water side”, is clearly taken from Matthew as is the entreaty of the disciples, “Lord! Save us, or we are lost!” Of the three Evangelists, only Mark records Jesus’ words, “Peace, be still!” to still the storm, which Dickens includes in his account (38).

It seems obvious that, in this particular instance, combining such stories would not have presented too much of a challenge, as the harmonization amounted to little more than choosing a source and adding a few details from the others. There are, however, passages by which Dickens would have been more exercised and which would have tested his resourcefulness as both storyteller and harmonist. Perhaps one the best examples of such a passage is Dickens’s account of the crucifixion. Throughout his presentation of the crucifixion story he makes use of the Synoptics and John, and masterfully combines their accounts into a smooth running narrative. Here Dickens must make decisions not only about chronology and arrangement of the details within the story itself, but decisions about synthesis as well.

It is obvious that Dickens begins his account by following John, which seems to give him an initial outline for the beginning of his narrative of the crucifixion story, but as the story unfolds Dickens uses the temporal designation, “Meantime” (108) to allow him to include quite naturally more and more material from the Synoptics that is not included by John or that adds to John’s details. Initially following John, Dickens writes, “Bearing his Cross upon his shoulder” and then adds his own interpolation, “like the commonest and most wicked criminal, our blessed Saviour, Jesus Christ, surrounded by the persecuting crowd, went out of Jerusalem” (108). Luke 23.27 speaks of “a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him,” but no Gospel account offers Dickens’s description of Jesus being surrounded by a persecuting crowd. There is certainly adequate reason to suppose that the crowd would have been hostile, but this is nevertheless Dickens’s own interpolation. Dickens continues to add his own narrative details with, “And being come to a hill called Mount Calvary,<sup>52</sup> they hammered cruel nails through his hands and feet and nailed him on the Cross” (108). Mount Calvary was a common designation in the nineteenth century for the location of the crucifixion and Dickens’s details of the hammering of the “cruel nails” is most likely his description of the Gospels’ “they crucified him” (Matt. 27.38; Mark 15.25; Luke 23.33; John 19.18). Two more important indicators that Dickens is following John here are that 1) Dickens omits, as does John at this point, Matthew’s and Mark’s mention of the drink offered to Jesus (“vinegar” mixed with “gall” in Matthew; “wine” mixed with “myrrh” in Mark), although he will include it later; and 2) only John records the words on the placard placed above the head of Jesus, “Jesus of Naz-

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<sup>52</sup> Although this designation has no Scriptural attestation (but cf. Luke 23.33, “And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary—”) this was a popular title for the place of Jesus’ crucifixion. Henry Ware in his *The Life of the Saviour* (1833) writes, “This was a small eminence on the northwest side of the city, not far from the walls. It is commonly called Mount Calvary; but its elevation is so slight, that it hardly deserves the name of a mountain” (225); and Lucy Barton’s *The Gospel History of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (1837?) has, “On the way to Mount Calvary they met a man of Cyrene, Simon by name [...]” (286).

areth the King of the Jews” (John 19.19).

As Dickens continues, however, he expands his narrative to include details from the Synoptics. To a large degree this is obviously accounted for by the fact that the Synoptics report many details that John does not. Nevertheless, Dickens’s resourcefulness in harmonization is no less apparent. As was pointed out above, his use of the temporal designation “Meantime” (108) allows him to “flashback” in a sense to include details that the first pass of the narrative omitted. He indicates that there was a guard of four soldiers, a detail recorded only by John, but then includes an exclusively Matthean detail that the soldiers were “sitting on the ground” (108; cf. Matt. 27.36). At this point Dickens adds an interesting harmonization, a kind to which he is rarely given: he simply includes a direct statement from Matthew and a direct statement from Mark, letting them stand independently without any attempt to combine them. From Matthew he adds, “They offered him vinegar to drink mixed with gall,” and from Mark he includes, “and wine mixed with myrrh.” Moreover, we saw above that these mixtures were offered to Jesus, seemingly, prior to the actual act of nailing him to the cross. Here, Dickens, even with his “meantime”, seems to suggest that Jesus was offered this drink on the cross: the soldiers “sat there, gambling and talking, while He suffered” (109) and then offered him the drink.

Dickens continues, now exclusively in the Synoptics by including from Matthew and Mark that “the wicked people who passed that way mocked him” and from Matthew alone, “If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross” (109; cf. Matt. 27.39-40 and Mark 15.29). He then includes a fascinating and important harmonization of the Synoptics in his account of the mockery by the chief priests, who in Dickens rendering, say, “He came to save sinners. Let Him save Himself!” (109). None of the Synoptics record it quite this way. Matthew and Mark both have, “He saved others; himself he cannot save”

(Matt. 27.42; Mark 15.31), and Luke has, “He saved others; let him save himself” (Luke 23.35). Dickens rendering, “He came to save sinners,” has theological significance we will consider later, but here it is the harmonized expression of what Dickens understands the people to be saying that should be noticed.

Dickens then includes in his account one episode taken exclusively from Luke, one taken exclusively from John and one harmonization from the Synoptics. From Luke, Dickens includes the account of the penitent thief crucified beside Jesus. While Matthew and Mark both allude to this (Matthew 27.44; Mark 15.32), only Luke includes the exchange between Jesus and the thief. Interestingly, Dickens has followed Luke exclusively, ignoring Matthew and Mark. In doing so, he avoided the difficulty posed by the accounts of Matthew and Mark, both of which record that both thieves had joined the crowd in mocking Jesus and casting insults at him (Matt. 27.44; Mark 15.32). Luke indicates that only “one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him” (Luke 23.39) and Dickens adopts this in his narrative. Most likely, Dickens simply found it expedient to omit Matthew and Mark on this point (cf. Barton 290, who does the same); or perhaps he consulted and was satisfied by the various explanations of the commentaries of the day. In any case, Dickens has followed Luke exclusively here.

This is particularly fascinating in that the immediately following account of Jesus committing his mother to the care of the beloved disciple includes a minor detail that shows, one way or the other, Dickens’s care with harmonizing accounts. In this passage exclusive to John, Dickens’s mention especially of “four women,” together with his attempt to clarify John’s syntax (*TLOL* 109)<sup>53</sup> is conspicuous in light of the lack of clarity in John’s

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<sup>53</sup> Dickens was originally successful at this. His manuscript reads, “They were, the mother of Jesus, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene who had twice dried his feet upon her hair.”

wording and punctuation as rendered in the KJV as to whether there are three women or four (John 19.25-27). If Dickens consulted Matthew and Mark to harmonize here, he would have found the mention of three women (exclusive of the mother of Jesus) in each of those accounts, and this may have confirmed for him that John has named four women, not three. It is certainly possible that Dickens saw no problem with John's expression here at all and felt that the text was clear. But the fact that he mentions that there were "four women", and in a reasonably emphatic way,<sup>54</sup> whereas John is not interested in the body count (nor are the Synoptics, for that matter), suggests that Dickens was concerned with a clarity here that, in his reading, was not readily established by John's Gospel.

As Dickens concludes his story of the crucifixion with the account of Jesus' death, he draws largely from the Synoptics. His temporal designation concerning the darkness that fell at about the sixth hour is almost uniform in the Synoptics. The cry of Jesus, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me," which Dickens includes, is reported only in Matthew and Mark, as is the reaction of those nearby to this cry in providing a sponge filled with vinegar for Jesus to drink. This same action is reported in John, but there it is a response to Jesus' words, "I thirst," which Dickens omits. However, he then immediately turns to John to report, "When He had received it, He said, 'It is finished!'" (110), and then to Luke, who alone reports Jesus', "Father, Into Thy hands I commend my spirit!" (110-13; cf. Luke 23.46).

Finally, Dickens includes the aftermath of the crucifixion and Jesus' death. That the

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John 19.25 reads, "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene" (Note Dickens's use of commas and minimizing the "ands" to attempt to clearly indicate four). The 1999 Simon & Schuster edition adds more confusion with its, "They were the mother of Jesus, His mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene [...]."

<sup>54</sup> It is significant that in Dickens's original manuscript, the sentence that he originally composed to mention the fact of four women read, "None took pity on him but four women," which he emended to, "None were there to take pity on him, but one disciple and four women."

veil of temple was torn from top to bottom, a detail that Dickens renders as, “the great wall of the temple cracked,” is reported by all three Synoptics, but that “there was an earthquake” and “the rocks were rent asunder” (111) is reported only by Matthew. Also, Dickens’s “The guard, terrified at these sights [...]” is a detail only related by Matthew; but the response of the guard, “Surely, this was the Son of God,” is reported both by Matthew and Mark, while Luke has, “Certainly this was a righteous man” (Luke 223.47). Significantly, Dickens chooses the “Son of God” designation of Matthew and Mark. Dickens closes out the entire section by drawing largely from Luke informed by Matthew and Mark. He writes, “And the people who had been watching the cross from a distance (among whom were many women) smote upon their breasts, and went fearfully and sadly, home” (111). The detail that the people “smote upon their breasts” and went home is provided only in Luke 23.48 (that they went home “fearfully and sadly” is Dickens’s gloss). All three Synoptics report that the people watched these things from afar and that there were many women among them, but Dickens’s formulation seems to be dependent upon Matthew (cf. *TLOL* 111 and Matt. 27.54-56; Mark 15.39-41; Luke 23.47-49). With this, Dickens brings his account of the crucifixion to a close.

Here, then, is a further example of Dickens’s use of harmonization and the skill and resourcefulness with which he employs it. He has successfully synthesized the story of the crucifixion from John and the Synoptics into a coherent narrative that obviously attempts to replicate the Gospel account. More importantly, perhaps, his clear and adept use of harmonization indicates a careful engagement with his pre-texts that suggests a carefully crafted and thoughtfully composed narrative. Accordingly, it is quite easy to suppose that *TLOL* is in simple terms a Gospel harmony itself.

Still, in some technical aspects, Dickens departs from the precise form of the har-

mony by including some elements that we would expect of a Life. Although he does so sparingly and economically, Dickens does include various asides, comments, explanations, exhortations, and even on rare occasions, interpretation that a pure harmony would not have. It is here that *TLOL* shares, at least in a technical sense, the features of a Life. Even so, his various asides are not at all what we would find in a Life of the sort of Strauss'. Dickens writes concerning miracles, for instance, "I wish you would remember that word, because I shall use it again, and I should like you to know that it means something which is very wonderful and which could not be done without God's leave and assistance" (*TLOL* 25); or, in his longest aside, he explains the crucifixion:

That you may know what the People meant when they said, "Crucify him!" I must tell you that in those times, which were very cruel times indeed (let us thank God and Jesus Christ that they are past!) it was the custom to kill people who were sentenced to Death, by nailing them alive on a great wooden Cross, planted upright in the ground, and leaving them there, exposed to the Sun and Wind, and day and night, until they died of pain and thirst. It was the custom too, to make them walk to the place of execution, carrying the cross-piece of wood to which their hands were to be afterwards nailed, that their shame and suffering might be the greater. (107-8)

Dickens's word on miracles stands in stark contrast to some 120 pages by Strauss devoted to the discussion of how we are to understand the miraculous in the ministry of Jesus; and Dickens's explanation of what crucifixion means was obviously intended to clarify terminology and historical context for his audience. In both cases, Dickens included information for his children that 1) would advance the narrative with minimal interruption and 2) anticipate possible questions as he read *TLOL* to his children. Still, while Dickens's explanatory comments and asides are more characteristic of a Life than a harmony, it is obvious that *TLOL* was not a Life in any sense that *Das Leben Jesu* was. Dickens's explanatory and interpretive annotations are only intended to serve his historical narrative, not to re-evaluate or redefine it.

### §2.3 *THE LIFE OF OUR LORD* AS JUVENILE GOSPEL NARRATIVE

There is a third option of generic category in which to attempt to situate *TLOL* that must be considered and that might best be designated as the devotional or popular Life of Jesus. Such works, quite popular in the nineteenth century, and in essence forming a genre themselves, were often titled Lives or Histories. They tended to be simply structured narratives recounting the Gospel story and were composed upon the basic principle of a harmony: that the New Testament Gospels were reliable and accurate historical representations of the life of Jesus, and that they were able to be harmonized. Actual harmonization of the Gospel texts in such works, however, was not always the author's primary concern, and so, was often not readily discernible or attended to conscientiously. Depending on the intended audience, these so-called Lives or Histories might include extra-biblical explanations and descriptions of persons, places, or historical events in the Gospel story with which the reader might be unfamiliar. Such works were usually geared toward devotional use and spiritual formation, and so would also include hortatory instruction, doctrinal annotation or argument, and devotional emphases. John Fleetwood's *The History of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (1767) and Jeremy Taylor's *The Great Exemplar* (1649), both quite well-known and still popular in Dickens's day, are noteworthy examples of these devotional Lives, *The Great Exemplar* being more of a devotional handbook, *The History of Our Lord Jesus Christ* more a paraphrased devotional harmony.

In turn, these devotional Lives spawned a plethora of very similar works for a juvenile audience with which Dickens's *TLOL* seems to share the greatest affinity, and while such works often were seen as "history", "Life", or "Harmony", we might refer to them, for lack of any better designation, as juvenile Gospel narratives. Identifying these works in this way will provide a more generalized terminology with which to speak of *TLOL* at this stage

of our discussion. It will also provide a point of reference for a productive and functional approach from which we might be able to understand better *TLOL* in its generic connections as well as in its form and structure. To that end, we want to consider here a representative sampling of three such narratives using those we have already introduced above: Lucy Barton's *The Gospel History of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (1837); Unitarian Henry Ware's *The Life of the Saviour* (1833); and the anonymous *Gospel Stories: An Attempt To Render The Chief Events Of The Life of Our Saviour Intelligible and Profitable to Young Children* (1833). While it appears that, to one degree or another, Dickens's *TLOL* shares characteristic elements with each of these, a more disciplined scrutiny will suggest that *TLOL* is distinct from them. Comparing *TLOL* with these three representative examples will help us not only to see more clearly the uniqueness of *TLOL*, but also to understand better the significance of Dickens's form, as well as something about his method.

That Dickens seems to eschew a basic approach that is essentially common to these three juvenile Gospel narratives is one of the initial and more instrumental observations that emerges from a careful consideration of *TLOL* and other juvenile narratives of the Gospel story. Whereas Barton's *Gospel History*, Ware's *Life of the Saviour* and *Gospel Stories* each variously and to varying degrees display a penchant for explanation, gap filling, commentary, historiography, and doctrinal argument, Dickens's *TLOL* is compressed and minimal, foregrounding the basic narrative of the Gospel story and eliminating what he must have considered superfluous and distracting elements of commentary and explanation whether historical or doctrinal. Certainly, each one of these works attempts to be an accurate account of the Gospel story, but in the cases of Barton, Ware and the author of *Gospel Stories*, each has embraced their own notional orientation by which their narratives are shaped. Above, I referred to this orientation as a conceptual framework, a term I will use to describe the pre-

conceived notions of these various authors that seem to shape and define their respective narratives. Specifically, Barton's work is shaped by doctrinal and theological concerns, Ware's by historiographical concerns, and *Gospel Stories* by devotional concerns and concern for spiritual disciplines.<sup>55</sup> Dickens, on the other hand, devotes virtually no time or space to historiography, or to a concern for spiritual disciplines, or to commentary or doctrinal argument. In fact, in comparison to these other works, *TLOL* is straightforward and stark, as it attempts to replicate the narrative lines of the Gospel pre-texts as nearly as possible without supplementation. This particular austere approach, coupled with Dickens's deliberate focus on and engagement with the Gospel story itself, is a characteristic feature that contributes to distinguishing *TLOL* from the others.

The most important distinguishing feature of *TLOL*, however, seems to be Dickens's almost exclusive use of harmonization as the primary and fundamental means of composing his narrative. While all four of the works we are considering share the common feature of employing the basic principle of the Gospel harmony—that the Gospels are a reliable and accurate historical witness to Jesus' life and that they can, indeed, be harmonized—Dickens concerns himself with the harmonization of his selected Gospel episodes to create a running narrative that tells the story of Jesus in a minimal and focused way that the others do not. In that Dickens's central concern is Jesus and the story of Jesus that emerges from the Gospels, he is primarily interested in providing for his children a replication of the Gospel history in a paraphrase that they will understand. It is the story itself that Dickens wants to communicate, not doctrinal commentary or argument, not historical anecdote and not devotional lessons on spiritual disciplines. To that end, Dickens found his most effective

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<sup>55</sup> A survey of any number of nineteenth-century juvenile Gospel narratives would show that these are representative of the basic concerns of such writings and the orientations by which they are shaped.

course to be a conscientious and often exacting harmonization of his Gospel sources. The advantage of such attention to harmonization must have appeared to be, in Dickens's mind, its facilitation of the production of a more precise narrative, a near replication, keeping the story of Jesus foregrounded and authentic, and thus providing his children with a meaningful and exemplary portrait of Jesus.

While Dickens's intent is a straightforward presentation that truly seeks to be a replication, *TLOL* is regularly paraphrased allowing him certain narrative and dramatic freedoms. He applies these freedoms, however, in service to his sources, as well as his story, rather than to an already established notional framework. In other words, while Ware, Barton and the author of *Gospel Stories* come to their sources with a particular framing concept (historiography, doctrine, spiritual disciplines), Dickens attempts to stay as close to his Gospel sources as possible, with very little annotation and even less commentary, in order to facilitate what he believes to be a replication. Any narrative or dramatic freedoms are extended for the sake of clarity, narrative flow, and making certain his story is intelligible and easily followed by his audience; and sparingly, for particular instances of teaching or application.

Dickens is not hesitant to include explanation and commentary that he feels is necessary, but he does so in such a way that it is, at least for the most part, neither intrusive nor distracting. Any explanations are typically only as long as they need to be to keep the narrative flowing and to give his audience the necessary information they need about terms or ideas that, left alone, might otherwise create interruptions or slow the pace of the story. He does not have a theological or doctrinal axe to grind, and so we find virtually no overt doctrinal argument or commentary in *TLOL* of the sort that drives Barton's *Gospel History*, and to a lesser degree *Gospel Stories*. Neither is he especially concerned about supplying extra-biblical historical facts or information that play no immediately pertinent role in the flow of

his narrative. As such, the historiographical details that are so emphatic in Ware, and found also in both Barton and *Gospel Stories* in a different form, find basically no parallels in *TLOL*. Even the frequent devotional reminders of spiritual disciplines that characterize *Gospel Stories*, and to lesser degrees both Barton and Ware, are missing from *TLOL*.

Dickens is, without doubt, as interested in teaching as are Barton, Ware, and the author of *Gospel Stories*. As I have already indicated in the previous chapter and as I will argue more fully below, Dickens's primary motivation in writing *TLOL* was to begin to acquaint his children with their moral responsibilities as Christians. This singular motivation in itself is one more feature that plays a significant role in distinguishing Dickens's narrative from others. The major difference, however, between Dickens's intent in teaching in *TLOL* and that of other Gospel narratives is his deference to the Gospel history alone to create a work that intends to be a unified whole, a narrative that not only might leave a moral-ethical impression on his audience about the person of Jesus, but also, and perhaps more profoundly, might urge his children to reflect upon how that impression would come to bear on what it means to be a Christian. Understood along these lines, Dickens shares with the others a common desire to teach through his narrative, but adopts a rather distinct approach to do so. In other words, it is not so much the difference of content generally that distinguishes *TLOL* as it is Dickens's economical and focused presentation of Jesus. Dickens's methodology and concomitant form, then, seem to provide the essential distinction of *TLOL*. A few comparisons of passages in our trilogy of juvenile Gospel narratives with Dickens's *TLOL* will surely point to its uniqueness and present its formal characteristics in bold relief.

### §2.3.1 DICKENS AND BARTON

Standing in rather stark contrast to *TLOL*, Barton has written her narrative of the

Gospel story filling gaps and providing explanation with doctrinal and historical annotation, Scripture citations, and theological interpretation. Her didactic theologizing is no doubt well intended, but it is comprehensive and sometimes almost oppressive. Comparatively, Dickens's work is much more measured and is never concerned with attempting to establish a particular doctrinal view. Rather, Dickens's concern is the urgency of moral responsibility and practice exemplified implicitly in the life and example of Jesus. Furthermore, Dickens's tendency is to keep any interpretation or explanation separate from his narrative, usually appended in some fashion before or after a narrative unit. Consider Dickens's comments and explanations following his recording of various parables. Conspicuously, it is in his relating of the parables of Jesus that Dickens is most apt to include commentary or explanation, and almost always in the form of exhortation. Still, Dickens will always attempt to present the parable as it stands in the Gospel(s) and follow it with his hortatory comment or explanation, almost as if he is adding "the moral of the story." A representative example is his handling of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. After he has related the parable in paraphrase, he adds the simple explanation, "By this, Our Saviour meant to teach that those who have done wrong and forgotten God, are always welcome to Him and will always receive His mercy, if they will only return to Him in sorrow for the sin of which they have been guilty" (73). This is representative of how Dickens adds commentary or provides explanation throughout *TLOL* on those occasions when he deems it necessary or appropriate to his larger purpose.

By contrast, Barton uses the same parable as a platform from which to preach on and define repentance, to teach duty to God, and to warn against double-mindedness as well as spiritual envy, all of this from the one parable and all done in such a way that the reader is apt to lose sight of the parable itself as it becomes simply a frame for teaching and preaching. Note in this particular case how Barton chooses to introduce the parable:

Do you know what it is *to repent*, dear children? It means, to be very sorry for our sins, to hate our sin; and when by the grace of God we repent we have a feeling in our hearts which makes us *afraid* to say or do any thing that we know God would not like. This is that *fear of God*, which Solomon said was the beginning of wisdom; and then we not only fear him, but we learn to love him who is so good, and when we do this we wish to be like him. [...] You will see in the parable I am going to relate to you of “the prodigal son,” how he repented of his sin, and how graciously his father took him home again. (165-66)

As she continues to relate the parable she pauses at specific points to add teaching and preaching inspired by her reading of the various events of the story.

It is noteworthy that Dickens never attempts to weave doctrinal argument or annotation in or through a narrative event. Consequently, Dickens’s selected episodes, harmonized from the Gospels, are allowed to stand on their own as faithful accounts, at least in his mind, of the Gospel story. Here we are seeing a very important aspect of the composition and intent of *TLOL*. Dickens felt that he was presenting Jesus for who He was and what he did in a more pure form consistent with his personal conviction that the Christian religion and the New Testament should be taught, studied and understood apart from “any man’s narrow construction of its letter” and “putting aside the interpretations and inventions of Man.” In comparison to other juvenile Gospel narratives of his day, Dickens was actually quite successful in doing so, as additional examples and comparisons with Barton will demonstrate.

Barton’s basic approach is exemplified in extended passages much too long for inclusion here, but the following short examples will suffice to illustrate the basic difference between Barton’s expanded texts and Dickens’s attempted measured account. Consider, for instance, the clear differences between Barton’s description of the phenomena that followed Jesus baptism and Dickens’s. Dickens, on the one hand, reports:

And when he was baptized, the sky opened, and a beautiful bird like a dove came flying down, and the voice of God, speaking up in Heaven, was heard to say, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased! (24)

On the other hand, Barton writes:

And Jesus, when he was baptized, came up out of the water, and as he was praying, the heaven opened, and the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, and, lo! There came a voice from heaven, saying, "Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well please." Thus was thrown open the way of access to the Father, which had been closed by man, whose sins had separated between him and his God. He who then trod the weary path of life for our sakes, and after a painful pilgrimage bore the punishment of our sins upon the cross, now sits at the right hand of God, where he is still the "Beloved Son," for whose sake God will pardon all who come unto him. (26)

Compare both of these to the Matthean<sup>56</sup> account:

And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. (Matthew 3.16-17)

The basic difference between the two approaches is plain to see here and rather telling. Whereas Barton seems compelled to add her final two sentences of doctrinally nuanced teaching and interpretation, Dickens seems content to leave his text stand virtually as it does in his Gospel sources. Again, this appears characteristic of Dickens's approach throughout *TLOL* and is surely consistent with his insistence and hope that his children become acquainted with the Gospel story in a straightforward and impartial way.

One more example from Barton highlights this basic difference with perhaps even more clarity. After reporting the exorcism by Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum (Mark 1.21-28; Luke 4.31-37), Barton, seemingly following Luke, records the wonder of the multitudes at the exorcism with the words, "What a word is this! for with authority and power he commandeth the unclean spirits, and they come out." With this observation, the Gospel account closes. Barton, however, continues:

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<sup>56</sup> I use the Matthean account here for an example only because it is the longest, by word count (54 words), of the Gospel accounts. Luke's account includes 44 words, and Mark's 41.

I will tell you dear children, what word it was; it was the word of Jesus, at whose name every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess that he is God, who not only had power over the unclean spirits, (which we read were in those days permitted thus to trouble man, perhaps in order that his power might be seen, who commandeth the evil spirits, and they obey him); but he has power to help us also, to cleanse our hearts from every unclean and evil thought, to set us free from the power of Satan, who will strive to rule us, and lead us, and ruin us, if we ask not the blessing of that Jesus, at whose name the devils tremble. (49-50)

While Mark and Luke choose to let the Gospel account conclude with the wonder of the crowd remaining a thought-provoking observation for the reader (or, as in Mark, a question), Barton characteristically fills the gap for her young audience with interpretive commentary.

In the end, the comparison between Barton and Dickens reveals a difference in the method and intent of their respective narratives. Dickens's intent was a straightforward presentation of the Gospel story shaped and determined by careful harmonization in order to set before his children what he believed to be an unembellished portrait of the Jesus of the Gospels and his exemplary life. Dickens's use of harmonization plays the central role in shaping his narrative and presenting the Gospel story, giving his narrative its distinctive form. Barton, too, employs harmonization, but not in the formative manner in which Dickens does. Rather, when Barton does harmonize texts she does so only incidentally, a bit unevenly, and quite secondarily to her conceptual framework and her intent to present doctrinal commentary and argument. In fact, the Gospel accounts have simply become a backdrop before which she presents particular theological propositions in order to establish a proper doctrine. The comparison, then, between *TLOL* and *The Gospel History*, makes Dickens's austere presentation more conspicuous and draws attention to his form and method. Significantly, the same result accrues when we compare *TLOL* to the other juvenile Gospel narratives we are considering here.

### §2.3.2 DICKENS AND WARE

In the ways that Barton's *Gospel History* compares to *TLOL*, so in similar ways does Henry Ware's *The Life of the Saviour*. Where Barton's work was driven by doctrinal concerns, however, Ware's *Life of the Saviour* is driven by historiographical concerns, and just as Dickens shows little or no interest in doctrinal argument, neither does he show significant interest in historiographic annotation. In the ways that a comparison with Barton highlighted the uniqueness of *TLOL*, so in similar ways Ware's *Life of the Saviour* will do the same.

In his preface, Ware initially refers to "the essential difficulties of constructing a *harmony* of the evangelical historians" (vii, my italics), apparently suggesting that some sort of harmonization lies behind his work (vii). Notwithstanding, as we read further, it appears that *The Life of the Saviour* is much more likely a Life than a Harmony. There is certainly nothing in Ware's approach to suggest that his work is a harmony or that he makes any significant use of harmonization.<sup>57</sup> In fact, Ware begins his preface, "The principles adopted in the arrangement of the present history, are sufficiently explained in the course of the work" (vii) and further adds his goal "to unfold to young minds some of the interesting points in our Saviour's history" (viii). Standing alone, such statements are no certain affirmation of his historiographic intent, but the historiographic detail that is apparent, even after just a casual perusal of *The Life of the Saviour*, reveals Ware's intent and suggests that his work shares the characteristic elements of a Life of Jesus.

From the beginning Ware's concern for historiography is apparent. His first chapter, noticeably titled, "The Parentage and Descent of Jesus" begins, "It is usual to begin the life

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<sup>57</sup> Ware's narrative, like the others, obviously employs the fundamental principle of the harmony but any actual harmonization is even less conspicuous in Ware than in Barton.

of a distinguished person with an account of his family and parents” (1). Initial indications, then, are that Ware’s approach is biographical, thus situating his work squarely within the bounds of historiography. The continuing development of his opening chapters bears this out. While he is careful with his use of them, he appeals to the “traditions” (4) about Joseph and “certain books” about Mary “written by persons unknown and at an uncertain period, which profess to relate the circumstances of her birth and education” (6). Furthermore, by the time he finishes his second chapter, he has commented on the extra-biblical *Gospel of Mary* 5:2 and *Protevangelium [of James]* 8:1-2 (7) as well as the accounts in the *Infancy of Jesus* of Jesus’ childhood (23-25).<sup>58</sup> Typical of Ware’s method here is an extended passage in which Mary presents Jesus, according to the Law, in the Temple (Luke 2.21-24):

Forty days after the birth of all children, the mother was bound to appear at the temple with the sacrifice of a lamb for a burnt-offering, and a turtle dove or a young pigeon for a sin-offering. Those who could not afford to bring a lamb, were allowed to offer a pigeon or turtle dove as a substitute; and it is an evidence of the humble station of Mary, that she brought two turtle doves—the offering which was permitted to the poor. Besides this, which was required at the birth of every child, in the case of the first born son there was an extraordinary ceremony to be passed through. In order to keep alive a solemn memory of the providence which delivered the nation from Egypt by the death of the Egyptian firstborn, the law required that every first-born male, of man and of beast, should be sacred to the Lord;—the beast to be sacrificed, and the child to be redeemed. This redemption consisted in paying the priest for the service of the temple, five shekels [Numbers 18.15-16]; a sum equal to about twelve shillings and sixpence. Mary therefore must redeem her child. Accordingly, having presented her humble sacrifice, which she did, waiting in the outer court of the temple, she took the child in her arms, and accompanied her husband into the temple, “to do for him,” as the evangelist says, “after the custom of the law;”—that is, “to present him to the Lord, and pay the price of his redemption.” (14-15)

Clearly, Ware’s initial interest is historiographic and further scrutiny will indicate that such interest is sustained as formative throughout *The Life of the Saviour*.

In contrast, the only extended passage that we find in *TLOL* that even comes near a

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<sup>58</sup> It should be noted that Ware emphatically rejects the authority in these traditions or books. Notwithstanding, such references point to his intent.

historiographical interest is Dickens's explanation of crucifixion, in a passage which has already been cited in its entirety above. Other passages that might qualify as historiographic concerns in *TLOL* are of an incidental nature. For instance, Dickens's description of Jerusalem consists of: "Now the great place of all that country was Jerusalem—just as London is the great place in England—and at Jerusalem the King lived, whose name was Herod" (14); or his description of those with whom Jesus, at twelve years of age, was interacting in the Temple: "They were not what you understand by the word 'doctors' now; they did not attend sick people; they were scholars and clever men" (20). Significantly, we find no extended historiographic passages (other than the one on crucifixion already cited) in *TLOL*.<sup>59</sup>

The differences in Dickens's historiographic annotations and Ware's are not just that Dickens's seem more simplified, but that their intent and broader function in the narrative are quite distinct. Dickens's historiographic references barely qualify as such and are used exclusively for clarification, while Ware's are clearly intended to be deliberate, extensive and foregrounded. Some comparisons will bear this out. Consider, for instance, Dickens and Ware on Jesus' Public Entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21.8-9; Mark 11.8-11; Luke 19.36-38; John 12.12-15). Of the entire event, Dickens observes:

An immense crowd of people collected round Him as He went along, and throwing their robes on the ground, and cutting down green branches from the trees, and spreading them in His path, they shouted, and cried, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (David had been a great King there.) "He comes in the name of the Lord! This Jesus, the Prophet of Nazareth!" (84)

Ware recounts the event and adds the further explanation:

Although it was yet six days before the Passover, the people had already collected in great numbers at Jerusalem. There were certain legal defilements which required purification, some of them for seven days, before the feast could be partaken. This obliged many to resort early to the city; and it is reasonable to suppose that, in many

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<sup>59</sup> Dickens's epilogue is certainly historiographical in character, but even so, functions more on the level of serving the narrative than as annotation or explanation.

instances, they were accompanied by their friends. Hence it is easy to see, that the crowd must have been gathering for several days; and St. John informs us, that as they met and talked in the courts of the Temple, there was a general inquiry for Jesus. (172)

In this way, Ware not only records the event, but also adds annotation giving historical background accounting for the crowd that both the Gospel writers and Dickens leave unexplained, apart from acknowledging that it is the occasion of the Passover (but note that only John does so explicitly in the immediate context).

On the occasion of Jesus' trial before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (Matt. 26.57-75; Mark 53-65; Luke 22.54-71; John 18.12-24), Dickens remarks, with the same economy of the Evangelists, that it was "to the house of Caiaphas the high priest, whither Jesus was taken, and where the Scribes and others were assembled to question Him" (97). Ware characteristically adds the extended annotation:

This Council [the Sanhedrin], the highest and most sacred court of the Jews, consisted of seventy persons, and is often intended in the New Testament when "the chief priests, elders, and scribes" are spoken of. Some argue that it was the same council with that constituted by Moses in the wilderness, continued down through all the changes of the nation; but it was, more probably, of a later origin. It had supreme authority in all matters peculiar to the Mosaic institutions, and was allowed to exercise it even under the dominion of the Romans. (211)

From here, Ware goes on to identify the traditional meeting place of the Sanhedrin and how, on this occasion, they ended up at the house, or "palace" (211), of Caiaphas.

While these examples are representative of Ware's fundamental approach to his work, it should not be assumed that he simply strings together annotation after annotation. His is still a Gospel narrative; it is simply one that highlights his own selected historiographic details. At the same time, he also engages in the same sort of gap filling that we saw in Barton. In his account of the birth of Jesus he is quick to add of Mary on the road to Egypt to escape Herod's decree to murder the innocents:

Is it thus, she might say, that the visions of the night, the promise of the angel, and

the prophecies in the temple are to be accomplished? Are we thus to be compelled to flee for our lives, to endure the perils of the desert, and the want and anxiety of a strange land? Would God thus deal with this Messiah? Is it not possible that, after all, I have been deceived? We may conceive that moments of despondency like this must have sometimes beset her. (18)

And in his account of the Jesus' Public Entry into Jerusalem he adds:

Little did the multitude know what was passing in the thoughts of him whom they were thus honouring. Little did they know how far he was from sharing the feelings and purposes by which they were impelled. In the midst of the triumph, the central figure of the whole, to whom all eyes and hearts turned, he was borne along passively, taking no part in the scene of which he was chief part. There was nothing to him exhilarating in the shouts or the gladness of the people; there was nothing to him glorious in this princely approach to the capital of the nation. He looked far beyond it all. He saw the truth and knew the future. And as the procession rolled on from the mount of Olives and across the valley, he fixed his eyes on the guilty city and wept at the ruin which was about to overtake it. "Oh that thou hadst known," he exclaimed, "even thou, at least in this thy day, the things that belong to thy peace! But know they are hidden from thine eyes." (174-75)

It becomes increasingly apparent that, just as we observed in the comparison of Barton's *Gospel History* and *TLOL*, so we observe here, Dickens's work remains distinct in its form and intent. Dickens's commitment to the idea that the Gospels themselves are a sufficient source for his work results in a near replication of the Gospel story and a portrait of Jesus that is drawn from careful harmonization. Increasingly, *TLOL*, in its economy and simplicity, is set in bold relief among so many nineteenth-century juvenile Gospel narratives.

### §2.3.3 DICKENS AND GOSPEL STORIES

The last juvenile Gospel narrative to consider seems to share the most linguistic affinity with *TLOL*. The anonymous, *Gospel Stories*, we learn from the advertisement prefacing the work, was written by an unidentified female (2) and was an attempt to render the chief events of the life of our Saviour intelligible and profitable to young children, we learn from the larger title of the work. *Gospel Stories* may be the work most like *TLOL*, yet an important difference is that *Gospel Stories* is intended to be a series of Gospel stories retold.

Although the author arranges the individual stories in chronological order, attempting to create at least the sense of a broader continuous narrative, each story seems to be intended to stand by itself as a discrete unit. Each narrative unit renders one episode in the Gospel story and then concludes with a devotional thought—sometimes a short paragraph, but usually more—emphasizing a particular spiritual discipline or attitude that the child reader is encouraged to practice or adopt. The narrative unit is then rounded out by the inclusion of a verse of Scripture that represents the spiritual theme or devotional thought. This is, essentially, the Gospel story turned into a series of 27 Sunday School lessons. Further, the author endeavours in her advertisement to distinguish her work from another entitled *Bible Stories* noting that, “There is in them more of commentary and doctrinal argument than in these ‘Gospel Stories,’ which being in a more simple and narrative style, may therefore be, in some respects, more acceptable and profitable to *very young* minds” (1-2). As we will see, however, her commentary and doctrinal argument is only different by degree.

There seems to be at first glance a number of common elements shared by *TLOL* and *Gospel Stories*. In the first place, both seem to share a common range of vocabulary and rhetorical devices. A second related common feature, based on the use of register, the vocabulary and the rhetorical devices shared, is that both accounts appear to be written for approximately the same age group. If we can assume, for the sake of analysis, that Dickens completed *TLOL* in 1849 and read it to his children at Christmas of that year, he would have had an audience of eight children twelve years of age or younger, five of whom would have been between the ages of two and ten. Further analysis along these lines demonstrates that *TLOL* would have had a sizable audience for a time window of almost twelve years. Even in 1858, Dickens still had three children under the age of twelve. Such an analysis seems to suggest that *TLOL* was most likely written for an audience twelve years of age and

younger. It was the same age group, perhaps, that the author of *Gospel Stories* had in mind when remarking that her stories were meant for “very young minds” (2). Moreover, if we can use a statement by Henry Ware as a reference point, this proposed age range of the intended audiences of *TLOL* and *Gospel Stories* seems all the more likely. Ware commented in his preface that his *The Life of Our Saviour* was written “to interest and instruct those who have past the age of childhood [...] extending from about the age of twelve to sixteen or eighteen years” (v). In any case, the range of vocabulary, and rhetoric of both *TLOL* and *Gospel Stories* are remarkably similar and worth our notice. A comparison of passages will show these similarities.

Notice, first, the descriptions of the birth of Jesus from both authors. Where Dickens writes:

And the town [Bethlehem] being very full of people, also brought there by business, there was not room for Joseph and Mary in the Inn or in any house; so they went into a stable to lodge and in this stable Jesus Christ was born. There was no cradle or anything of that kind there, so Mary laid her pretty little boy in what is called the manger, which is the place the horses eat out of. (13)

The author of *Gospel Stories* writes:

The little town of Bethlehem was quite crowded when they arrived: they tried in vain, to get room in the inn, and were at last obliged to take shelter in the stables adjoining. It was here that the Holy Child was born; and Mary having wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, laid him in the place out of which horses eat in the stable, called the manger. (16)

Note also the similarities in their accounts of the funeral at Nain. Dickens writes as he introduces the story:

Going on, in the midst of this crowd, and near the Gate of the city, He met a funeral. It was the funeral of a young man, who was carried on what is called a bier, which was open, as the custom was in that country, and is now in many parts of Italy. (37)

The author of *Gospel Stories* writes:

Many of His disciples went with Him, and a multitude of people, and as he came

near the city gate, He met a funeral procession. The funerals in those countries were not like those which you may have seen: here, the dead person is nailed up in a coffin, which is sometimes put into a hearse; but there, they merely placed the body on a bier, or wooden bed, and covered it over with a sheet. (89)

Interestingly, Luke's mention of the "bier", which both Dickens and the author of *Gospel Stories* move to the front of the story, occurs almost incidentally in the middle of the story and without explanation. Even though this is one of Dickens's few explanations, we expect it because it is a term his audience most likely would not know. Also, it makes sense that it would be brought forward in the narrative, since this would be a natural place for it to appear. The notable thing is that it is handled by both authors in a similar manner and situated in a similar place in the narrative.

Another significant similarity in this same story is the note struck in conclusion by both authors. After Jesus has restored the young man to life, Dickens concludes, "And Jesus Christ, leaving him with his mother—Ah how happy they both were!—went away" (38). The author of *Gospel Stories*, less concisely but quite similarly notes:

But how can I tell you the joy, the happiness of his poor mother, when our Saviour restored him to her—when she could clasp him to her heart once more, and feel that she was no longer childless; that her dear, dear son was indeed alive again! (91)

Nowhere does Luke introduce the idea of the "happiness" that both Dickens and the author of *Gospel Stories* seem almost emphatically to describe.

Despite a number of other linguistic and rhetorical similarities,<sup>60</sup> there are significant differences in *TLOL* and *Gospel Stories* of the same sort that we have already seen in comparing Dickens to Barton and Ware. That is, the tendency toward explanation and interpretation that was so apparent in *The Gospel History* and *The Life of the Saviour* finds similar

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<sup>60</sup> These shared features are sometimes strikingly similar and rather intriguing. There are instances of the use of words and phrases common to both *TLOL* and *Gospel Stories* that seem to suggest that Dickens may have read *Gospel Stories*, or that he and the anonymous author shared common sources of information.

expression in *Gospel Stories*, albeit more suited to a younger audience. Just as Barton and Ware employed their own conceptual frameworks to relate the Gospel story, so does the author of *Gospel Stories*. The conceptual framework that drives *Gospel Stories* is a devotional-practical one emphasizing spiritual disciplines and Christian behaviour. This is seen, of course, most clearly in the devotional emphasis at the conclusion of each chapter and is more directly stated in her second chapter: “It is the chief object of these stories, to apply to your use, my dear children, the example thus given by some of the most remarkable passages of our Saviour’s holy life” (12-13).

A representative example of a technique that this particular author used regularly is found in her response to her account of the parable of the Prodigal Son. After suggesting that the parable was not told to benefit the Pharisees alone, but was told for our benefit as well when we wander “from God our Father in the pursuit of pleasure”, she teaches:

The prodigal son thought, perhaps, that he should be very happy when he could do as he liked, and had no longer his father’s eye to watch over him; but he found nothing but famine, suffering, and sorrow. Return, then, when you have had the misfortune to wander from him, return to the Father whose guidance you have left; He will receive you with open arms, welcome you as dear, long-lost children, and for Christ’s sake forgive you all your past sins. Heaven is prepared for you, and Angels will rejoice over you. (133)

Then is added, as for each devotional conclusion, a verse of Scripture. In this case the author adds a verse directly from the larger context of the three “lost and found” parables in Luke 15.1-32, “There is joy in the presence of the Angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (Luke 15.10). Each of the author’s twenty-seven Gospel stories ends in this manner, a devotional thought urging a particular behaviour or discipline reinforced with a citation from Scripture. This consistent pattern throughout *Gospel Stories* is the most conspicuous feature that separates it from *TLOL*, but there are others as well.

I have already pointed out that *Gospel Stories* contains as many explanations and

doctrinal annotations as other narratives we are considering and that they are geared toward the younger audience. This is perhaps even more apparent in a comparison of *Gospel Stories* and *TLOL* in that both seem directed toward an audience of the same age group and yet Dickens does not feel compelled to include nearly the amount of explanation and interpretation that the author of *Gospel Stories* does. Representative is her explanation at the beginning of the parable of the Good Samaritan:

There was a certain man who was journeying from Jerusalem to Jericho (another city of Judea). The road by which he was obliged to travel lay through a kind of desert or wilderness and was exceedingly dangerous; being so infested by thieves, that it was known by the name of the Bloody Way, on account of the many dreadful murders and robberies which had been committed there. (122-23)

Luke (and Dickens) omits any explanation, description, or history of the road that the victim took, yet this author deems it appropriate to include such details. Likewise, she adds an interpretive note to her account of the story of Jesus' baptism by John:

God often uses signs, or something which we can see, to make us better understand something which we cannot see. Water is such a sign in baptism; and as water is used for the purposes of washing and cleansing the stains from our bodies, so it is used in baptism, to show us that our sins must be washed away by our Saviour, and our hearts cleansed from all wickedness, before we can be acceptable to God. (47)

Very much like Barton, and Ware to a lesser degree, the author of *Gospel Stories* often fills gaps for her audience, sometimes with annotations similar to the ones just cited or by sometimes suggesting the thoughts of the principals in the action. For instance, when she relates the miraculous draught of fish (Luke 5.1-11), she supplies an account of Peter's thoughts:

Simon had probably thought, like many others, that our Saviour was merely a great teacher sent from God, and no more; but he now perceived by this miracle that He could be no less a person than the Saviour who was expected, and he immediately fell down on his knees at our Lord's feet, saying, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." (77)

On occasion, she might even add a seemingly gratuitous annotation. Upon relating the ac-

count of the murder of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod, this author is compelled to add the following annotation:

History informs us that this wicked family were justly punished for their murder of John. Herod and Herodias were driven from their kingdom in great trouble, and died among strangers, in banishment and poverty; and it is said, that one day, as Salome was walking across the ice, she fell into the water, and the ice closed round her neck and cut off her head. Whether these last particulars are true, I cannot be certain, because the story is written only in ordinary histories, and not in the Holy Gospel, as the rest of the story is. (106-107)

While there are, then, some provocative similarities between *Gospel Stories* and *TLOL*, once again, especially at the point of method and intent, *TLOL* remains distinct. Like Barton's *Gospel History* and Ware's *Life of the Saviour*, *Gospel Stories* highlights Dickens's use of harmonization and his portrait of Jesus derived from that harmonization alone. The author of *Gospel Stories*, even though she clearly states that the goal of her narrative is to portray Jesus as exemplar nevertheless has predetermined not only what the Jesus of the Gospels looks like, but also precisely what it looks like to follow him. Her emphasis on Jesus as example is surely similar to that of Dickens, and yet her precision in defining just how that example comes to bear on the life of the Christian young person aligns her work more closely to Barton's and Ware's than to Dickens's. Distinctly and deliberately, Dickens's *TLOL* portrays Jesus as exemplar apart from particular spiritual disciplines or doctrine and that, in the long run, constitutes the important difference.

In all of this, what continues to grow in increasing clarity is, once again, the distinction of *TLOL* and Dickens's economical and minimal portrait of Jesus drawn from careful harmonization, judicious attention to the Gospel sources, and a sense that the Gospels alone should sustain his narrative. The more we compare, the more we see that Dickens refuses to indulge in the sort of annotation and development that was common to so many of the juvenile Gospel narratives of his day, and in that refusal he is able to portray Jesus in bolder

relief. This is not to attempt to cast aspersions on *Gospels Stories*, or the work of Barton or Ware. Nor is it an attempt to suggest that *TLOL* is a better or a more suitable work for young children than the others. On the contrary, and depending on the audience, any of the others may be deemed as more instructive and more appropriate than *TLOL*. The purpose here, rather, has been to attempt to demonstrate the distinctiveness of *TLOL* and thereby come closer to identifying its form and its generic connections.

#### §2.4 DRAWING SOME CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE FORM OF *THE LIFE OF OUR LORD*

What should be said, then, and what conclusions can be drawn about the form of *TLOL*? Certainly, to refer to it as a juvenile Gospel narrative is accurate and acceptable, but is not entirely satisfying. While the designation juvenile Gospel narrative allows us to place *TLOL* in a general category for heuristic purposes, it fails to suggest some of the important distinguishing formal characteristics of *TLOL*. Our analysis above has demonstrated that, even among the juvenile literature of the day, Dickens's *TLOL* is unique not simply in its form but also in method and intended result. The more general designation of juvenile Gospel narrative fails to indicate the importance of such distinguishing characteristics. Therefore, when everything is considered, perhaps the best designation by which to classify Dickens's *TLOL* is a harmonized narrative of the life of Jesus. This may seem a rather cumbersome designation, but it possesses three particular advantages by way of clarification.

First, this designation highlights the important distinguishing feature of harmonization, which serves as the backbone of Dickens's work. Although it may be going too far to insist that *TLOL* is a harmony, for the simple reason that it does not include all the events and accounts that are included in the Gospels, nevertheless, the Gospel material that Dickens does include in *TLOL* is harmonized in a literal and technical sense. As such, it makes good sense to try to highlight in any designation of its form Dickens's use of harmonization

and to evoke a sense of and connection to the harmony. Second, this designation also picks up the notion that *TLOL* shares some of the features of a Life. As a pre-1860 harmonized Gospel narrative, *TLOL*, particularly in its use of added explanation, interpretation and exhortation, arguably possesses some of the characteristic features of a Life. Although, such features are minor in *TLOL* and tend to be overshadowed by Dickens's use of harmonization; and although the inclusion of the term Life in our proposed designation tends to act as more of a concessive ascription to alert the reader to non-harmonistic elements, such elements are nonetheless legitimate and significant features of *TLOL*. Finally, this designation possesses the added advantage of holding the ideas of both a Life and a harmony in tension, suggesting a unique composition of a peculiar historical context in which the Life and the harmony occupied equal and complementary positions in studies of Jesus and the Gospels.

There is yet another aspect of our analysis of form we must consider before we leave this discussion. I indicated initially that a consideration of form could serve as a first step toward a careful and full analysis of the theological and biblical content of *TLOL*. As such, then, it is important here to identify what bearing this analysis and identification of form might have on our careful scrutiny of the theological and biblical content of *TLOL*. The analysis above offers at least two pertinent observations on the connection between the form of *TLOL* and its theological and biblical content. First, it reiterates and confirms in perhaps a supplementary way my insistence in the previous chapter that *TLOL* is a serious and carefully crafted composition. As the consideration of form has drawn attention to Dickens's method, we can see even more poignantly the fatherly care and the deliberate intention of this composition. Not only have we been reminded of the time and effort that the composition of *TLOL* would have involved, but we have been reminded also of Dickens's care and resolve to provide a portrait of Jesus derived from the Gospels alone. It is this latter feature

that generates a second observation. More important perhaps than his employing the techniques of harmonization is this deliberate intention and careful reconstruction of an unembellished portrait of Jesus drawn from the Gospels alone. His attention to his sources and refusal to depart from them in the development of his narrative is indicative of that singleness of purpose—to set before his children a straightforward portrait of Jesus as it emerges from the Gospels alone. This larger purpose then suggests that any analysis of *TLOL* must consider it in terms of its theological and religious value. In other words, the most productive approach to *TLOL* will consider it as primarily a religious work with implicit theological presuppositions.

*TLOL* has been criticized as a mediocre piece of literature at best (See Collins, *Education* 59-60; Zemka 120), and that may well be an accurate assessment of it; but it is such because Dickens was writing, of first importance, to communicate what he believed to be Christian truth to his children. Without question, he would have tried to make *TLOL* interesting as well as entertaining for his children, but his priority would not have been critical or literary mastery, or entertainment value. Rather, he was attempting to reconstruct the story of Jesus while remaining as faithful as possible to his Gospel sources. Peyrouton was the first to suggest that Dickens was “overwhelmed” by his theme (that is, he was focused on the Jesus story) in his composition of *TLOL* and bridled much of his literary artistry in deference to his sources and his topic (107). Neil Philip does the same in the afterword in the Silver Burdett Press edition of *TLOL* (91-92). Moreover, Sir Henry Dickens points out that it was Dickens himself who made the important distinction between *TLOL* as religious instruction over and against it being a literary piece. In fact, this is one of the reasons Dickens gave for wanting it never to be published. In *Memories of My Father* (1928), Sir Henry Dickens wrote of *TLOL*, that he had the manuscript in his possession, “but my father impressed

upon us that, as it was not intended as a literary effort, it was never to be published to the world” (29). In light of this, it is important that we hear and understand *TLOL* in the same sense that Dickens wanted his children to hear and understand it: not as literary entertainment, but as the story of the life of Jesus, the Saviour who is the exemplar for the life that Dickens understood as “real Christianity”.

## CHAPTER THE THIRD

### THE ETERNAL MAJESTY OF HEAVEN

*“...there being high wisdom in the thought that the Eternal Majesty of Heaven  
ever was, or can be, on the side of selfish lust and love!”*

– from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Chapter 39

In the previous chapters, I have tried to establish that *TLOL* is a serious expression of Dickens’s Christian thought and that, as we take it seriously as such, we can learn a great deal about his understanding of the life of faith. I have also maintained that *TLOL* functions as an index of sorts, or a reference point for Dickens’s Christian thought. By this I mean that *TLOL* can be not only a definitive starting point from which we begin an examination of Dickens’s religion, but also a source to help to clarify, focus and give shape to Dickens’s thought as it emerges from the host of references, citations, and allusions to Christian and Biblical ideas found throughout his work. As an index, then, *TLOL* provides an orientation and a way of approach to his other work that is always illuminating and sometimes surprising. It functions as a legitimate index, precisely because it is a work concentrated in the story of Jesus in the Gospels, Dickens’s source for his theological ideas and his understanding of Christianity. In telling the story of Jesus, Dickens was expressing his own formative and essential Christian conceptions and beliefs in a form suitable and fitted for the communication of those ideas; a form intended to convey such ideas to his children in a clear and vivid manner.

I do not, on the one hand, mean to suggest here that we can establish a comprehensive and thoroughgoing Christian theological system culled from Dickens’s Christian and religious thought. Dickens, after all, was a layperson not a theologian, and like most laypersons of his day, never sought consciously to develop a thoroughgoing systematic theology of his own. Despite his strong religious opinions, which are articulated in his writing, his let-

ters, and his speeches, it is unlikely that Dickens gave much thought to developing his own carefully formulated theological system. Nevertheless, Dickens did think about his Christian faith and had clear and certain ideas about the life of faith. In addition, as our study will reveal, Dickens was probably like most laypersons in embracing a simple core of beliefs that the typical Anglican layperson would have embraced.

In *The Nineteenth-Century Church and English Society*, Frances Knight suggests that the core beliefs of the typical layperson probably consisted of belief in the efficacy of prayer, belief in the reality of heaven and hell, and a composite but undefined view of salvation by works and by faith. Moreover, she adds that the typical Anglican layperson would have felt no particular allegiance to the parish church (21-48) and that the Bible and the Prayer Book would have played a large role in an Anglican piety that had its source largely in the home rather than the church (37). The more we consider Dickens's religious views and practices, the more he begins to look like the typical Anglican that Knight has described. The things that Dickens thought about and the things about which he seems to have the most definite opinions, which are the ideas he develops most elaborately in his work, are reflective of those core beliefs that Knight describes. As will be made evident by our continued investigation into Dickens's Christian thought, even his more progressive, allegedly inconsistent and sometimes seemingly improvised views would not have been unusual for a mid-nineteenth-century Anglican layperson.

I do maintain, on the other hand, that while Dickens made no deliberate attempt to formulate a comprehensive systematic theology, it is quite possible to reconstruct, from his enormous corpus of writing, a fundamental, reasonably consistent account of his thinking on a number of theological topics using *TLOL* as an index. In fact, I will argue that Dickens presents clear and consistent thought about the subjects that occupied his mind and that he

felt were the essence of Christianity and the life of faith. The theological underpinnings of Dickens's "real Christianity", however, are not explicitly formulated in *TLOL* in the manner of a systematic theology nor does he, like the authors we considered in the previous chapter, include specific doctrinal comments or observations in *TLOL*. Instead, Dickens's theological presuppositions are to be discerned in the selection and arrangement of material in his narrative. As we seek for a clearer understanding of Dickens's Christianity, *TLOL* provides the biblical-theological elements that underpin that thought.

We will begin our attempt at a reconstruction of Dickens's Christian thought by looking, in this chapter, at Dickens's understanding of God the Father. Beginning with *TLOL*, we will gather the theological and Christian thought there that Dickens was, in fact, intending to convey, that thought that represented his understanding of Christianity. Then, looking to the rest of the Dickens corpus for further development of that thought, and employing a technique I will call genre lock,<sup>61</sup> we will find a reasonably consistent, coherent, and thoughtful expression of what Dickens believed.

### §3.1 ESTABLISHING A CONTEXT

In Dickens's conception and portrayal of the person and character of God the Father in *TLOL*, there is much assumed. What we find profiled in *TLOL* and developed in his other writings seems to be a rather typical early nineteenth-century understanding of God. That is, God is understood to be the Creator of the universe and providential orchestrator of history. The early-Victorian layperson embraced a concept of God that was understood to have emerged from the Scriptures and that was largely taken for granted, but one which was

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<sup>61</sup> Genre lock is a technique that attempts to triangulate multiple attestation across genre distinctions in the Dickens corpus. Particularly when using quotations from novels, I have attempted, in most cases, to corroborate the point of view of the quote with material from *TLOL* and from another source of correspondence, speech, or journalism. I will employ this technique in this chapter as well as chapters 4, 5, and 6.

very seldom precisely articulated by anyone other than theologians. In particular, God's power, providence, and justice comprised some of the more obviously familiar attributes of God, but John Howard Hinton's<sup>62</sup> *Theology: An Attempt Towards a Consistent View of the Whole Counsel of God*, for instance, includes chapters on God's benevolence and wisdom as well, two more attributes that would have been readily familiar to the popular mind. We will return to some of these attributes below, but for now it is enough simply to identify what the popular mind connected with the study of the person and character of God.

Turning to Dickens, we find the same familiar concept of God: all-powerful, all-wise, the righteous judge, the supreme benevolence, and inscrutable providence. In *TLOL*, however, God the Father operates, for the most part, behind the scenes. He is seldom center stage—God the Son occupies that space. But, Dickens's approach here is consistent with both the Scriptures and the popularly received teaching on God. Hinton noted in his *Theology* concerning the Scriptural teaching on God: "It may strike an attentive reader of the holy scriptures, however, that the existence of God, though every where implied, is not among the truths formally asserted in them. They copiously declare what he is, but no where expressly announce the fact of his being" (36). Dickens's course in *TLOL* is, not unexpectedly, quite the same. Nevertheless, his basic understanding of God as revealed in *TLOL* presents important, foundational and essential aspects of the person and character of God, which are broadened in his other work.

### §3.2 BEHIND THE SEEN: GOD AT WORK IN *THE LIFE OF OUR LORD*

Page through any number of mid-nineteenth-century popular religious books and

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<sup>62</sup> Hinton, a Baptist, was a distinguished minister and theologian, and a prominent Dissenting political activist. His *Theology: An Attempt Towards a Consistent View of the Whole Counsel of God* (1827) would have been directed toward and more accessible to the popular mind.

commentaries and you will soon be confronted with a myriad of names and ascriptions for God the Father. Stupendous Creator, The Supreme Being, The Divine Mind, all-gracious God, God of Truth, God of Nature, the Divine Wisdom, Providence, and the wise Disposer of all things—these are just a few of the various titles that you might find. Likewise, when Dickens uses ascriptions such as the Eternal Majesty of Heaven, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, the Infinite Benevolence, the Great Creator of mankind, and the Supreme Beneficence, he identifies several attributes and marks of character which we want to consider. For Dickens and for *TLOL*, God exists as Eternal Good, Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and the inscrutable orchestrator of Providence. Most importantly, however, God simply is—and God acts.

As I have already pointed out, God is not at center stage in *TLOL*, but He seems to be at the center of the action much of the time. He is understood as the key Mover of the entire narrative. God is the One who oversees and directs the birth of Jesus and the events surrounding it. He is the One who sends an angel to the shepherds to announce the birth of the child whom He “will love as His own Son” (14). He is the One who uses a star to direct the magi to the abode of the Holy Family: “God ordered it to be so” (15). It is God who keeps the child from the harm Herod seeks to do him. Furthermore, it is God who permits and empowers the miraculous in His world (25), who has sent Jesus, and who empowers him (25-26). It is God of whose goodness Jesus speaks, and to whom he teaches us to pray (20). It is toward God that men and women must mind their duty, John taught (20-23). Jesus teaches that men and women are to love God (34) and it is to Him they must ultimately answer (53), for it is God upon whom they must ultimately depend to “forgive us our sins and mistakes, and enable us to live and die in peace” (128). God’s presence and activity, then, are unavoidable in *TLOL*, but never become the focus. Still, the Jesus story takes place

in the context of God's world and according to His direction. So, as we observed earlier, in typical early-Victorian fashion, basic conceptual aspects of God's person and character are assumed but not explicitly articulated in *TLOL*.

### §3.3 THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

There is, then, an underlying assumption in *TLOL* that God is all-powerful, an assumption that extends to all of Dickens's work. Indeed, it is not hard to see in Dickens's work that God is the sovereign Lord of the universe superintending the events of history and of the lives of men and women. As such, Dickens maintains a rather lofty concept of God. God is not only the creator of the universe and of humankind, but He is also active in the present, ordering events according to His will. In providential oversight, He not only appoints order to His creation but he also acts to uphold and sustain those in need. So, God is not only sovereign and all-powerful, He is also the good, beneficent Father.

Presenting God as the Eternal Majesty of Heaven (*MC* 582), the sovereign, omnipotent Lord, Dickens often uses the term Providence (or a form of it) interchangeably with both God and God's activity.<sup>63</sup> As such, Dickens is using the term and the idea very much in keeping with its standard usage, both popular and academic, in his day. In a popular early-Victorian theology, *The Providence of God Illustrated* (1836), Edward Parsons defined Providence as:

[...] the right direction of all the departments, occurrences, and affairs of the universe, by the divine wisdom, power, and goodness, to its final end—the promotion of the glory of its Author. It is the superintending care of the Great Creator, exercised over all events, all beings, and all worlds. (1)

Moreover, this Providence was further understood and described by Parsons to operate on

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<sup>63</sup> Dickens will use the term 'provident' also in its more mundane sense of prudent foresight or wise management.

both the general and the particular levels. That is, Providence not only directed the course of history, but it also governed the life of the individual. So, Adam Clarke, the Methodist Evangelical, also notes, “This providence is not only general, taking in the earth and its inhabitants, en masse; [...] but it is also particular; [it considers] the individual as well as the family” (409).

Providence seems to have been a central and familiar enough concept in the nineteenth century and was articulated in theological works from the Westminster Confession of Faith<sup>64</sup> to those popular works like Parsons’ above. There seems to have been, in fact, a general consensus regarding the concept of providence. Dickens’s use of the term is consistent with the consensus view, but he tends to place a greater emphasis on God’s foreknowledge and His beneficent ordering of history and circumstances. Although Dickens does not use the term in *TLOL*, we have already encountered examples of such Providence there, for instance, in the narrative of Jesus’ birth and the events surrounding it. We see Dickens’s gesture toward the concept again in the epilogue of *TLOL* when he describes Saul’s conversion observing, “But God turned Saul’s heart afterwards” (125).

The same understanding of Providence is even more evident in Dickens’s other writing. In *David Copperfield*, for example, David’s Aunt Betsy questions, “why in the mysterious dispensations of Providence” Murdstone ever met David’s mother and declares that their meeting was “more than humanity can comprehend” (205). Interestingly, Dickens speaks more directly to such mysterious dispensations of Providence in a letter to Wilkie Collins. According to the editors of volume nine of the Dickens’s Pilgrim *Letters*, Collins was questioning Dickens’s early veiling of the connection between Dr. Manette and Darnay

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<sup>64</sup> In the first article of chapter 7, the Confession states: “God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.”

in *Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens remarked to Collins:

I think the business of Art is to lay all that ground carefully, but with the care that conceals itself—to shew, by a backward light, what everything has been working to—but only to SUGGEST, until the fulfillment comes. These are the ways of Providence—of which ways, all Art is but a little imitation. (9: 128)

Apparently, Dickens was well aware of such manifestations of the ways of Providence of which he spoke here. Recognizing God’s merciful and providential care, he wrote to Forster, “I know that, but for the mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond” (Forster 1: 29-30; also *DC* 157).

That Dickens recognized and appealed to the Providence of God so often in his work is significant. It indicates, first, Dickens’s embracing a common and important popular theological concept of his day in a very common manner, and second, it indicates that Dickens understood God as more than just a cosmic Father Christmas whose only task is to fulfill the whims and desires of individuals. Interestingly, his use of the concept of Providence seems to be quite traditional and yet exhibits a tension which Dickens seems to have felt in his life, one of many that we will see as we continue to scrutinize his Christian thought. In *Bleak House*, just after Richard and Ada, through Esther, declare their love for one another to Mr. Jarndyce, he advises Richard, “Trust in nothing but in Providence and your own efforts” (162). This would suggest that for Dickens, Providence is not the product of an oppressive doctrine of predestination. Rather, there is an easy and compatible interface between Providence and one’s own efforts. For Dickens, the two concepts coexist without conflict. Again, this tension was not lost on the popular or academic mind of the day, and was addressed in various ways. In an anonymous pamphlet, “On God’s Providence” (1841), the author wrote:

People make God’s providence an excuse for their own idleness. They would have God take their share as well as his own: so, in our conversation, the very expression of leaving a thing “to Providence,” instead of being, as it should be, the resolution of

a religious mind, has come to be a proverb for carelessness and inattention. [...] In the direction of the course of the world, in its great features, God leaves nothing for man to do. [...] But in the smaller affairs of earth God seems to take a supplemental or adjusting part. He steps in just to aid the weakness of his faithful servants, or to break down the pride of the ungodly when it seems good to him. (9-10)

This seems to reflect further the popular view of the day and also seems to be a theological understanding of Dickens's thought as expressed in the advice that Jarndyce gave to Richard.

At the same time, Dickens seems to recognize also that God directs things according to His own purposes and not always according to what seems best or most congenial to men and women. As Oliver and Mrs. Maylie contemplate the possible death of Rose, Mrs. Maylie observes:

I have seen enough, too, to know that it is not always the youngest and best who are spared to those that love them; but this should give us comfort in our sorrow; for Heaven is just; and such things teach us, impressively, that there is a brighter world than this; and that the passage to it is speedy. God's will be done! I love her; and He knows how well!" (OT 242)

For Dickens, Heaven is just and God's will is done whether or not human beings concur in its unfolding. Similarly, in *Bleak House*, the Eternal Wisdom brought help to Ada in a way unexpected (767). And Esther, not unexpectedly, recognized God's providential work even in her disfigurement. As Lady Dedlock seeks her forgiveness, Esther's initial response is:

I felt, through all my tumult of emotion, a burst of gratitude to the providence of God that I was so changed as that I never could disgrace her by any trace of likeness; as that nobody could ever now look at me, and look at her, and remotely think of any near tie between us. (449)

Surely, none of this casts any doubt on the viability of trusting in our own effort. Yet, it suggests notwithstanding, that for Dickens, the Providence of God was an inscrutable and irresistible influence in the lives of men and women. As such, Dickens's concept of God includes that mysterious aspect of God that speaks at once to His immensity as well as to the

creatures' unknowing.

### §3.4 GOD AS CREATOR

As the Sovereign Providence of the universe, Dickens's God is also the Creator. Among the various ascriptions that he employs for God are the Divine artificer (*LD* 496), the Almighty Hand (*CB* 239), the wise Creator (Fielding, *Speeches* 81), the Great Creator of mankind (*BR* 188), and the Creator of Heaven and earth (*BR* 61). Such titles indicate that Dickens recognized God as Creator. His understanding of God as Creator, then, was based upon a Scriptural model, but as we will see, Dickens was not unreceptive to the influence that science was beginning to exert in the early decades of the nineteenth century on the traditionally accepted view of God's creative activity. A few examples will serve to clarify Dickens understanding of God's creative agency before we consider his understanding of the impact of science on his conception of God as Creator.

In a remarkable passage in *American Notes*, Dickens records the profound impact Niagara Falls had on him on his first visit there and expresses his sublime impressions in the context of the creation event using the language of Scripture:

Then, when I felt how near to my Creator I was standing, the first effect, and the enduring one—instant and lasting—of the tremendous spectacle, was Peace. Peace of Mind, tranquillity, calm recollections of the Dead, great thoughts of Eternal Rest and Happiness: nothing of gloom or terror. Niagara was at once stamped upon my heart, an Image of Beauty; to remain there, changeless and indelible, until its pulses cease to beat, for ever. [...] But always does the mighty stream appear to die as it comes down, and always from its unfathomable grave arises that tremendous ghost of spray and mist which is never laid: which has haunted this place with the same dread solemnity since Darkness brooded on the deep, and that first flood before the Deluge—Light—came rushing on Creation at the word of God. (200, 201)

The language and tone especially of the last portion of the citation is that of the creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:3. And while Dickens makes no direct mention of God creating Niagara Falls, it is the experience of seeing the "tremendous spectacle" that evokes in Dickens

thoughts of creation and his Creator.<sup>65</sup>

In a speech 5 October 1843 at the Manchester Athenaeum, Dickens employed a seemingly incidental yet significant ascription for God when he observed:

Something of what he hears or reads within such walls can scarcely fail to become at times a topic of discourse by his own fireside, nor can it ever fail to lead to larger sympathies with man, and to a higher veneration for the great Creator of all the wonders of this universe. (Fielding, *Speeches* 49)

Here Dickens is singing the praises of the social and personal benefits that would accrue to those who would avail themselves of the opportunities of the Manchester Athenaeum, and as always, he sees spiritual benefit in education and enlightenment. In this case, Dickens concurred with a commonly held view of educators of his day that one of the benefits of knowledge and education was greater appreciation and reverence for God.<sup>66</sup> More importantly, however, for our purposes here, Dickens notes in both of these examples a clear and definite, almost emphatic recognition of God as the Creator of the universe. Of course, to acknowledge a Creator and a creation event is not necessarily determinative of Christian thought, but the intent here is not a proof of Dickens's Christian orientation. Rather, here I want simply to show that Dickens's Christian convictions evoke plain declarations of his

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<sup>65</sup> Dickens wrote again of Niagara Falls to Forster 25 years later on 18 March 1868: "Nothing in Turner's [artist Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851)] finest water-colour drawings, done in his greatest day, is so ethereal, so imaginative, so gorgeous in colour, as what I then beheld. I seemed to be lifted from the earth and to be looking into Heaven. What I once said to you as I witnessed the scene five and twenty years ago, all came back at this most affecting and sublime sight" (2: 428).

<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Henry Brougham (Lord Chancellor, 1830-34), articulating the advantages of a scientific education for those in the working class, wrote in his pamphlet on scientific education and knowledge, *A Discourse on the Objects, Advantages, and Pleasures of Science* (1827): "The highest of all our gratifications in the contemplations of science remains: we are raised by them to an understanding of the infinite wisdom and goodness which the Creator has displayed in all his works. Not a step can we take in any direction without perceiving the most extraordinary traces of design; [...] the delight is inexpressible of being able to follow, as it were, with our eyes, the marvellous works of the Great Architect of Nature" (47). Brougham was an important figure in nineteenth-century educational reform and an instrumental force in the popularization of mechanics' institutes. He wrote *A Discourse on the Objects, Advantages, and Pleasures of Science* as the initial pamphlet for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. This from Brougham, and in a pamphlet authorized by the SDUK indicates that, even in the secular setting, natural theology was the likely frame of reference for the discussion of science. This topic will be taken up in greater detail below.

concept of God the Father as Creator.

Just as Dickens subscribed to a Scriptural view of God as Creator of the physical universe, so Dickens understood God as the Creator of humanity as well. His 1844 Christmas Book, *The Chimes* ends with the hopeful prayer, “So may each year be happier than the last, and not the meanest of our brethren or sisterhood debarred their rightful share, in what our Great Creator formed them to enjoy” (154). Further, in a rather graphic, but nevertheless pertinent citation, Dickens wrote in *A Child’s History of England*:

When the populace broke in, they found (except the trembling few, cowering in corners, whom they soon killed) only heaps of greasy cinders, with there and there something like part of the blackened trunk of a burnt tree, but which had lately been a human creature, formed by the beneficent hand of the Creator as they were” (224).

Dickens makes the point here, with his mention of “the beneficent hand” of the Creator and in light of the circumstances of the event, that the manner and the occasion of such deaths are a desecration of God’s creative purposes invested in humanity. As is evident in both of these citations, Dickens understood humanity to be God’s design and creation infused as it were with a dignity derived from His hand. This, of course, provided Dickens with his fundamental understanding and elevated view of humanity, and was a major factor in his emphatic humanitarian concern and social conscience. Believing that men and women were created by God with a dignity and purpose derived from that creation, Dickens was convinced that all human beings should be able to live lives commensurate with such dignity apart from neglect, want, disease, oppression, ignorance and injustice. Surely, all of creaturely humanity are entitled to such fundamental qualities of life by virtue of their creation. It is such conviction that caused Dickens to remind us speaking of Barnaby in *Barnaby Rudge*:

It is something to know that Heaven has left the capacity of gladness in such a creature’s breast; it is something to be assured that, however lightly men may crush that

faculty in their fellows, the Great Creator of mankind imparts it even to his despised and slighted work. (188)

He remarked, further, in a speech at a dinner given in his honor, 25 June 1841:

I felt that the world was not utterly to be despised; that it was worthy of living in for many reasons. I was anxious to find, [...] if I could, in evil things, that soul of goodness which the Creator has put in them. I was anxious to show that virtue may be found in the bye-ways of the world, that it is not incompatible with poverty and even with rags, and to keep steadily through life the motto, expressed in the burning words of your Northern poet –

“The rank is but the guinea stamp,  
The man’s the gowd for a’ that.” (Fielding, *Speeches* 9-10)

In these examples, Dickens not only reminds us that humanity is the direct and purposeful creation of God, but also provides a foundation to declare that human beings have a moral responsibility one to another. It is this basic conviction that caused Dickens to write as he did in the citation above from *A Child’s History of England* and to remind his children in *TLOL*, “God makes no difference between those who wear good clothes and those who go barefoot” (27), and that Jesus “went among them, and taught them, and thought them worthy of His care” (28). Furthermore, he informs his children that Jesus told the parable of the Great Banquet so that people might know “that those who are too busy with their own profits and pleasures to think of God and of doing good, will not find such favour with Him as the sick and the miserable” (69). For Dickens, every human being was a creature endowed with a worth and a dignity from God that was to be mutually recognized and respected. Because of this, the poor, the downtrodden and the disenfranchised should be a special concern for others. So, Dickens exhorts his children:

Never be proud or unkind, my dears, to any poor man, woman, or child. If they are bad, think that they would have been better if they had had kind friends, and good homes, and had been better taught. So, always try to make them better by kind persuading words; and always try to teach them and relieve them if you can. (*TLOL* 28)

In light of these few examples, there are some important perspectives that come to bear on Dickens’s view of the Creator and creation that should be explored further. In par-

ticular, science was beginning to have an extraordinary impact on religion generally and Scriptural cosmogony specifically in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Consequently, one's concept of God as Creator would no longer be able to rest on the simple appeal to the Mosaic creation accounts in Scripture, as the findings of science, especially the hypotheses of geology, were beginning to demand consideration in explanations of God's creative activity. It seems that Dickens, like so many of his contemporaries, was able easily to accommodate the findings of science and maintain a Scriptural understanding of God as Creator.

Generally, Dickens's views should be recognized as being informed, at least to some degree, by the science of his day.<sup>67</sup> It should be noted, too, that his views seemed to develop along the lines of popular thought and the growing popularity and preeminence of science in the 1830s and 40s. So, it should be acknowledged that his views represent a rather common and popular understanding of the interface between science and religion accepted in the early to mid-nineteenth-century formulations of natural theology. It will seem reasonable, also, amidst these considerations and according to the available evidence, to conclude that his views remained largely unchanged well into the 1860s, at least, and most probably

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<sup>67</sup> There is, for instance, the slight intimation in the citation from *American Notes* (above, p. 100) that Dickens accepted the view that there is an indeterminate span of perhaps millions of years between the events described in Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2 (or, sometimes, between Genesis 1:1-2 and 1:3). This was a relatively common view especially in the middle decades of the nineteenth century when it was fashionable to reconcile the Mosaic creation narrative with the current findings of geology. See, for example, Joseph Baylee's *Genesis and Geology: The Holy Word of God Defended from Its Assailants* (Liverpool: Adam Holden, 1857) cited from James P. Moore, ed., *Religion in Victorian Britain: Volume III Sources* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 178-185. See also Thomas Chalmers, *The Evidence and Authority of Christian Revelation* (Edinburgh: William Blackburn; Oliphant, Waugh, and Innes, 1814), William Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy Considered with Reference to Natural Theology* (London: William Pickering, 1836), and Hugh Miller, *Testimony of the Rocks; or, Geology In its Bearings on the Two Theologies, Natural and Revealed* (Edinburgh: Thomas Constables and Co., 1857). Miller's earlier work espoused this Gap Theory, while in *Testimony of the Rocks* he abandoned it. Nevertheless, Miller presented the evidence in *Testimony of the Rocks* that convinced him, "No blank chaotic gap of death and darkness separated the creation to which man belongs from that of the old extinct elephant, hippopotamus, and hyena; [...] and so I have been compelled to hold, that the days of creation were not natural, but prophetic days, and stretched far back into the bygone eternity" (xi). Thus, he deals with the longevity of the earth that many geologists of the day believed needed to be reconciled to the Mosaic account of creation in the book of Genesis. Miller also indicates that some form of the Gap Theory "formed [...] the preliminary proposition of those ornaments of at once science and the English Church" including Dr. John B. Sumner, Adam Sedgwick, Dr. J. Pye Smith, and Dr. James Hamilton (117).

until his death. A consideration, then, of these various perspectives should help provide a clearer understanding not only of Dickens's view of God as Creator, but will also contribute to the greater clarity of our discussion in chapter 7 of Dickens's churchmanship.

Most of the citations that we have considered above come from his earlier work and thought in the 1840s (the citation from *A Child's History of England* comes from the early 1850s), a portion of those middle decades that were a formative period for scientific thought in the nineteenth century. Stimulated by a flurry of innovative intellectual activity and discovery, the sciences began to experience a realignment of sorts, as geology began vying for ascendancy in the scientific community and a place in popular thought. Advances and new discoveries were already beginning to stir controversy in scientific circles at the time. New methods of understanding creation and the created order generated especially by the likes of Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), and Robert Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), were beginning to create waves already that would break full force in the 1860s triggered by the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. Indeed, in the 1860s, long held beliefs and traditions in the formal sciences about "the way things are" would begin to be effectively dismantled. Walter Houghton, reflecting on this later period and its imminent scientific hegemony, observes in his *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830 to 1870*, "The assumptions of the old order had been bred into young minds of almost all mid-Victorians; and now in the nineteenth century, [...] they suddenly began to crumble" (66).

Nevertheless, in the first half of the nineteenth century, there remained a general and largely unshaken confidence, except, of course, with some gentlemen of science, that science and religion continued as loyal partners. Clearly, there were rumblings and undercurrents of the incipient controversy that would eventually radically alter science and the way it was perceived and practiced, but well into the 1850s, and even into the 1860s, there were still

many—scientists, clergy, and laypersons—who saw no conflict between science and religion. As T.W. Heyck<sup>68</sup> observed, “Science was not generally seen as in opposition to religion before the publication of the *Origin of Species*, but as part of a widely accepted natural theology” (162). Various forms and adaptations of natural theology still supplied a framework that provided stability to a culture in which revealed religion was being newly confronted by new scientific discovery. Nevertheless, the new discoveries of science, especially in geology, were able to be comfortably, albeit sometimes incredibly, reconciled with belief in the authority of Scripture. Likewise, Christian thought about creation continued to be developed primarily in terms of the Scriptural data, with science providing confirmation and demonstration of the omnipotence and benevolence of God as evidenced in His creative activity. Thus, natural theology and a Scriptural paradigm of understanding the universe carried the day. By and large, science was seen as, and quite often understood itself as, a window into the mind and activity of God. Aileen Fyfe and John van Wyhe recognized this important aspect of the cultural and intellectual framework when they note:

Although much has been made of a mid-Victorian crisis of faith, perhaps triggered by the sciences, this seems to have been a feature of a certain class of intellectuals, and not an accurate description of the majority of society (especially middle-class society), which retained a religious faith long after most expert men of science. (Fyfe and vanWyhe)

While the sciences continued advancing, a variety of works of natural theology were accommodating the new discoveries and developments with little difficulty. In addition to William Paley’s *Natural Theology; or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*,

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<sup>68</sup> See T.W. Heyck “From Men of Letters to Intellectuals: The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Nineteenth-Century England”, *Journal of British Studies*, 20 (Fall, 1980), 158-183. But see also Jack Morrell and Arnold Thackray, *Gentlemen of Science: Early Years of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 224-245, who emphasize a more tenuous relationship between religion and science during the period under discussion here. Studies we will note below by Aileen Fyfe, John van Wyhe, and Jonathan Topham, however, have cast doubt on what have been shown to be largely generalizations by Morrell and Thackray.

*Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802), which remained popular during most of the nineteenth century,<sup>69</sup> C.M. Burnett's *The Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God, as Displayed in the Animal Creation* (1838), Henry Duncan's *Sacred Philosophy of the Seasons* (1835-36), and especially Henry Fergus's *Testimony of Nature and Revelation to the Being, Perfections, and Government of God* (1833) were read widely. Of particular significance in this period, however, were the *Bridgewater Treatises* of the 1830s. Commissioned by the Royal Society at the bequest of Francis Henry Egerton the eighth Earl of Bridgewater, as works that were expressly intended to demonstrate "the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God, as manifested in the Creation", these treatises were serious scientific works of natural theology by respected authors.

Jonathan Topham has demonstrated not only the quality of the content of the *Bridgewater Treatises*, but also the popularity and the wide circulation of the *Treatises* as well. In his "Science and Popular Education in the 1830s: The Role of the *Bridgewater Treatises*", Topham remarks that the treatises were natural theologies "written by leading men of the scientific establishment, [...] at the behest of the President of the Royal Society" and that they were "chiefly attractive for the qualities of their scientific exposition" (403). Moreover, he notes concerning the extent to which the *Bridgewater Treatises* "rank among the scientific best-sellers of the early nineteenth century. Their varied blend of natural theology and popular science attracted extraordinary contemporary interest and 'celebrity', resulting in

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<sup>69</sup> Aileen Fyfe maintains that Paley's *Natural Theology* was a successful and important work for most of the nineteenth century. While she challenges the notion that it was a set textbook at Cambridge, she argues for its presence and influence there. At the same time, "*Natural Theology*," she writes, "was also welcomed as a devotional work for believers" (323). She remarks further on its popular interest and circulation. She cites the dissenting *Monthly Magazine* as recommending it "as a textbook to those who superintend the religious instruction of the young, the ignorant and the poor", and the Anglican *Churchman's Magazine* as suggesting that it was a work "to which our academic youth may be referred with so much safety and advantage." See Aileen Fyfe, "The Reception of William Paley's *Natural Theology* in the University of Cambridge." *British Journal for the History of Science* 30 (1997): 321-35, especially 323-324.

unprecedented sales and widespread reviewing” (397).

Topham goes on to point how the *Treatises* reached all classes of literate society, despite prohibitive pricing and the limited audience for which they were originally intended. His “Beyond the ‘common context’: the production and reading of the *Bridgewater Treatises*”, discusses the readership of the *Treatises* as including gentlemen of science, fashionable society, the middle-class, the public arena (or working classes), and the radical artisans, and how “the strategies of both authors and publisher were undermined by readers themselves, who bought the works in large numbers and read them in ways that had not been anticipated” (244).<sup>70</sup> Despite the initial intent of the authors and the focused marketing of the publisher, the *Bridgewater Treatises* found their way to a wide reading public that included even the working class.

Topham’s *BJHS* article points to this wide readership of the *Treatises* in his discussion of their popularity among educators of all classes and religious persuasions. He notes, “While the *Bridgewater Treatises* were undoubtedly successful in presenting a science acceptable to many middle-class readers, they also formed an important part of the pedagogic apparatus of those engaged in popular education” (398). Topham explains further that the *Treatises* were used by secular, High Church, and Evangelical educators alike in various educational endeavours and in this way, found an audience even among the working class. “One overriding reason for the extraordinary success of the *Bridgewater Treatises*,” he maintains, “was that they presented the pious middle classes with a largely non-technical and religiously conservative compendium of contemporary science, written by men whose scientific and religious credentials had been vetted by authorities as impeccable as the president of the Royal

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<sup>70</sup> Topham remarks concerning the clientele to whom the publisher of the *Treatises* (William Pickering) catered, “His overriding interest was ‘in preserving, strengthening, and disseminating works enshrining traditional literary and religious views to a select, well educated, discriminating and monied public.’” (242).

Society and the Archbishop of Canterbury” (398).

Topham’s work, while maintaining an emphasis that the *Bridgewater Treatises* were primarily accepted for their scientific content, nevertheless, demonstrates that these expressed works of natural theology became widely read and influential on a popular level. Moreover, the popular readership and wide circulation of the *Bridgewater Treatises*, as well as that of other similar works of natural theology suggests that there was a popular interest in and knowledge of the new findings of science, with a concomitant natural theology that viewed God as Creator and that remained unthreatened by scientific discovery.

In light of these facts, it is interesting to note that Dickens’s library at Gadshill contained no fewer than 17 titles (some multi-volume) concerned with natural history and natural theology. Among these titles were 5 of the 8 *Bridgewater Treatises*,<sup>71</sup> Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, Lyell’s *Geological Evidence of the Antiquity of Man*, Hugh Miller’s *Testimony of the Rocks*, and *Essays and Reviews*.<sup>72</sup> Some of the works found in his library were rather technical (Darwin, Lyell, Miller) and some were more popular in their approach and style (the majority of the *Bridgewater Treatises*, D.T. Ansted’s *The Ancient World; or, Picturesque Sketches of Creation*).<sup>73</sup> The very presence of these volumes seems to suggest that Dickens was at least

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<sup>71</sup> Dickens also owned Charles Babbage’s *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* (1837). This was not, however, an authorized volume of the original *Bridgewater Treatises* as envisioned by Egerton and overseen by Davies Gilbert of the Royal Society. It was Babbage’s own undertaking and was intended by him to correct some of the deficiencies of the originals. In particular, he took exception to a “prejudice” in William Whewell’s treatise, *Astronomy and General Physics*, one which he understood to suggest “that the pursuits of science are unfavourable to religion” (See Babbage’s preface, especially x-xvii). Dickens cites Babbage’s *Treatise* in his speech of 27 September 1869 to the Birmingham and Midland Institute. See K.J. Fielding, *The Speeches of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: OUP, 1960), 399. Fielding adds the note that “an attempt to reconcile the evidence of men of science with religion [...] was clearly a theme Dickens had particularly in mind in his address [...] but he treated it with excessive caution.”

<sup>72</sup> While *Essays and Reviews* was a work of divinity and not science, some of the essays do speak to the natural sciences and their implications for the study of Scripture and theology.

<sup>73</sup> Ansted wrote of his intent: “The object of this Work is to communicate, in a simple form, to the general reader, the chief results of Geological Investigation. No detailed account of particular districts,—no minute statements with regard to peculiarities of structure exhibited in various formations, or in their fossil contents,—must, therefore, be expected; and, on the other hand, the reader will be spared, as far as possible, the

familiar, and perhaps even conversant, with the issues circulating around science and theology in the thirties, forties and beyond. Furthermore, from what we have already observed in his writing and speeches, it seems reasonable to believe that Dickens embraced the popular natural theology that was common knowledge, especially in the middle-class, which affirmed both a Scriptural view of God as Creator and the discoveries and evidences of science. It appears that Dickens was one who, like many of his contemporaries, believed that the natural sciences confirmed God's agency in creation; that the discoveries of science merely served to allow us to appreciate all the more God's creative activity.

A letter to his friend, W. F. de Cerjat seems to confirm such a view. On 28 May 1863, Dickens wrote to Cerjat concerning Colenso, Jowett, *Essays and Reviews*, and "the science of geology". In the course of such a varied theological discussion, Dickens remarked:

What these bishops and such-like say about revelation, in assuming it to be finished and done with, I can't in the least understand. Nothing is discovered without God's intention and assistance, and I suppose every new knowledge of His works that is conceded to man to be distinctly a revelation by which men are to guide themselves. (*Pilgrim Letters*, 10: 253)

Here, Dickens appears to embrace a rather progressive view of science and religion, but his language actually suggests a rather conservative view, especially in light of the fact that these comments were expressed in 1863. Note first, in Dickens's mind, scientific discoveries are "revelation" given by God's "assistance" and according to His "intention". Second, scientific discoveries are "new knowledge of His works". In this way, Dickens articulated the popular view that carried the day in the thirties and forties, and he continued to espouse it in 1863, four years after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and three years after the publication of *Essays and Reviews*. While science was, at this point, beginning its transition from the partner of religion to a distinct and exclusively secular, not to

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mere technicalities of the Science, while being informed of the views deduced from the study of them" (vii).

mention professional, discipline, Dickens's views remained unchanged from the thirties and forties. This may be reflected in the fact that many of the volumes in his library, some of which we have cited above, were editions published in the 1850s. Or it may be in spite of that fact. Whatever the case, it would seem that Dickens's views were neither remarkable nor any more progressive than popular Christian thought or safe, middle-class lay Anglicanism; he appears to exemplify a rather common, but imminently vulnerable, understanding of how the new scientific methods might come to bear on the Scriptures. Of course, some might insist that he is in some respects progressive in that he accepts the sciences and the new discoveries on their own merits, on the one hand. On the other hand, he is not so bold as to suggest that science radically alters a Scriptural view of God's creative agency, as some surely did. Rather, his is a common view, recognizing an easy compatibility and simple harmony between natural science and revealed religion—a view that, although it was beginning to be contested in some circles, remained a framework of stability still well represented even into the 1860s.

### §3.5 GOD IS GOOD

In his speech of 27 September 1869 to the Birmingham and Midland Institute, in which he took exception to the characterization of his era as a material one, Dickens attributed even the harnessing of electricity for the benefit of humanity and the invention of the steam locomotive for the improvement of travel to the gracious activity of God. He spoke of these advancements as not only taking place “in the good providence of God” but as also coming from the hand of the “Supreme Beneficence” (Fielding, *Speeches* 404). While there is the clear gesture to providence here and even the intimation of God's creative activity in the way Dickens turns his phrases, what is most conspicuously suggested is his conviction that God provides good things for his creatures. This is one instance of similar indicators

that reminds us that perhaps the most notable attribute above all others in Dickens's concept of God was his decided trust that God is good.

In Dickens's retelling of the account in *TLOL* of Jesus in the Temple as a boy, his parents "found him, sitting in the temple, talking about the goodness of God, and how we should all pray to him, with some learned men who were called Doctors" (*TLOL* 20). These particular words are significant because Luke's account of this event mentions nothing about the goodness of God as the subject of Jesus' conversation with the religious leaders. Nor is there anything in the account to suggest such a reading. This is a Dickens interpolation identifying God's goodness as one of His most notable attributes. In fact, for Dickens, God's goodness may be His most distinguishing attribute. Dickens was never reticent to remind those with an inclination to conceive of God as a God of wrath and vengeance—the Murdstones, the Clennams, the Barbarys, for instance—that God's goodness must not be slighted or ignored. So, he exhorts such persons in *Barnaby Rudge*:

Ye men of gloom and austerity, who paint the face of Infinite Benevolence with an eternal frown; read in the Everlasting Book, wide open to your view, the lesson it would teach. Its pictures are not in black and somber hues, but bright and glowing tints; its music—save when ye drown it—is not in sighs and groans, but songs and cheerful sounds. Listen to the million voices in the summer air, and find one dismal as your own. (188-89).

Indeed, it is the "Beneficent Creator" whose ends are being worked out by youth and beauty in *The Chimes* (*CB* 137); and conversely, it is "the beneficent design of Heaven" which is overthrown by man's indifference and presumption in the *Haunted Man* (*CB* 378-79). Esther senses "the goodness and the tenderness of God" in the healing touch of Ada's newborn child "to bless and restore his mother" (*BH* 767). In each case, it is plain that God is not only intrinsically good in character, but that both His activity and volition are good. That is precisely why Dickens saw even in such common things as electricity and train travel "the good providence of God", "the Supreme Beneficence", from whom alone such discov-

eries proceed.

One of the primary activities in which Dickens highlights God's goodness is in the extension of His mercy in His great care and concern for His creatures, and that, most often in the compassionate activity of Jesus. When Jesus heals the paralytic at Capernaum, the healed man "rose up and went away quite well, blessing him and thanking God" (*TLOL* 31-32). Likewise, when Jairus' daughter had been raised from the dead and restored to him, Dickens reports, "Oh what a sight it must have been to see her parents clasp her in their arms, and kiss her, and thank God, and Jesus Christ his son, for such great Mercy!" (*TLOL* 33-34). Dickens employs a similar phrase when he tells his children that we should "thank God and Jesus Christ" that the "cruel times" in which crucifixion was a form of capital punishment are past (107). In each case, Dickens sees God's goodness operative in His mercy and tender compassion toward His creatures.

One way in which this mercy and compassion is expressed in the novels is the fatherhood of God for the fatherless and the orphan. Throughout *Oliver Twist*, for instance, the reader detects a sense of God's providential care for Oliver that is finally voiced explicitly in Dickens's concluding remarks as the narrator recalls:

[...] how the two orphans, tried by adversity, remembered its lessons in mercy to others, and mutual love, and fervent thanks to Him who had protected and preserved them—these are all matters which need not be told. I have said that they were truly happy; and without strong affection and humanity of heart, and gratitude to that Being whose code is Mercy, and whose great attribute is Benevolence to all things that breathe, happiness can never be attained. (368)

In the same way, Florence Dombey is adopted by the Father of the fatherless. In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens points out on more than one occasion that God Himself steps into the breach, becoming for Florence the father that Mr. Dombey is not. We learn very early from Mrs. Chick that, "Florence will never, never, never be a Dombey, not if she lives to be a thousand years old" (52), and then we watch throughout the rest of the story as Flor-

ence desperately tries to become the daughter of Mr. Dombey, but to no avail. At the point in the narrative when Dombey strikes Florence, “She saw that she had no father on earth” (704). This statement hardly needs what follows it thematically, for the implication is clear in the turn of the phrase. Nevertheless, it is when Florence begins to think about the fact that she is “homeless and fatherless” that Dickens observes, “She only knew that she had no Father upon earth, and she said so, many times, with her suppliant head hidden from all, but her Father who was in Heaven” (718). Interestingly, this is observed in such a way that it seems to be recognized more on the Godward side than it does by Florence. In other words, Dickens seems to highlight God’s beneficent providence in His being Father to Florence, even when Florence may not recognize it. Thus, Dickens can refer to God in *Dombey and Son* as “that higher Father who does not reject his children’s love, or spurn their tried and broken hearts” (640).

In light of such a concept of God as is represented by the above examples, it hardly needs to be demonstrated that there is a striking contrast between Dickens’s emphasis on the absolute goodness of God and those whose concept of God was derived from a strongly Calvinistic view of His justice and judgment on sin. Yet, the recognition of this contrast is essential to understanding that when Dickens vehemently attacks such a view, as he often does, he is not simply disparaging a view of God or a particular religious group to which he takes exception. Rather, there is at the center of his criticisms and rebuke an enormous contrast in the fundamental theology that drives the conception and understanding of the character and person of God. For Dickens, developing a right concept of God was a matter of one’s starting point: whether from the point of view of God’s wrath against sin and sinners, or from the point of view of God’s goodness, grace and love for his creatures and creation. In theological terms, the contrast is between a forensic theological starting point that sees

God as the Lawgiver whose law has been broken and whose penalty must be paid; or a familial theological starting point that sees God as a Father whose desire is to restore and enjoy a relationship with His children.<sup>74</sup>

Dickens's strong repugnance, on the one hand, toward this extreme forensic orientation toward the character of God—usually (mis)understood in the nineteenth century as the Calvinistic view—and his emphatic recognition of God's goodness, on the other hand, was shared by many of his contemporaries in both lay and clerical circles. At the initial conference for the forming of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846, the basis of the alliance was discussed and formulated at the various meetings. A main point of discussion at those meetings was the adoption of a Ninth Article for the charter that included an affirmation of “the Eternal Punishment of the wicked”. The significance of these discussions lies in the fact that a group of Evangelicals recognized the provocative nature of such a declaration and labored through prolonged discussion weighing the pros and cons of inclusion of the article. Although most of those who spoke at the meetings spoke in favour of the inclusion of the Ninth Article, all seemed to recognize the legitimacy of concern and sensitivity over the inclusion of the article.<sup>75</sup> Francis Knight points out that even in Anglican lay religion there was sufficient anxiety about the severity of the doctrine of everlasting punishment, that a marked shift in thinking toward an emphasis on the glories of heaven, one that would characterize the 1860s and beyond, began as early as the 1830s (57).

There were also Christian thinkers like Thomas Erskine, F. D. Maurice, and John

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<sup>74</sup> This is the contrast employed by James Torrance in his introduction of John MacLeod Campbell, *The Nature of Atonement* (Edinburgh: The Hansel Press, 1996), 1-17. We will consider Campbell's views on Atonement in more detail in chapter 6 below.

<sup>75</sup> See *Evangelical Alliance: Report of the Proceedings of the Conference held at Freemasons' Hall, London, from August 19<sup>th</sup> to September 2<sup>nd</sup> inclusive, 1846* (London: Partridge & Oakey, 1847). My evaluation here is based on James R. Moore, ed. *Religion in Victorian Britain: Volume III Sources* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 232-244, § 5.1.2 “The Basis of the Evangelical Alliance, 1846”.

McLeod Campbell who were encouraging new ways of thinking about salvation, heaven, and judgment. It seems that Dickens, whether or not he was familiar with the work of such men, was attracted, like many others in his day, to that concept of God that began with God's goodness rather than His justice. We will see below that Dickens, who does seem to understand and affirm the justice and the judgment of God, does not necessarily reject God's judgment on sin. In one sense it seems that Dickens was simply reacting to one very influential strand of thinking about God that focused on sin and God's punishment of it. But it is important to understand that Dickens's emphatic view of the goodness of God is more than simply reactionary. It is indeed, his starting point for thinking about God. Only when we view it in this way can we begin to understand such strong statements from Dickens, like that above from *Barnaby Rudge* (and many others), that condemn, in his mind at least, such a negative starting point for thinking about God.

We can recall any number of passages in which Dickens speaks in such strong language of those who would turn God into a vengeful tyrant. But probably the most extended and coherent statement is his characterization of Mrs. Clennam and her distorted Christianity in *Little Dorrit*. For Dickens, Mrs. Clennam's sense of religion is the perfect negative counterpoint to a genuine Christianity as it is exemplified especially by Amy Dorrit.

In chapters 30 and 31 of the second book of *Little Dorrit*, one of Dickens's most important caricatures of religion is provided to illustrate what he, through Gabriel Varden, observed about distortions of religion: "But recollect from this time that all good things perverted to evil purposes, are worse than those which are naturally bad. A thoroughly wicked woman, is wicked indeed. When religion goes wrong, she is very wrong, for the same reason" (*BR* 314). Central to Dickens's understanding not only of Mrs. Clennam's religion, but also of his view of distorted religion in general is his characterization of Mrs. Clennam's

concept of God:

She still abided by her old impiety—still reversed the order of Creation, and breathed her own breath into a clay image of her Creator. [...] No human eyes have ever seen more daring, gross, and shocking images of the Divine nature, than we creatures of the dust make in our own likenesses, of our own bad passions. (740)

The sin of the ancient Israelites at Sinai was not so much that they had created a golden idol as it was that they had misrepresented God by an image that distorted His person and character. Dickens saw in Mrs. Clennam this same tendency to misrepresent God by creating God in her own image—that of finite and transient humanity. While this seems to testify to Dickens’s lofty concept of God on the positive side, it indicates, at the same time, on the negative side, the central flaw that distorts religion in the first place and results in the religion of Mrs. Clennam and those like her.

Further, Mrs. Clennam describes the upbringing that shaped her religion as “days of wholesome repression, punishment, and fear.” She elaborates, “The corruption of our hearts, the evil of our ways, the curse that is upon us, the terrors that surround us—these were the themes of my childhood. They formed my character, and filled me with an abhorrence of evil-doers” (739). Here, Dickens has again hit at the heart of a distorted understanding of Christianity that seems to understand God and religion primarily in terms of human depravity, sin and judgment over and against God’s mercy, grace and love. Such an orientation, at least in the mind of Dickens, makes it quite easy, then, to eventually see one’s self as a righteous judge of others. Mrs. Clennam claims, “I have done what it was given to me to do. I have set myself against evil; not against good. I have been an instrument of severity against sin. Have not mere sinners like myself been commissioned to lay it low in all time?” (755-56). Mrs. Clennam adopts just such a posture relative to her husband, Arthur, and Arthur’s birth mother—doing so in the name of God and the “just dispensation of Jehovah” (741-2).

Perhaps the most scathing and profound criticism Dickens brings to such distorted religion in *Little Dorrit* is found in one of our first impressions of Mrs. Clennam:

Great need had the rigid woman of her mystical religion, veiled in gloom and darkness, with lightnings of cursing, vengeance, and destruction, flashing through the able clouds. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, was a prayer too poor in spirit for her. Smite thou my debtors, Lord, wither them, crush them; do Thou as I would do, and Thou shalt have my worship: this was the impious tower of stone she built up to scale Heaven. (57)

Clearly, Dickens sees much of this type of distorted religion as conceived in the hearts of those with a miserable and wicked temperament. But just as important, he sees in this kind of religious counterfeit a distorted Christianity ready made for such dispositions. Mrs. Clennam learned Christianity as a religion that beat people up with their own depraved sinfulness and guilt, and portrayed God as a vengeful tyrant longing to mete out punishment to and exact retribution from such sinful humanity. There was little or no room for joy and the celebration of the love of God and His grace and mercy; only a constant vigil (motivated mostly by fear) to mortify the flesh and avoid God's anger and judgment on sin. It is precisely this type of religion against which Dickens and many like him vehemently protested by offering an approach to God and Christianity that began instead with God's goodness in His grace, mercy, love, and forgiveness. As we will see, it is not that Dickens ignored sin or God's judgment upon it. It is just that Dickens had a different starting place.

Surely, the central aspect, then, of God's goodness in *TLOL* is His readiness to extend mercy in the forgiveness of sins. For Dickens, it is necessary to have one's sins forgiven for entrance into heaven, and God is always ready to forgive sins. Dickens points out that this is precisely why Jesus related the parable of the Prodigal Son:

By this [the parable], our Saviour meant to teach, that those who have done wrong and forgotten God, are always welcome to him and will always receive his mercy, if they will only return to Him in sorrow for the sin of which they have been guilty. (73)

And Dickens understands Jesus' parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard similarly:

Our Saviour meant to teach them by this, that people who have done good all their lives long, will go to Heaven after they are dead. But that people who have been wicked, because of their being miserable, or not having parents and friends to take care of them when young, and who are truly sorry for it, however late in their lives, and pray God to forgive them, will be forgiven and will go to Heaven too. (61)<sup>76</sup>

As Dickens conceives of Him, God is the constant and loving Father, ever ready to extend his mercy in the forgiveness of sins and to grant Heaven to those who would seek it. In Dickens's mind, there could be no stronger expression of His goodness.

### §3.6 CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

While Dickens's concept of God is not expressed or formulated in terms of a systematic theology, it is solidly Scriptural, at least according to the popular Scriptural understanding of his day. Clearly, Dickens's concept of God is Christian and typically Anglican in the popular sense, but as I have already suggested, his concept of God taken by itself is determinative of little more than affirming his theism. Taken in the larger context, however, of both the nineteenth century and his writing, selections of which we have examined, his concept of God tells us a great deal about his faith and his Christian conviction. More importantly, an understanding of his concept of God provides for us a foundation upon which we can build our further investigation into his religious thought.

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<sup>76</sup> There seems to be a subtle qualification in Dickens application here relative to those who are actually eligible to approach God to expect forgiveness. It may not be any "people who have been wicked", but only those who have been wicked because of having been disadvantaged and disenfranchised. I will consider this more carefully below.

WHERE THE TWO ENDS OF LIFE MEET

*“When a man is drawing on to a time of life, where the two ends of life meet... he should be over-rejoiced to do a kindness if he can.”*

– from *David Copperfield*, Chapter 51

Especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, popular Protestant Christian spirituality was shaped largely by a preoccupation with death and judgment and the consequent entrance into one’s eternal destiny. Such a preoccupation was no respecter of party lines within the Established Church or the boundaries between Anglicans and Nonconformists. Under a pervasive influence of Evangelicalism, the common belief of almost all Christians was that upon death, final judgment was passed and one’s eternal destiny was determined. As such, much of the popular religious thought of the first half of the nineteenth century focused on the ideas and issues surrounding death, judgment, heaven, and hell—or, personal eschatology. Such a mood was characterized by an emphasis on death and dying, and often understood salvation rather narrowly as securing a place in heaven and avoiding consignment to hell.

Dickens’s life, of course, was not one untouched by the loss of loved ones and so he had some clearly defined notions of death and the afterlife. This chapter, then, continues to examine the theological presuppositions that underpinned Dickens’s understanding of Christianity particularly with regard to “the four last things”. By employing *TLOL* as our index and as our way into the larger corpus of his work, we can establish with greater clarity Dickens’s thought concerning death, judgment, heaven, and hell.

§4.1 DEATH

In *TLOL*, death is neither dealt with explicitly as a theme nor as a point of theologi-

cal interest. When death does play a role in the narrative, however, it is not something to be feared. Rather, Dickens relates it almost incidentally and in the larger context of the hope of heaven. In *TLOL*, Jesus has clearly demonstrated his power over death in the raising of Jairus' daughter (32-34), in the raising of the son of the widow of Nain (36-38), in the raising of his friend Lazarus at Bethany (79-82), and in his own resurrection following his death by crucifixion (114-21). It is not insignificant that, of the Gospel material Dickens selects for inclusion and that which he chooses to omit from *TLOL*, he has been keen to include all of those instances in the Gospel narratives that demonstrate in the raising of the dead, Jesus' power over death. And he is careful to add in his epilogue, that although "Christians were hanged, beheaded, burnt, buried alive, and devoured in theatres by wild beasts [...] nothing would silence them or terrify them; for they knew that if they did their duty, they would go to Heaven" (127). The fear of death has been replaced by the hope of heaven in *TLOL*. For Dickens, death seems to be simply the passage from this earthly life to the eternal happiness of heaven and reunion with loved ones and family (11).

Dickens understood death and responded to it in ways consistent with the popular Christian thought of his day. In fact, Margaret Holubetz argues that Dickens's treatment of his fictional deathbed scenes "are indeed largely typical of general Victorian attitudes" (14), and as we will see below, Dickens's personal, real-life response to death can be characterized in the same way. Dickens's concept of and response to death can be more clearly understood against the backdrop of two models of nineteenth-century attitudes and practices surrounding death: the Romantic ideal of death, what Philippe Ariès refers to as "the beautiful death", and the Evangelical idea of the "good death" and dying well. On the one hand, Ariès, in his pioneering work, *The Hour of Death*, describes this Romantic ideal of the beautiful death as one characterized by the hope and fearlessness of an "enlightened deism" over

and against that of “clerical superstition” (411). The beautiful death is a death unencumbered by “the religious prejudices that distort it”<sup>77</sup> (410); it is “simple and familiar” and distinguished by a “narcotic sweetness”<sup>78</sup> and “wonderful peace” (409-11). It is not that the beautiful death for Ariès is necessarily devoid of religious or Christian elements and sentiment; rather, it is liberated from the religious superstition that he sees as breeding fear, anxiety and uncertainty.

On the other hand, the Evangelical model of the “good death”, was quite influential especially in the first half of the nineteenth century. This model included certain elements and practices that have caused some historians and social scientists to see it as stage-managed and artificial. The most conspicuous of these elements and practices included 1) death occurring at home with family members attendant at the deathbed; 2) final instructions, advice, and spiritual exhortation to family members and household servants from the dying person; and 3) a number of spiritual exercises and practices not the least of which would have been attendant prayers, hymns, and quotation or reading of Scripture. Finally, 4) an obligatory affirmation of salvation and general edifying devotional or spiritual declarations—the proverbial “last words”—were expected from the dying person. Ultimately, of course, the end of the good death was the certainty that the deceased had been ushered into the peace and rest of heaven.

Pat Jalland argues that the beautiful death and the good death are two distinct and competing models describing the attitudes and practices accompanying death in the nineteenth century and insists that Ariès has misread these attitudes and practices in nineteenth-

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<sup>77</sup> Ariès explains further, citing Denis Diderot et al. eds., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des artes, et des métiers* 28 vols. (Paris, 1759-72), s.v. “Mort”: “Did we not awaken these fears by means of these gloomy attentions and lugubrious ceremonies that in society precede death, we would not see it coming. [...] The fear of death is largely a result of habit, education, and prejudice” (Ariès 410).

<sup>78</sup> Ariès likes this phrase to describe ‘the beautiful death’ and borrows it from *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des artes, et des métiers*.

century Britain.<sup>79</sup> It should be observed, however, that the distinction drawn by Jalland is suggested by the fact that the beautiful death seems to be introspective, addressing death from the perspective of the dying, whereas the good death of Evangelicalism is more prescriptive and didactic, oriented more toward leaving the proper impression upon observers and survivors. From a theological perspective, then, these models are not so much competitors as complements, and so together they can help provide a more comprehensive picture of how families and individuals coped with death in the nineteenth century.

In light of these models of understanding and facing death, it is interesting to look at how Dickens portrayed death in both his writing and how he faced the death of loved ones in real life. In his fiction, it is not difficult to see elements of both the beautiful death and the good death when he portrayed death in any detail. For instance, it is easy to understand the death of Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* in terms of Ariès “beautiful death”, especially as it is represented in chapter seventy-one in which Dickens concerned himself with the presentation of Nell’s corpse.<sup>80</sup> All the Romantic elements are there and the entire narrative seems to be almost a textbook example of Ariès beautiful death. Nevertheless, the account of Nell’s death also possesses elements that are plainly characteristic of the good death of Evangelicalism. A careful consideration of Dickens’s portrayal of the death of Nell will show 1) how both of these models provide the framework with which Dickens thinks about death and which he uses to portray death; 2) how they overlap in Dickens’s portrayal of Nell’s

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<sup>79</sup> “If death in nineteenth-century Britain is to be characterized in terms of a single model or ideal,” Jalland insists, it should be the Evangelical ‘good death’ and not Ariès ‘beautiful death’” (8). Jalland argues that Ariès has based his conclusions regarding “the beautiful death” in nineteenth century England on the “limited and eccentric [...] writings of the Brontë family” (Jalland 8; Ariès 432-46) and has failed to recognize the sweeping influence of “the good death” of Evangelicalism.

<sup>80</sup> This act itself of the presentation of the corpse, or the laying-out of the body, was an important part in the process of death in the nineteenth century. Immediately following the death of a person, family members were especially keen to present and “dress” the corpse in an attractive manner for show. Jalland notes that this was performed by “someone familiar with the procedure”, usually “the nurse attending the final illness or by faithful family servants” (211). Dickens’s description of Nell’s deathbed, then, is not exaggerated sentimentalism, but rather, representative of typical concerns in the nineteenth century.

death; and 3) how together they help define and clarify the attitudes and practices surrounding death in the nineteenth century.

Dennis Walder has masterfully testified to the Romanticism that shaped the narrative of Nell's death (66-90, esp. 82-86), helpfully drawing our attention to Cattermole's familiar "At Rest" (the illustration of Nell's corpse on her deathbed) and the remarks of Q. D. Leavis on Cattermole's illustration (82). These Romantic features are the stuff that the beautiful death is made of, but Ariès also points to other more specific details that further signify the beautiful death. Facing death with hope and without fear, for instance, produce a happy death, happiness being, according to Ariès, one of "the two essential elements<sup>81</sup> of the romantic death" (436). The bachelor affirms old Trent's observation that Nell's "is a good and happy sleep" and that her waking will be "happy too. Happier than tongue can tell or heart of man conceive" (650). Moreover, it is remarked of Nell, "Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born" (654).

The image of restful and pleasant sleep is another important feature of the beautiful death. The calm countenance and even the smile of death produced what Ariès calls "the beauty of the dead" (419). Likewise, the "peace and perfect happiness" cited above were "imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose" (654).

There upon her little bed, she lay at rest. [...] She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death. (652)

And old Trent tells the schoolmaster, Mr. Marton, "There is a smile upon her young face now" (650).

Interestingly, there is, not unexpectedly, some overlap of the features of the beautiful

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<sup>81</sup> The second essential element of the beautiful death is family reunion after death, which we will consider below.

death with those of the good death of Evangelicalism. Those identified immediately above—the peaceful rest of sleep, the beautiful countenance, and perfect happiness—are equally as much a part of the good death as they are the beautiful death. So, too, would be the presence of flowers, inside or on the coffin or even thrown into the grave. Indeed, “After the beginning of the nineteenth century, flowers are becoming an important element of the ritual” (Ariès 419). Nell’s deathbed “was dressed with here and there some winter berries and some green leaves” (652-54) which Cattermole’s illustration seems to underplay. A photograph of the corpse of Lord Frederick Cavendish taken immediately after his assassination (Jalland, Plate 8) illustrates the lavish use of greens and flowers in the deathbed. The offering of dried flowers by Nell’s little friend and the “little wreath[s]” dropped in the grave (or the coffin) at the gravesite further highlight this feature.

As Dickens moves to chapter seventy-two, however, to his description of Nell’s last hours and her death, he seems to borrow features more characteristic of the good death. The unnamed company of attendants at Nell’s deathbed (655) corresponds to the family members and close friends who would be in attendance at the good death. So, too, acting as surrogate family, this unnamed company participated as if they were attendants at a good death. They read to her and talked to her; she addressed the company and requested parting kisses; she spoke of the two sisters of Miss Monflathers’s Boarding and Day Establishment and wished to extend her regards to them; she longed to see Kit and surely, to send her love to him. All of this corresponds directly to features of the good death of Evangelicalism (Jalland 25-38). Moreover, Nell “had never murmured or complained”, bearing up bravely in the face of death. Always lucid, “she never wandered in her mind but once, and that was at beautiful music which she said was in the air” (655). These, too, represent exactly features that Jalland cites as peculiar to the good death (36-37).

The point here is not to suggest that Dickens is somehow borrowing from or intentionally trying to imitate the beautiful death and the good death. Rather, he is simply portraying death and the deathbed as Christians in the first half of the nineteenth century would have experienced it, especially those of the middle and upper classes.<sup>82</sup> We can trace many of these same features, albeit to a lesser degree, in the death of Paul Dombey, for instance, or even Richard Carstone's death in *Bleak House*.<sup>83</sup> In each case, Dickens's deathbed scenes are generated from within the realm of conventional Victorian observances even though they may be characterized as Romantic or Evangelical. When seen against the backdrop of these nineteenth-century models of death, then, there is not much remarkable about Dickens's fictionalized accounts, even Nell's death. Far from being peculiarly Romantic or otherwise, Nell's death can be seen as a typical portrayal of a middle- and upper-class Christian death in the nineteenth century.<sup>84</sup>

Not all nineteenth-century Christians, of course, felt that the ideal of the Evangelical good death was a perfect model. There were those orthodox, or High Church, Anglicans

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<sup>82</sup> Obviously, Nell's death and the attendant circumstances serve larger purposes in the novel than merely reflecting social rites and practices. As Walder observes, "death and the consolation of death [...] becomes all-pervasive" as "the obviously religious subject" of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (66). But within a traditional depiction of Victorian practices and attitudes concerning death, Dickens deliberately attempts to comment on and redefine some of the religious conventions concerning the memory of the dead (itself, a primary concern and emphasis in the nineteenth century), the value of a life lived properly, and to a lesser degree, even the afterlife. Interestingly, he does so by calling our attention to the customary ritual of facing death. The fact that Nell's death is portrayed as middle or upper-class is another issue altogether, revealing much about Dickens's own values, attitudes, and practices concerning death.

<sup>83</sup> Note, for instance in Paul Dombey's death: 1) the presence of family and friends, including the doctor, Sir Parker Peps and Paul's old nurse (237-38, 39-40); 2) Paul's fearlessness (237); 3) his happiness (238); 4) his good-byes and his instructions to his father (240); 5) his heavenly vision (241). Carstone's death is much more nuanced, not to mention incidental, but note, nevertheless, 1) the presence of family and doctor; 2) Richard's handsome appearance; 3) his making things right with Mr. Jarndyce and his begging forgiveness of Ada; 4) the smile that "irradiated his face" (763).

<sup>84</sup> The critical assessments of Nell's death as mawkish and overwrought are called into question by understanding it against the backdrop of the attitudes and practices of the nineteenth century Christian conventions surrounding death. For a reading public so emotionally involved in the narrative, as was the case here, and for whom Nell's death was "real", a good death was necessary and hoped for. Far from being mawkish, Nell's death would have brought closure and consolation to the "family", the reading public, in a typical and expected manner. To see Nell's death otherwise would be anachronistic and misinformed.

who saw in the idea of the good death of Evangelicalism certain excesses that seemed to lack the dignity and solemnity that they felt should attend death. In F.W. Robertson's view,<sup>85</sup> as reported by Jalland, "The true Christian death was signified by a calm fearlessness rather than ecstatic 'parade'" (24). To be sure, the Evangelical ideal was still the prevailing model, but orthodox Anglicans did not subscribe to it indiscriminately or without occasional adaptations. In particular, a nuanced, Anglicanized version of the good death would have been more restrained especially in its avoidance of cant and exaggerated spirituality.<sup>86</sup> It is this Anglicanized version of the good death that we see not only in Dickens's fiction, as we have already observed, but also in his experience of the loss of a loved one.

Dickens, of course, was greatly shaken by the death of his beloved sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth. It is a bit more difficult to read exactly how the death of Dora, his ninth child and third daughter, affected Dickens.<sup>87</sup> In both cases, however, what evidence there is indicates that Dickens seems to have responded as a typical nineteenth-century Anglican in keeping with the conventions of the good death, one that bore more the restraint of an Anglican stripe than the excess of an Evangelical one. Of particular significance is the chain of letters that Dickens wrote announcing the deaths of both Mary (1837) and Dora (1851) to friends and relations. As Jalland notes, such letters played an important role: "Victorian Christians were eager to learn the details of family deathbed scenes, to be reassured that the death was a good one and their loved one truly saved" (30). According to Jalland, these let-

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<sup>85</sup> Robertson was a liberal Broad Churchman, but in his statement here, represents the view of High Churchmen as well. In this, as well as in other issues, Broad Churchmen would have been aligned more with orthodox Anglicanism over and against Evangelicalism.

<sup>86</sup> While Jalland correctly acknowledges, "Evangelicalism touched all denominations and all sections of the Church of England, including even the High Church" (20), she goes on to observe that "the rapturous triumphalism of the Evangelical model, including, uplifting last words and joyful signs of grace" were not elements particularly appreciated by orthodox Anglicans (33). Another feature more peculiar to orthodox Anglicans would have "related to the role of the clergyman and the significance attached to the sacraments" (30-1). So, while the Evangelical model of the good death prevailed even among High Churchmen, it was modified at certain points by Anglican practices and tastes.

<sup>87</sup> Dora died suddenly on 14 April 1851. She was 8 months old.

ters were the equivalent of what a telephone call might be today (9). It will be worthwhile to cite Dickens's letter to an unknown correspondent (probably one of Mary's relations) at some length:

Why should I say more than that she was taken ill without an instant's warning on the night of Saturday the 7<sup>th</sup> of May, almost immediately after she retired to bed—that although every effort was made to save her, and no danger apprehended until nearly the very last, she sank under the attack and died—died in such a calm and gentle sleep, that although I had held her in my arms for some time before, when she was certainly living (for she swallowed a little brandy from my hand) I continued to support her lifeless form, long after her soul had fled to Heaven. (*Pilgrim Letters* 1: 268)

Dickens includes the details of Mary's death, which the correspondent would have desired and expected. The chain of letters that Dickens wrote to various recipients were of much the same character (*Pilgrim Letters* 1: 259-68).

Of course, Dickens's comments regarding Mary's dying in "such a calm and gentle sleep" and that "her soul had fled to Heaven" have a notable affinity with the good death. So, too, Dickens's words to Richard Johns, 31 May 1837 that Mary was now "in that happy World for which God adapted her better than for this" (*Pilgrim Letters* 1: 264) and his assurance to the unnamed relative mentioned above that he knew "that before a single care of life had wounded her pure heart, she had passed quietly away to an immortality of happiness and joy" (*Pilgrim Letters* 1: 268). Here Dickens is appealing to the accepted thought of his day to help explain and cope with the death of a youth (Mary was 17 when she died): that God in His mercy would take a child to protect it from any future grief or harm. Jalland observes, "This consolation affirmed that dead children were spared the suffering of a sinful world and were permitted to retain the relative innocence of childhood" (123).

In some ways, the preceding examples appear to indicate merely what is obvious and ordinary in Dickens's practice and attitude toward death, and to some degree, that is the point. Both Dickens's fictionalized portrayals of death and his response in his personal life

to the death of a loved one were clearly consistent with characteristic Christian attitudes and practices of the mid-nineteenth century.

#### §4.2 HEAVEN

Forster informs us of a dinner party at Dickens's Devonshire Terrace in May of 1849 which included among other guests, Dickens's close and admired friend, the Unitarian minister, Edward Tagart. At one point during the evening, Forster tells us that Tagart, seated next to Dickens, began assaulting him with "various metaphysical questions in regard to heaven and such like" (Forster 2: 100), an interrogation under which, Forster leads us to believe, Dickens was neither comfortable nor patient. Before Dickens uttered any response, however, W.M. Thackeray, also at the dinner, rescued him with a bit of levity borrowed from a mutual friend, William C. Macready, and so we never learn how Dickens may have responded to the particular questions of Tagart. Nor do we know exactly what those questions may have been. It is not improbable, however, considering both that Tagart was a Unitarian and that "questions in regard to heaven and such like" were the burning religious issues of the day, that Tagart's questions may well have included questions of judgment and eternal destiny. Whatever the case, even though we have no recorded response by Dickens to Tagart's questions, it should not prove beyond our reach to reconstruct a fundamental outline of Dickens's convictions and ideas about "heaven and such like".

As we have already noted, it was commonly held among most Protestant Christians, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, that upon death, final judgment was passed and one's eternal destiny—in heaven or hell—was assigned. While a certain amount of anxiety generally persisted in regard to this final judgment, the realization of a good death was taken as assurance that the deceased had passed to heaven. Precisely how such salvation was accomplished and secured was disputed among Christians in the nineteenth century.

This issue of salvation will be the subject of a later chapter, in which it will be discussed in some detail. Here we need only point out that no matter what the means of salvation, its end was widely understood as escaping consignment to hell and securing deliverance to heaven. Obviously, it was heaven as their eternal dwelling place upon which nineteenth-century Christians set their hope. In this regard, Dickens was no different. To appreciate more fully Dickens's understanding of heaven as it emerges from *TLOL*, we will consider it in light of both popular and academic nineteenth-century Anglican thought about heaven and the afterlife.

Nineteenth-century views of the nature of heaven ran the gamut. At one end of the spectrum, heaven was conceived of as a sublime and inscrutable state of being; at the other, it was, in Michael Wheeler's apt description, "often more like a middle-class suburb in the sky" (121). Apart from scholarly theological discussion, most nineteenth-century Christians understood heaven to be a place that lay somewhere between these two extremes, although situated much nearer Wheeler's "middle-class suburb".

While he held only moderately to the view of heaven as a state of being, John Howard Hinton's comments are representative and noteworthy in terms of disclosing some of the underlying issues that concerned theologians, and to a lesser degree the laity, in this regard. Speaking of "the state of the righteous" after death, Hinton wrote:

As the abode of finite beings, heaven must of necessity be a place; but we apprehend it will not be earth, and we cannot imagine a mere locality, however glorious, can constitute its essential happiness. It is as a state that it is blessed; a state of enlarged knowledge, of consummate purity, of intimate friendship with God, of sacred activity, and gracious reward. Such is the true import of the metaphorical language employed by the inspired writers, and such a state is obviously adapted to yield the brightest conceivable felicity to a man rightly disposed; [...] The blessedness of this state is augmented by the release from all the sorrows and dangers of this world, and crowned by the assurance of its uninterrupted and endless duration. (198-99)

While Hinton's thought here suggests the view that heaven is a state of being, he is not

ready to surrender wholly the view that conceives of heaven as a spatial locale. Neither is he ready, as his further discussion indicates, to relinquish the attribute of personality of those in heaven, although he does not go so far as to describe heaven as community among the saints.

Heaven as a state of being was considered, then, a serious point of discussion by some theologians and scholars, but in the end, proved too metaphysical and too impersonal to commend itself to the popular mind. Consequently, the two most important models of heaven in the nineteenth century, as Wheeler suggests further, became “heaven as worship and heaven as community” (126). In other words, one model represented heaven as a place (or state) of eternal worship; the other represented heaven as a community in which earthly friendships and familial relationships were resumed, but in a more purified or perfected state.<sup>88</sup> Tending toward an example of the former, Adam Clarke describes the inheritance of the righteous:

It is neither an earthly portion nor a heavenly portion, but God himself who is to be their portion. It is not heaven they are to inherit; it is GOD, who is infinitely greater and more glorious than heaven itself. With such powers has God created the soul of man, that nothing less than himself can be a sufficient and satisfactory portion of the mind of this most astonishing creature. (433)

Clarke is not ready to admit a static or monotonous heavenly existence, however. “Heaven,” he continues, “is the region where the spirits of just men made perfect live, thrive, and eternally expand their powers in the services, and to the glory, of Him from whom they have derived their being” (434). Clarke seems to be attempting to answer the criticism of those who would insist that a heaven in which worship was the exclusive activity would render heaven unappealingly and uncharacteristically flat and one-dimensional. Still, he is careful to main-

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<sup>88</sup> Wheeler does not suggest that this distinction is absolute nor should be taken to be. The distinction is made to illustrate the basic orientations that shaped nineteenth-century views of heaven.

tain an emphatic theocentric conception and description of heaven in which the appreciation and declaration of the fullness of God's being is the central preoccupation of the inhabitants there.

Even C.R. Muston in his *Recognition in the World to Come or, Christian Friendship on Earth Perpetuated in Heaven* (1830) seeks to maintain this theocentric emphasis. Muston, whose central purpose is to argue recognition and friendship in heaven, writes:

In forming our conceptions of heaven, it must be of great importance to remember, that it is a state of perfect rectitude, and that the felicity of the redeemed will spring chiefly from their communion with God, for which they will be fitted by conformity to his holy image. (74)

Despite the concessions of those like Clarke and the obligatory qualifications by Muston, those who understood heaven as community, Muston himself one of them, insisted that a heaven given exclusively to the worship of God suggested a rather impersonal state of being and a static, seemingly monotonous, heavenly existence.

Richard Whately, the Oxford philosopher and liberal Anglican, was another who argued that personal recognition and Christian friendship would extend to the heavenly state. In a series of pastoral lectures to his Halesworth congregation in 1829, Whately challenged those who questioned friendship and the recognition of loved ones in heaven. In one of those lectures he remarked:

All that is suitable to this world alone, will be removed from that other: what is evil will be taken away;— what is imperfect will be made complete;—what is good will be extended and exalted; —but there is no reason to suppose that any further change will be made than is necessary to qualify the faithful for that improved state. (213-14)

For Whately, friendships and relationships were features of an earthly existence that God would extend to a heavenly existence; and as God was the author of both worlds, Whately argued, it would be reasonable to suppose that what was legitimately and righteously enjoyed by Christians in this present world “will be immensely heightened” in the next (213-

14). So, arguing against the view that rejected recognition and friendship in heaven, Whately concluded, “As it is, I not only can see nothing, either in reason or Scripture, that compels us to take this uninteresting and repulsive view of a future state; but, on the contrary, I see strong reasons for entertaining quite opposite notions” (221).

In the end, while not entirely discarding the worship aspect of heaven, the popular mind would gravitate toward the ideas represented by Whately and Muston, and would emphasize heaven primarily as a relational community. Muston’s concise and explicit statement articulates the view that seems to have sustained popular thought along these lines:

To this end it is necessary,—that those between whom this holy relation [Christian friendship] subsists should survive the present life,—that the same local destination should await them,—that they should recognize each other,—that they should retain the affections which now unite them,—and that social preferences should be consistent with the circumstances of their new condition. (60)

Amidst all the varied and nuanced theological formulations of the day, then, the popular mind conceived of heaven simply as a place of happiness, peace and rest for the saved, and most importantly, the place of eternal reunion with family and friends.

Francis Knight identified the trend that began in the 1830s and that was reflected in popular devotional literature, “that emphasized heaven as the eternal home of Christians” (57) and that loved ones who had died would be “reunited with other relatives, and would continue family life in a perfected form” (51). Wheeler supports Knight’s observations when he suggests, “Perhaps the most characteristic Victorian ideas of heaven are of a place in which family reunions and the recognition of friends are to be achieved after death, and (more radically Romantic) of a site in which lovers are reunited as couples” (120-21). It is this popular view of heaven as the place of family reunions and friendships to which Dickens was drawn and that is reflected in his writing and thought.

Dickens’s concept of heaven was quite straightforward. There is little in his thought

that could be construed as even hinting that heaven was a state of being and virtually nothing that would suggest to our minds that worship was the exclusive activity in heaven. For Dickens, the two things that mattered most about heaven were, first, that he would be there after death and second, that he would enjoy reunion with loved ones there, especially family members. It should be noted, however, that in Dickens's mind heaven was not profaned by its character as community nor was it any less holy or pure for being the locale of family reunion. Just as Dickens recognized the transcendence of God's being and character, so he recognized heaven as the source from which the holiness and purity of domestic affection and familial love was derived, sanctified as it were by God Himself. Indeed, home and family were two things that, for Dickens, derived their essential quality from heavenly resources.<sup>89</sup>

To suggest, then, as Dickens does, that home and family bear a heavenly stamp, implies a subtle but crucial distinction. That is, earthly ideas of home and family do not establish and determine their heavenly nature. Rather, heaven infuses its character and quality into home and family, imparting to them value and sanctity. More often than not, this distinction is implied. On occasion, however, it is articulated explicitly. Just over midway through *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens pauses to "linger [...] for an instant to remark that if ever household affections and loves are graceful things, they are graceful in the poor" (363). As Dickens begins to clarify Kit's affections for his old home over Abel Cottage, Finchley, he insists that Kit's love of home and family "are of the true metal and bear the

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<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Muston argued, as did Whately to a lesser degree, that Christian friendship, upon which home and family relationships were founded, was the highest form of relationship attainable in this world and that it would continue in the next, being brought there to its intended perfection (Muston 54-57; 140-44). Even William Branks in his *Heaven Our Home. We Have No Saviour But Jesus, No Home But Heaven* (1863) maintained a similar emphasis, albeit in a more popular and sentimental form.

stamp of Heaven”; indeed, Kit “has his love of home from God” (363).<sup>90</sup> Here, Dickens points to Kit’s affection for his home as born in heaven where it derives its nature and quality from God. It is not Kit’s natural affection and instinctive love that give substance to these ideas in heaven. Rather, it is the love and affection born of God and bearing the stamp of heaven that sanctifies his love of home and family with heavenly substance and character.

Muston identifies a comparable distinction that may be helpful in illuminating Dickens’s idea. It is not, Muston would argue, “the instinctive and natural affections which constitute the basis of the domestic life with all its endearing charities and relations” that are to shape our thoughts of heavenly relations, for “it would be absurd to suppose that the consecrating impress of eternity is stamped upon them” (51). Instead, there is a special bond of intimacy in Christian friendship born of heaven that “may be blended with the endearing relation of parent and child, husband and wife, brother and sister, and impart to them its sacred influence and exalted associations” (55). Dickens seems to reason along these same lines.

Within this distinction, Dickens attributes to heaven an underplayed but identifiably exalted character, which again, is part of the finer texture of his work. Quite often in Dickens, heaven receives its exalted character from the simple fact that it is frequently used as a form of *antonomasia* for God.<sup>91</sup> The rhetorical effect of this, of course, is to attribute to

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<sup>90</sup> That Dickens situates his discussion here within a contrast between rich and poor is incidental to the larger issue of home and family to which I want to draw attention. For Dickens, the poor man’s “rude hut” and “humble hearth” are the exemplary models for rich or for poor. Thus, the love of home that comes from God bears the stamp of heaven and is the standard to which all men and women should aspire.

<sup>91</sup> This, of course, is exclusive of exclamations such as “Heaven forbid!”, “Heaven be thanked!”, etc. Apart from such usage, however, Dickens regularly uses “heaven” in place of “God”. This is particularly frequent in *Tale of Two Cities*. For instance, “He embraced her, solemnly commended her to Heaven, and humbly thanked Heaven for having bestowed her on him” (198); “O pity us, kind Heaven, and help us! Look out, look out, and see if we are pursued” (371-72). But note also, *A Christmas Carol*: “It may be, that in the sight of Heaven, you are more worthless and less fit to live than millions like this poor man’s child” (CB 47); *Little Dorrit*: “Little Dorrit seemed the least, the quietest, and weakest of Heaven’s creatures” (103); *Martin Chuzzlewit*: “Don’t speak to me, John. Heaven is very good to us. I—” Tom could find no further utterance, but

heaven much the same dignity and holiness that is attributed to God Himself. When Dickens addresses heaven as a reality, the object of hope and the ultimate destiny of Christians, he seems to invest it with a simple dignity and reverence based on his concept of its solemn and divine character. As such, Dickens's heaven bears the stamp of God's gracious nature and beneficent character, Jesus' welcoming presence, and the peaceful innocence of the humble who alone are the inhabitants there.

Dickens reflects some of this sacred character of heaven, not to mention the popular hope of heaven, in the opening paragraph of *TLOL* when he writes to his children, "what a good place Heaven is", and that it is a place "where we hope to go, and all to meet each other after we are dead, and there be happy always together". Importantly, Dickens makes clear that heaven is such a good place and one in which we can be happy precisely because of Jesus' presence there (11). In *TLOL*, heaven is a place where God's merciful forgiveness will welcome all who seek it (61) and where "none but those who are as humble as little children shall enter" (58). Dickens continues to express the obvious and accepted popular notions in *TLOL* in identifying heaven as the abode of God (e.g., 24, 53, 122), the abode of angels (e.g., 13, 115), and the present abode of Jesus (e.g., 11, 53, 122). Moreover, it is also a place of comfort (e.g., 27, 74), happiness (e.g., 11, 24, 65), and peace (e.g., 128). For Dickens, heaven is that hope to which all those who suffer through the hardships and sorrows of this earthly life might appeal. It is "The world that sets this [world] right" (*BH* 763). He certainly seems to strike this note when he writes in *TLOL* concerning Jesus' selection of the Twelve from among the poor:

That the Poor might know [...] that heaven was made for them as well as for the rich, and that God makes no difference between those who wear good clothes and

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left the room; and Ruth went after him" (766); *The Haunted Man*: "'Pardon me, great Heaven!' said Redlaw, lifting up his eyes, 'for having thrown away thine own high attribute!'" (*CB* 393).

those who go barefoot and in rags. The most miserable, the most ugly, deformed, wretched creatures that live, will be bright Angels in Heaven if they are good here on earth. (27-28)

Similarly, we learn that Lazarus the beggar found comfort from his earthly hardship in heaven (74); the thief on the cross was granted forgiveness in Paradise (109); and Christian martyrs would find rest and vindication in heaven (127). Such a heaven was truly Dickens's ultimate hope, not just for the poor, but for all who were Christians. And it was surely this hope of heaven that brought consolation to Dickens when he faced the loss of a loved one or when he sought to help others come to terms with such a loss.

Much that we have previously considered in regard to death has already hinted at Dickens's thoughts about heaven and the afterlife, but a more focused attention to Dickens's facing death in his personal life can provide an even clearer picture of his understanding of heaven. As much as he was affected by Mary's death, he seemed able to meet his overwhelming grief with consolation and certainty in the hope of heaven. We have already noted above that Dickens had written, probably to a relative of Mary's, that upon Mary's death, he had "continued to support her lifeless form long after her soul had fled to Heaven" and that "she had passed quietly away to an immortality of happiness and joy". His most candid, and perhaps most profound, words upon Mary's death, however, are found in his diary, a short-lived project he commenced on 1 January 1838. In the entry of 14 January, borrowing the words of Sir Walter Scott, from Scott's own contemplations upon the death of his wife, Dickens wrote regarding Mary and the afterlife:

She is sentient and conscious of my emotions *somewhere*—where, we cannot tell, how, we cannot tell; yet would I not at this moment renounce the mysterious yet certain hope that I shall see her in a better world, for all that this world can give me. (Pilgrim *Letters* 1: 632)

These words are rather significant for a number of reasons. First, they seem to represent very candid words from Dickens about death, heaven and immortality. He opened the

entry by writing:

I have not done it yet, nor will I; but say what rises to my lips—my mental lips at least—without reserve. No other eyes will see it, while mine are open in life, and although I daresay I shall be ashamed of a good deal in it, I should like to look over it at the year's end. (641)

Reading these words leaves one with the impression that Dickens's was speaking forthrightly in the privacy of his own heart and mind, and that we are thus reading quite intimate and genuine thoughts. Second, his words of Mary and the afterlife represent a genuine hope of heaven even in the midst of heartfelt grief. Even in his persistent sorrow, Dickens was confident that Mary was in "a better world" and that he would join her there upon his own death. Third, while these words were originally penned by Sir Walter Scott, Dickens has taken them here as his own. He writes: "In Scott's diary, which I have been looking at this morning, there are thoughts which have been mine by day and by night, in good spirits and bad, since Mary died" (641). Perhaps the slight alteration of Scott's words (see *Pilgrim Letters* 1: 632) suggests Dickens's personal involvement with the sentiments expressed.

Fourth, and significantly, these words attribute that quality to heaven that makes it at once an impenetrable mystery and yet a certain and stabilizing hope. Undoubtedly, Dickens accepted the common and popular ideas about heaven, as we have shown above. Beyond such fundamental ideas, however, Dickens was not ready to speculate. Instead, he was able to acquiesce to the mysteries of life and death as part of God's larger providence. In a passage of *Little Dorrit*, Dickens attempts to create an idyllic, pastoral setting for a brief scene of Arthur Clennam's contemplations on life, which scene is described as being "fraught with solemn mystery of life and death" (325). Similarly, Mr. Meagles, referring earlier in the novel to death and the afterlife as "that mystery in which we all have our equal share" (32), reflects the same notions in the same language. For Dickens, there were inscrutable mysteries in seeking to come to terms with death and the afterlife, particularly in Mary's case; but

the reality and hope of heaven, in his thinking, were nevertheless unquestioned certainties.

It is with that same certainty of hope that Dickens met the death of his daughter, Dora. Dora was eight months old when she died quite suddenly and unexpectedly on 14 April 1851. Dickens was rather reserved in expression when he wrote to Angela Burdett Coutts on the day Dora was buried. He briefly recounted for Miss Coutts the circumstances of Dora's death and added simply, "We laid the child in her grave today. And it is part of the goodness and mercy of God that if we could call her back to life, now, with a wish, would not do it" (*Pilgrim Letters* 6: 356). He wrote quite similar words to F. M. Evans (6: 355), and on 19 April 1851, to Mrs. Henry Austin, "We have buried our poor little pet, and can quite quietly (I hope) entrust her to God" (6: 357). Dickens's language here reflects sentiments which seem to have helped shape the words of the inscription on Mary's gravestone: Young Beautiful And Good / God In His Mercy / Numbered Her With His Angels / At the Early Age Of / Seventeen (*Pilgrim Letters* 1: 259, note 1).<sup>92</sup> Likewise, when Dr. F. H. Deane requested of Dickens an inscription for a gravestone for Deane's son, Dickens wrote in part: This is the Grave of a Little Child / Whom God in his goodness / Called to a Bright Eternity / When he was very young" (*Pilgrim Letters* 3: 186-87). Such words remind us that Dickens took seriously the belief of nineteenth-century Christians that there was consolation in the fact that God in His mercy received children to heaven to keep them from some grief or sorrow or danger of which He alone could be cognizant. James Hervey, in his popular *Meditations and Contemplations* (1808) expressed it this way:

Consider this, ye mourning parents, and dry up your tears. Why should you lament, that your little ones are crowned with victory, before the sword is drawn, or the

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<sup>92</sup> Note, incidentally, the echoes and foreshadowings here of Nell's death. On Mary's gravestone, the words "young, beautiful and good" are the same that Dickens uses to describe Nell (*OCS* 657); the schoolmaster says of Nell's death that, "If one deliberate wish expressed in solemn terms above this bed could call her back to life, which of us would utter it!" (654) reflect the sentiments that Dickens wrote to Angela Burdett Coutts upon Dora's death.

conflict begun?—Perhaps, the supreme Disposer of events foresaw some inevitable snare of temptations forming, or some dreadful storm of adversity impending. And why should you be so dissatisfied, with that kind precaution, which housed your pleasant plant, and removed into shelter a tender flower, before the thunders roared: before the lightnings flew: before the tempest poured its rage?—O remember! They are not lost, but *taken way from the evil to come*. (10)

It is reasonable to suggest that Dickens felt what these words expressed as he contemplated Dora's death and Mary's as well. Indeed, it was to these same sentiments he alluded to console and encourage F. H. Deane. Such words, and such sentiments as we have seen throughout our consideration of Dickens's concept of heaven, are not the mere words of convention and platitude. Rather, in light of our technique of genre lock, such words and sentiments show that heaven was a real and substantial conviction, an integral element in Dickens's personal eschatology. His teaching to his children about heaven in *TLOL* was not simply the stuff of which fairy tales and happy endings are made, but seemed to be the certain hope that sustained him in the face of death, a hope he wished to impart to his children.

In a letter of consolation to the Reverend James White at the death of White's child, Dickens wrote: "Our blessed Christian hopes do not shut out the belief of love and remembrance still enduring there [in heaven] but irradiate it and make it sacred" (*Pilgrim Letters* 5: 297). This hope of love and remembrance, of family reunion and friendship rekindled was the hope that Dickens embraced and felt. Such a hope was not, for him, simply passive resignation to an unavoidable fate. Rather, it was a willing submission to the living hope of the beneficent providence of God, the heavenly Father.

#### §4.3 JUDGMENT AND HELL

Discussing early Tractarian eschatology in his *Hell and the Victorians*, Geoffrey Rowell wrote of John Henry Newman:

From the time of his first conversion, as he acknowledged in the *Apologia*, he had held “with a full inward assent and belief the doctrine of eternal punishment, as delivered by our Lord Himself, in as true a sense...as that of eternal happiness”, though he had always looked for ways of making the idea less terrible to his imagination. (92)

In some ways, much the same thing could be said about Dickens. Although it is unlikely Dickens held as confidently and firmly to a doctrine of eternal punishment as did Newman, as I will seek to demonstrate below, Dickens clearly held to an eschatological view that included a concept of negative judgment. At the same time, like Newman, Dickens seems to have certainly “looked for ways of making the idea less terrible in his imagination”.

Our consideration here of Dickens’s views on the negative aspects of personal eschatology will reveal that his worldview included God’s judgment on sin, punishment in hell, and an unseen world of malevolent spirits. The ideas of a literal hell, not often associated with Dickens’s thought, and an unseen spiritual world, are a bit elusive in his larger work. They are, however, ideas that are not entirely absent or ignored there, and they find reasonably clear expression in *TLOL*. Dickens’s ideas about God’s justice beyond earthly existence in a “world that sets this one right”, his disdain for injustice and oppression, and as we will see, his inclusion of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus suggest that, although he may not have liked the idea of eternal punishment, some form of eschatological judgment and punishment was a necessary element of his personal eschatology. That is, in order to vindicate the destitute and oppressed, or those who have been the victims of heinous crimes, an eschatological judgment and punishment of some kind was necessary for those hardened individuals who through indifference, malevolence, self-interest and greed defaced God’s image in their fellow creatures. While it is difficult to come to any decisive conclusion regarding Dickens’s view of eternal punishment, what he has to say about evil and God’s judgment on sin would lead one to believe that for him, some form of retribution beyond

the grave was part of God's justice.

Continuing our approach of using *TLOL* as our index and reference point, we will consider three explicit passages in *TLOL*, in which Dickens presents the influence of evil spirits or demons, the reality of punishment in hell, and the assurance of Christ's return to judge the world. In each case, the three passages represent the only occurrences of their respective ideas in *TLOL*. The significance of these passages, however, lies in part in the very fact that Dickens chose to include them in *TLOL*. Especially in the relating of the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus and the inclusion of the story of the Gerasene demoniac, there are no external necessities or narrative requirements in his account of the Gospel story that demand the inclusion of these episodes in *TLOL*. They are included simply on the basis of Dickens's free editorial choice.

Similarly, his shaping of the account of the Ascension of Jesus with its explicit declaration of Jesus coming in judgment bears the mark of his editorial hand. That Dickens, as sole editor and composer of *TLOL*, chose to include these episodes and present them as he did is telling. Together, these stories indicate strongly that Dickens's ideas of judgment, retribution, hell, and demons, are nuanced in ways that are more conventional and that have not typically been understood to be part of his worldview. Our consideration of these stories in *TLOL* and the further development of their themes in his other work will provide an illuminating view of Dickens's personal eschatology.

Clearly, for Dickens, as for the majority of nineteenth-century Christians, the hope of heaven was a sustaining force in the contemplation of death. Nevertheless, hell and judgment were realities that could not be easily dismissed or ignored. Dickens was by no means one to close off the hope of heaven to any person. Yet, at the same time, "there are some people (men and women both, unfortunately)," says the landlady of the Break of Day, "who

have no good in them—none.” They are “people who have no human heart” and who are “enemies of the human race” (*LD* 131). Dickens was not reticent to acknowledge that divine retribution awaited such people after death. Our consideration, then, of the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, of the Gerasene Demoniac, and of Jesus’ Ascension in *TLOL* will provide the foundation upon which such claims are substantiated. Moreover, as we extend our investigation of his thought accordingly to the larger body of his work, we will find, once again, these ideas are consistently traceable and help to form the contours of a reasonably developed theology.

Dickens is really quite clear on eschatological judgment both in *TLOL* and in the larger corpus of his work. In *TLOL*, he establishes quite clearly in his account of the ascension of Jesus that Jesus will return one day to judge the world. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in *TLOL* establishes also that there is a judgment immediately following death. Dickens nowhere discusses or even grapples with the problem of the intermediate state between one’s death and the final judgment of Christ.<sup>93</sup> That is, he does not try to explain the occurrence of two judgments (one immediately following death and one at the coming of

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<sup>93</sup> A full treatment of this issue, a significant one for nineteenth-century Protestants, is beyond the scope of our consideration here. This much, however, might be said: The basic question was whether the deceased exist in a conscious, sensual state or a state of “sleep” between death and final judgment. Isaac Watts, in *The World to Come: or Discourses on the Joys or Sorrows of Departed Souls at Death, and the glory or Terror of the Resurrection* (1816), describes the view of those who reject the idea of a conscious existence, observing “that the whole time from death to the resurrection is but the sleep of a night, and the dead shall awake out of their graves, utterly ignorant and insensible of the long distance of time that hath past since their death. One year or one thousand years will be the same thing to them” (xiii). The consensus view, however, based primarily on 2 Corinthians 5.8, seemed to be that the deceased were in a state of conscious existence. John Howard Hinton summarizes, “There appears sufficient reason to believe that departed spirits do not slumber. Their consciousness and activity, far from being impaired, must be considered as greatly invigorated by emancipation from the body; and each, according to its character, as entering at once into a corresponding state of joy or woe” (193). Jeremy Taylor, in his *The Great Exemplar* (1818 imprint) appeals to Jude 6 to imply that the wicked also are in a state of conscious existence immediately after death (347). This intermediate state is not properly heaven or hell but rather “it renders us absent from the body, it will bring us home to Christ, and to a nearer fruition to him” (Whitby 2: 209), and “is sufficient to begin a heaven or hell immediately after death” (Watts xiv). See also on the common view: Olshausen, 3: 241. Based on Dickens’s inclusions in *TLOL*, his belief that his beloved Mary was “sentient somewhere”, and what we have noted generally of his concept of the afterlife, it would seem that Dickens held this consensus view. For a helpful discussion, see Michael Wheeler’s discussion in his *Heaven, Hell, and the Victorians* (68-83).

Christ) or to clarify their relationship to one another; nor does he seem to feel the need to do so. He simply accepts the judgments as they are recorded in the Scriptures and that eschatological judgment is a reality in the purposes of God.

As Dickens brings the narrative proper to a close in *TLOL* (121), he concludes with a succinct summary of Jesus' post-resurrection teaching culminating with a description of Jesus' ascension. It makes sense that he depends largely on Acts 1.1-11 for this conclusion. Yet, the fact that he could have just as effectively appealed to the Synoptics (especially Luke), which contain most of the material he reproduces in his narrative, makes his use of Acts stand out. Dickens begins his harmonization of this episode with the statement taken from 1 Corinthians 15.6 on Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to 500 of his followers at once. The rest of the account as Dickens reports it is found in Acts 1.1-11 harmonized with the Synoptics. That Jesus conducted "his disciples [...] as far as Bethany" is peculiar to Luke (24.44) and that he "took His place at the right hand of God" is reported only in Mark (16.19). In his description of the actual ascension of Jesus, Dickens seems to depend entirely on Acts. Only in Acts do we learn that Jesus "ascended in a cloud" (1:9), that two angels appeared to the disciples as they watched Jesus ascend to heaven (1.10), and that the angels announced Jesus' return (1.11).

The most significant element of Dickens account of the event, however, is the statement of the angels that Jesus would one day return "to judge the world". The simple phrase "to judge the world" is of considerable significance to our discussion for two reasons: 1) It implies an eschatological judgment at which Jesus would preside as judge; and 2) most significantly, the phrase is an interpolation by Dickens that is not in the text of Acts or the Synoptic accounts. Without question, the larger theological implications are there, but the statement itself is not. It is as though Dickens wanted to make clear what was implicit. In

this way, Dickens has highlighted the idea of eschatological judgment and the role of Jesus as judge.

Such an emphasis is not unique to Dickens, however. Adam Clarke in *The Gospels Harmonized* (1836) similarly harmonizes Acts 1.6-12 with the Synoptic accounts of the ascension of Jesus (495-97). The anonymous author of *Gospel Stories* includes for her young readers a rendering similar to Dickens's when she writes, "A few disciples only witnessed our Lord's ascension from earth to heaven; but at His second coming He will descend amidst the assembled world to judgment, and 'every eye shall see Him'" (201). In their annotated edition of the Bible (1817), George D'Oyly and Richard Mant include comments from both Richard Hurd and Dr. Henry Hammond to the same effect. Hammond comments on Acts 1.11 paraphrasing the message of the Angels that Jesus "shall one day come to judge the world in the same glorious manner in which He has now ascended into heaven" (4: II, 12S3). Hurd adds:

This same Jesus, who is thus gone up from you for a time into heaven, will come again with the same, or even additional glory, to judge the world in righteousness, to see what improvements ye have made of all that He hath done and suffered for you, and to fix your final doom according to your respective deserts or miscarriages. (4: II, 12S3)

Dickens's highlighting, then, of Jesus as the appointed judge at an eschatological judgment was consistent with the popular theological ideas of the day. Moreover, it establishes eschatological judgment as a significant aspect of Dickens's personal eschatology.

Such an idea of eschatological judgment is a clear theme in Dickens and is found consistently in his thought through most of his writing. Sometimes it seems as though Dickens mentions eschatological judgment almost incidentally as though it were a common fact that he took for granted. In a letter Dickens wrote to the *Daily News*, 16 March 1846, concerning his views on capital punishment, he accepts eschatological judgment as an inevitable

event in which all men meet on level ground: “When the judge’s faltering voice delivers sentence, how awfully the prisoner and he confront each other; two mere men, destined one day, however far removed from one another at this time, to stand alike as suppliants at the bar of God” (*Misc. Papers* 35). Dickens repeats this same notion fifteen years later in *Great Expectations* in his description of the sentence of death being passed on Magwitch:

The sun was striking in at the great windows of the court, through the glittering drops of rain upon the glass, and it made a broad shaft of light between the two-and-thirty and the Judge, linking both together, and perhaps reminding some among the audience, how both were passing on, with absolute equality, to the greater Judgment that knoweth all things and cannot err. (*GE* 467)

When David admonishes Martha for her self-deprecation and despair over her lack of goodness, he, too, does so in the context of eschatological judgment: “In the name of the great Judge,” said I, “before whom you and all of us must stand at His dread time, dismiss that terrible idea! We can all do some good, if we will” (*DC* 652).

Theologically, this eschatological judgment will result in the formal verdict of one’s eternal destiny, either the gift of heaven or consignment to hell, depending upon one’s spiritual state at the time of judgment. Adam Clarke, in his *Christian Theology* provides a summary outline of this final judgment as generally understood in Dickens’s day.<sup>94</sup> Clarke describes two phases of this judgment. First, “Jesus, in all the dignity and splendour of his eternal Majesty, shall descend from heaven to the mid region, what the apostle called the ‘air,’ somewhere within the earth’s atmosphere” (426). Then a general order will be given for the dead to rise and come to judgment. When the trumpet sounds, the dead in Christ will be gathered to him, after which a second phase begins:

We may suppose that the judgment will now be set, and the books opened, and the

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<sup>94</sup> Even as stated here in a most general way, some would have taken exception to some of Clarke’s details. Nevertheless, this schema represents the basic and popular idea of the final eschatological judgment in the mid-nineteenth century.

dead judged out of the things written in those books. The eternal states of quick and dead being thus determined, then all who shall be found to “have made a covenant with him by sacrifice,” and to have “washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,” shall be taken to his eternal glory, and “be for ever with the Lord.” (426)

Nevertheless, eschatological judgment was usually understood and discussed in terms of its negative outcome, and for most nineteenth-century Protestants, the idea evoked a certain foreboding. What made the prospects of such judgment especially disquieting for many was the possibility of having incurred God’s wrath and thereby consignment to hell. This issue of God’s wrath raises an interesting point in our study of Dickens’s personal eschatology. A belief in eschatological judgment naturally implies the idea of God’s wrath, an idea that is not normally associated with Dickens and was in itself a vigorously debated topic throughout the nineteenth-century. Dickens viewed the idea of God’s wrath as he did eschatological judgment: he may not have particularly liked the idea, but he seems to have understood it as the concomitant of judgment.

Dickens’s letter of 25 July 1839 to Mrs. Godfrey is often cited for his strong words on presenting God as a God of wrath. He expresses to Godfrey in no uncertain terms, “I think it monstrous to hold the source of inconceivable mercy and goodness perpetually up to them [children] as an avenging and wrathful God” (*Pilgrim Letters* 1: 568). His caricatures and parodies of the religious, of course, are often those punctuated by just such an emphasis on the wrath of God. Dickens, however, did not ignore the reality of the wrath of God. In fact, when our understanding of Dickens’s concept of God’s wrath is informed by two legitimate qualifications, his aversion to it is only apparent. First, Dickens was not uncomfortable with the concept of God’s wrath per se, but rather with its expression in that distorted version of Calvinism which emphasized God’s wrath almost to the exclusion of his love and grace, seemingly making the majority of humanity its object. Second, he seems to

have understood the wrath of God to be limited and specific in its application. That is, God's wrath is not unreservedly dispensed on humanity in a seemingly random manner. Rather, it is directed at particular individuals for particularly outrageous violations of God's order and purposes.

The idea of God's wrath, when it is found in Dickens's work, is a conspicuous and notable element there. It is often used in a way that suggests that Dickens saw the wrath of God as an integral part of God's ordering of His universe. In *Barnaby Rudge*, for instance, especially in the narrative strand of the Haredale murder, God's wrath is a thematic element that helps to express the diabolically sinister character of Barnaby Rudge, Sr. and his murderous deed. Speaking of Rudge, Dickens describes him in prison as "singled out by his great guilt, a Lucifer among devils". Moreover, "His double crime, the circumstances under which it had been committed, the length of time that had elapsed, and its discovery in spite of all, made him, as it were, the visible object of the Almighty's wrath" (495). Likewise, when Rudge tried to escape the relentless, convicting knell of the phantom bell declaring his guilt in the murder of Rueben Haredale, Dickens reveals, "A hundred walls and roofs of brass would not shut out that bell, for in it spoke the wrathful voice of God, and from that voice, the whole wide universe could not afford a refuge!" (422). Even when Mary Rudge entreated her husband to repent of his guilt and crime, she reminded him that, "The hand of Him who set His curse on murder, is heavy on us now. You cannot doubt it. Our son, our innocent boy, on whom His anger fell before his birth, is in this place in peril of his life—brought here by your guilt" (563).

So, too, in a *Tale of Two Cities*, God's wrath is poised against the crime of the House of Evrémonde. The wife of the Marquis St. Evrémonde had hoped "to avert the wrath of Heaven from a House that had long been hateful to the suffering of many" (343). Unfortu-

nately, because of the hard-heartedness of the men of the House of Evrémonde, they were abandoned by God, in the words of Dr. Mannette, and “have no part in His mercies” (344).

The traditional religious language of God’s wrath, then, is foreign neither to Dickens nor to his work. While he was not given to emphasizing God’s wrath gratuitously, neither was he given to ignoring it. It was not in his character to use God’s wrath as a tool for coercing people into religious conversion or to characterize God by it. Dickens was not reticent, however, to acknowledge the wrath of God in retribution when sin or crime was especially evil and hateful.

In the passage from *Barnaby Rudge* we have just examined, Mary Rudge recognized that God had “set His curse on murder” and pleaded with her husband to repent, for his own benefit and the benefit of Barnaby, their son: “I promise you, in the great name of the Creator, whose image you have defaced, that He will comfort and console you” (563). Dickens seems to be alluding here to Genesis 9.6 in which murder is condemned on the basis that men and women are made in the image of God and murder defaces that image. For Dickens, it is this kind of sin, that which defaces the image of God in human beings, that kindles God’s wrath. Importantly, Dickens understood the image of God to be defaced also whenever any person was dehumanized by oppression, poverty, cruelty, or any kind of inhumanity. Perhaps Dickens had this in mind when he chose to include the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in *TLOL*.

As I have pointed out earlier, the fact that the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is included in *TLOL* is significant. What is more, it seems quite clear that its inclusion points to the fact that Dickens takes the story seriously. Certainly, it deals with one of his major themes in *TLOL*. More importantly, however, in terms of personal eschatology, this story is significant precisely because it relates the judicial destiny of two men after death: Lazarus,

the beggar, carried to Abraham's bosom, which for Dickens, was in heaven; and the rich man, consigned to suffer in the torments of hell (*TLOL* 74). The story has further significance for our study on a three levels. First, it includes the idea of torments in hell, not often associated with Dickens, and thus the idea of eschatological retribution, if not eternal punishment. Second, it is used by Dickens in the moral sense of warning against the love of money and indifference to the suffering and destitution of others. Third, it connects these two and indicates that avarice and indifference are sins, too, that invite God's retributive justice upon those who selfishly tend only to their own needs and wants to the exclusion of the needs of the poor and destitute.

Apart from a few changes in pronouns, Dickens tells this story verbatim from Luke 16:19-25 in the language of the KJV. For Dickens, the story ends at verse 25, while the parable, as Jesus relates it, extends 6 more verses (to Luke 16:31). Two reasons for the abbreviation commend themselves. First, and most obvious, Dickens wanted to control the amount of space he used to relate accounts. Second, and probably more important, Dickens felt that he had related the essence of the story, or at least what was necessary for his purposes. This is seen by his explicit declaration that this parable is related to the Pharisees as warning against their arrogance, greed, and scorn for Jesus' teaching on money, possessions and moral responsibility. For Dickens the last six verses of the parable were superfluous and quite unnecessary for his retelling, being of little or no benefit in advancing the story and the lesson for his children.

He has introduced the parable by paraphrasing Luke 16:14—Dickens writes, “Now the Pharisees received these lessons from our Saviour, scornfully; for they were rich, and covetous, and thought themselves superior to all mankind”—which comes just before a reprimand by Jesus and follows immediately Jesus' saying “No servant can serve two masters:

for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (16:13), the conclusion to teaching Jesus was relating to his disciples. It seems clear by this that Dickens obviously saw the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus as teaching a related lesson.

Probably most significantly, this story includes a clear indication of punishment in hell, another topic not often associated with Dickens. Michael Piret has noted that, in *TLOL*, Dickens refers to hell “only once in passing, where it is required as a dramatic location for the socially edifying tale of Lazarus and the rich man” (117). While he is correct in pointing out that Dickens refers to hell only once in *TLOL*, the rest of his claim runs counter to the evidence. First, the very inclusion of the story suggests that Dickens saw it as a significant episode in the Gospel story. Second, that the parable as related in *TLOL* is merely “a socially edifying tale” seems to be contradicted by Dickens’s introduction of it as warning to the Pharisees (*TLOL* 73). This story, as it comes from Dickens’s pen, is not simply about showing compassion to the poor, but stands as a warning to those who would selfishly and indifferently neglect the needs of the poor while indulging their own appetites. Dickens has made the story about both responsibility and retribution. Indeed, it is a story primarily about the cost of neglecting moral responsibility and the consequent retributive judgment of God. Dickens’s reference here to hell is hardly made “in passing”.

Considering Dickens’s clear teaching on eschatological judgment, God’s wrath, and his inclusion of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in *TLOL*, it is a bit surprising, on the one hand, that we find the little that we do on hell in Dickens’s other work. Once again, in *Barnaby Rudge*, where eschatological strands seem most prevalent, Rudge declares of his own fate, “Did I go forth that night, abjured of God and man, and anchored deep in hell, to

wander at my cable's length about the earth, and surely be drawn down at last?" (474).<sup>95</sup> Likewise, the imagery in *Oliver Twist* of Fagin's last hours seem calculated to evoke the notion that hell is his ultimate fate. In his cell, "He started up every minute, [...] with gasping mouth and burning skin [...]; his unwashed flesh crackled with the fever that burnt him up" (446). Dennis Walder comments on the imagery that suggests Fagin's hellish prospects, "There can be little doubt of his ultimate destination" (63).

Walder is even more certain of Sikes' fate. He observes, "Sikes is followed by a ruthless conscience, which takes on a cosmic significance" (63), and in a clear gesture to God's retribution, cites Dickens's declaration, "Let no man talk of murderers escaping justice, and hint that Providence must sleep" (*OT* 402). As Sikes continues to attempt to escape the dread phantom that follows him, Walder concludes, "The next sight to meet his eyes is a huge fire: there can be little doubt of his ultimate destination" (63). Dickens himself seems to confirm such an interpretation in a letter to Forster. He writes informing Forster of his progress on the closing of *Oliver Twist*: "Hard at work still. Nancy is no more. I showed what I have done to Kate last night, who was in an unspeakable *state*: from which and my own impression I auger well. When I have sent Sikes to the devil, I must have yours." (Forster 1: 99-100; *Pilgrim Letters* 1: 439). Like Walder, Dickens has little doubt of Sikes' ultimate destination.

On the other hand, considering the controversy in the nineteenth century regarding hell and eternal punishment, Dickens might be excused for his lack of enthusiasm concerning it. Knight reminds us that, on the popular level, "Hell as a literal reality had a greater prominence in the period roughly between 1800 and 1850 than it had earlier or later, and a

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<sup>95</sup> The "wandering", the "cable's length", and the "being drawn down at last" seem to be clear allusions to Revelation 20.1-10 where Satan is bound with a great chain in the bottomless pit only later to be loosed for a season and finally to be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone.

greater attention was given to heaven from the 1860s” (48). She adds later, however, an important qualification: that while the shift in emphasis from hell to heaven “did not become sufficiently prominent to be seen as a general shift in thought until the 1860s” (57), it can be traced back to the 1830s. Similarly, even though he situates the cautious reinterpretation by Evangelicals of the doctrine of eternal punishment in the late 1860s (127), Rowell points out that as early as the 1840s, a doctrine of conditional immortality, which “emerged as one of the attempts to find a mediating position between the extremes of universalism and eternal punishment” (181), was being articulated and preached.<sup>96</sup> And as early as 1835, when he published his *Christian Theology*, Adam Clarke, obviously with some form of conditional immortality in view, protests, “To suppose that sinners shall be annihilated, is as great a heresy, though scarcely so absurd, as to believe that the pains of damnation are emendatory, and the hell-fire shall burn out” (429). Given such circumstances, it is not difficult, then, to understand Dickens’s occasional reticence concerning hell and eternal punishment as consistent with progressive trends in popular theological thought.

Alternatively, many are tempted to attribute Dickens’s views on hell and eternal punishment to his alleged Unitarian leanings. After all, it is argued, the Unitarians generally held as established doctrine an eschatology that was shaped along universalist lines. Describing the Unitarian position, Harriet Martineau, author and sister to James Martineau, the eminent Victorian Unitarian, wrote “of the limited and corrective nature of future punishment” and declared:

Our faith in the Divine benevolence inspires a conviction that all evil is to be made

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<sup>96</sup> Rowell’s summary of the doctrine of conditional immortality is noteworthy: “The basic doctrine of the conditionalists was that God created man mortal but with a capacity for immortality. At the Fall of man God passed a sentence of death on man, but in his mercy did not put it into effect, so that, with the coming of Christ, immortality might once again be offered to man. This immortal life was only to be gained by faith in Christ, [...] Those who did not have faith in Christ were unfitted to receive the gift of immortality, and so were annihilated” (181).

subsidiary to good, and that therefore all punishment must be corrective, all suffering remedial. Thus far the light of nature teaches us to anticipate the final restitution of sinners” (33).

Lant Carpenter, himself an eminent Unitarian of the early nineteenth century and mentor to James Martineau, added:

The Gospel sanctions its requirements by the prospect of vast and unmerited rewards to faithful endeavours after Christian obedience, and of awful punishment to the workers of iniquity; directing our views, on the strength of Divine promises, to a period when God will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ, and render unto every man according to his works. (*Lectures* 12)

Accordingly, Unitarians held to a view that understood God’s retribution coming in a form that was corrective and limited.

It is certainly possible to read Dickens in this way. Importantly, however, it is not necessary to do so. As the orthodox understanding of hell and future punishment was being rethought, both on the popular and the academic levels, Dickens could easily have been influenced by the controversy and debate within orthodox circles. In any case, while Dickens is forthright in his understanding of judgment and God’s wrath, he is less certain about hell and eternal punishment. Nevertheless, however reluctant he may have been about such issues, the evidence seems to point to the fact that did not reject outright the provocative beliefs of hell and eternal punishment. It is most likely, though, at this point that he would have attempted to make this aspect of his personal eschatology “less terrible in his imagination”.

None of this seemed to alter the fact of the idea of a malevolent unseen spiritual world in Dickens’s thought. A.E. Dyson has commented on what he calls Dickens’s “very dark vision of the world. He saw it almost as Hell at times, a place of exile threatened by evil and daemonic powers” (Watts 56). In *TLOL*, Dickens includes two accounts involving spiritual evil and exorcism: one, the episode in “the country of the Gadarenes” (KJV), in

which Jesus casts out a multitude of unclean spirits named Legion (Mark 5.1-20; Luke 8.26-39; cf. Matt. 8.28-34); and a second one, following the account of the Transfiguration, in which Jesus cures a boy by casting out an unclean spirit (Matt. 17.14-20; Mark 9.14-29; Luke 9.37-43). Interestingly, Dickens takes a different tack with each of the two different accounts and in doing so sheds light on his views of the unseen spiritual world.

In his account of the Gerasene demoniac,<sup>97</sup> Dickens seems to follow Mark. While both Luke and Mark are quite similar in their relating this episode, there are a number details peculiar to Mark that Dickens includes. For instance, 1) that “they” had tried to chain him seems to be an inference based on Markan influence (5.3-4); 2) that “he would throw himself on the sharp stones and cut himself” could only be inferred from Mark (5.5); 3) that he howled all day and night is from Mark (5.5); and 4) only Mark mentions that the man saw Jesus “afar off” (5.6). Even though Matthew’s account includes two demoniacs, Dickens does draw from Matthew. Dickens’s “so that it made travelers afraid” seems best accounted for from Matthew (8.28).

Two things in particular about this story are significant for our purposes. First, that Dickens includes the actual presence of the demonic here by describing the man as being “torn by an evil spirit” (39) is significant especially in light of the fact that current theological commentary would have supported his simply maintaining the language of madness. Second, that he does, in fact, relate the story (following the account of the Transfiguration) of the healing of the boy in terms of madness and cure rather than possession and exorcism, makes the mention of an evil spirit in the account of the Gerasene demoniac even more conspicuous.

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<sup>97</sup> Based on superior manuscript evidence in Mark, biblical scholars prefer the location Gerasa for the setting of this episode. Gerasa, however, presents a geographical problem, as it is located 30 miles from the sea. The locations of Gadara and Gergesa emerged as very early attempts to solve this problem and thus found their way into various manuscripts. For a thorough treatment of the problems and issues see Guelich, 275-77.

In his account of the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac, Dickens initially refers to the man as a “dreadful madman”, making no mention of an evil spirit. There are, however, solid Scriptural and theological reasons to do so. First, the Scriptural accounts of both Mark and Luke provide a narrative that allows for understanding the man as suffering from some form of insanity. Not only do the details Mark and Luke supply suggest madness,<sup>98</sup> but also toward the close of their respective narratives, both state that the man was “sitting (Mark 5.15 only), and clothed, and in his right mind” (Mark 5.15; Luke 8.35). The implication, of course, is that prior to his encounter with Jesus, he was not in his right mind. Second, theologically, many nineteenth-century commentators acknowledged a connection between insanity and demon-possession in the Synoptic accounts specifically and in the New Testament generally. Most commentators, whether or not they agreed with such an assessment, drew attention to the fact that there were some who saw demon possession as a primitive way of understanding what the more informed nineteenth-century mind understood to be insanity or some other form of mental illness.

Henry Ware, the Unitarian, in his *The Life of the Saviour* comments:

The description answers precisely to that of a raving maniac; and indeed, many learned men are of opinion that to be ‘possessed with a demon,’ is only another mode of expressing the loss of reason, and other deplorable disorders. When the ancients, the heathens as well as the Jews, witnessed the wild conduct and speech of men who are beside themselves, they attributed it to some evil spirit or demon, which had taken possession of their bodies. (96)

Ware is cautious and ultimately does not take sides on this issue. Nevertheless, the comments above represent well those who considered demon-possession a primitive and super-

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<sup>98</sup> William Lane, in his commentary on Mark observes, “The people of the town undoubtedly felt that the man was mad, for his appearance and behaviour conformed to the popular diagnosis of insanity” (182). Robert Guelich comments further on the features commonly understood as insanity: “Taken together these verses [Mark 5.3-5] contain the four characteristics of insanity in Judaism (Str-B, 1:421): (a) running about at night (5:5); (b) spending the night in a cemetery (5:3); (c) tearing one’s garments (διδασπάζειν, 5:4); and (d) destroying what one has been given (cf. συντετριφθαι, 5:4)” (278).

stitious way to describe illness and infirmity.

Adam Clarke, in his commentary and critical notes to the New Testament observes on Matthew's account of this event:

Certain doctors in both sciences, divinity and physic, gravely tell us, that these demoniacs were only common madmen, and that the disease was supposed, by the superstitious Jews, to be occasioned by demons. But with due deference to great characters, may not a plain man be permitted to ask by what figure of speech can it be said that “two diseases *besought,—went out—filled a herd of swine—rushed down a precipice, &c.*” (M3-4)

The comments of Clarke and Ware represent opposite ends of a continuum on which most nineteenth-century commentators tried to find a middle ground. One such expression of a “middle ground” comes from Olshausen on the one hand and Thomas Arnold on the other. Olshausen's very thorough treatment of this episode includes an incisive discussion on the phenomenon of demon possession. Olshausen is ready to grant a distinction between demoniacs and madmen, attempting to point out that while a demoniac may be described as a madman, not all madmen are of necessity demoniacs. So, he comments: “Hence, the common opinion, which pronounces the demoniacs to be sick people, is true in one aspect; but it takes a partial view, embracing only what is outward, while the representation of Scripture regards the phenomena in their moral origin” (1: 274). Likewise, in a sermon on Matthew 8:31, Thomas Arnold declared:

Yet in that good man [Jesus], endowed with such mighty power, there dwelt, we know amidst all the perfection of the human nature, the fullness of the Godhead also; and in those madmen, with all the symptoms of what we call common and natural madness. The Scripture has revealed to us that there dwelt an author of that madness, of whom, without such revelation, we could have known nothing. (150-51)

Both Olshausen and Arnold note that one is justified in understanding a demon-possessed man to be a madman, but the revelation of Scripture is required to identify what is the moral and spiritual cause behind the madness.

It would seem that this is the sort of middle ground to which Dickens appealed as he related the story of the Gerasene demoniac. In his account of the story, Dickens simply referred to the demoniac as “a dreadful madman” (*TLOL* 39). Jesus, however, “perceived that he was torn by an Evil Spirit and cast the madness out of him” (39). Dickens clearly retained in his rendering of the account the presence of the evil spirit and that Jesus performed an exorcism. So, Dickens seems to be thinking along the same lines as Olshausen and Arnold.

Dickens’s rendering of this story and the spiritual contours that seem to lie behind it are cast in greater relief when we consider how he recounts in chapter six of *TLOL* the story following the account of the Transfiguration of a certain man whose son he describes as “mad” (Matt. 17.14-20; Mark 9.14-29; Luke 9.37-43). In relating this story, Dickens seems to follow Matthew. Two things suggest as much. First, those features that are peculiar to Matthew seem to shape Dickens’s account. Only in Matthew does the man who brought his son to Jesus explicitly entreat Jesus for mercy (17.15); and only in Matthew does the man tell Jesus that his son is mad (17.15). In Matthew, Jesus responds directly to his disciples and tells them that they were not able to cure the boy because of their unbelief (17.20); whereas in Mark, Jesus tells his disciples they could only have been successful in healing the boy “by prayer and fasting” (9.29) and Luke includes only the non-specific rebuke of Jesus to his disciple, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you, and suffer you” (9.41).

Second, Matthew’s language seems to be more conducive to the relating of a sickness and a cure rather than demon-possession and exorcism. In Matthew’s story, the boy “is lunatic” and a “cure” is sought (17.15-16); in Mark and Luke “a spirit taketh him” (Mark 9.17-18; Luke 9.39) and his father’s plea is that the spirit be “cast out” (Mark 9.18; Luke

9.40). Clearly, in Mark and Luke, an exorcism takes place in which the spirit is violently cast out of the boy (Mark 9.25-27; Luke 9.42). In Matthew, however, while Jesus “rebuked the devil; and he departed out of him” (17.18), the notion of exorcism is subdued and the emphasis seems to be that “the child was cured from that very hour” (17.18). There is no indication in Matthew of the violent convulsions brought about by Jesus’ confrontation with the spirit as in Mark and Luke. Indeed, the evidence would seem to suggest in this case that Matthew’s account of the story deliberately calls attention to Jesus’ curing a mental illness rather than to his exorcism of a demon.

It is not difficult to see, then, why Dickens chose to relate this episode as he did, especially in view of the popular thought that carried the day regarding the relation between various forms of mental illness and the unseen spiritual world. Based primarily on the text of Matthew 4:24, most commentators recognized a distinction, quite plausible on Scriptural grounds, between madness and demon-possession particularly in the story we have just considered. Describing Jesus’ ministry, Matthew’s Gospel states, “And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them.” This verse, nineteenth-century commentators pointed out, distinguishes between “those which were possessed with devils” and “those which were lunatick”. Consequently, many held to this distinction and considered the account of the man’s lunatic son quite a different situation from the Gerasene demoniac.

Still, each of the Synoptic accounts of the man and his son makes clear that the source of the madness is a “devil” (Matt. 17.18), a “foul spirit” (Mark 9.25), or an “unclean spirit” (Luke 9.42). According to the commentators, then, it is a connection between a demon and an illness that makes the two accounts different. So, Mant and D’Oyly, citing Dr.

Henry Hammond (1605-1660) simply observe, “The symptoms mentioned at Luke ix. 39, seem to shew that this disease was an epilepsy, caused by the power of an evil spirit” (4: II, 1101). Olshausen agrees when he observes:

The epileptic boy he [Mark] paints like a master, and the whole situation in which the cure was wrought. One sees as it were the people continuously streaming together, and the paroxysms amidst which the beneficent power of Jesus overcame the evil influences by which the child was possessed. (2: 238)

Even Clarke, representing a most conservative Evangelical approach, acknowledges the distinction of Matthew 4:24, and is effectively representative of commentators in his observation:

[A lunatic is] one who was most affected with his disorder at the change and full of the moon. But lunacy was occasioned by a demon. In this case, the devil intended to hide himself under the appearance of natural disorder, that no supernatural means might be resorted to for his expulsion. (Clarke, *Harmony* 245-46)

Here in *TLOL*, then, is an episode in which Dickens seems to understand the affliction the boy suffered as mental illness of some sort and not demon-possession per se. Very likely, this is why he depended mainly upon Matthew, for it is Matthew alone who uses the term “lunatick” to describe the boy’s affliction and who twice uses the term “cure” to refer to the action wrought on the boy’s behalf (Matt. 9.16, 18). Dickens repeats the same language in the same contexts—“Our Saviour cured the child immediately”—and Jesus told his disciples why “they had not been able to cure him themselves” (57).

In this light, it is noteworthy that Dickens related the two accounts as he did. Considering both that he related this story as he does and that he just as easily could have related the story of the Gerasene demoniac strictly in terms of madness, it is significant and telling that Dickens included the presence of supernatural evil and recounted an exorcism in *TLOL*. That he included this episode related in the manner that it was, speaks to the presence in his worldview of an unseen malevolent spiritual world.

It is not surprising, then, that in the larger body of his work, we should find the presence of this unseen spiritual world. Initially, it is clear that Dickens makes use of the language and imagery of supernatural evil in his work. It is also clear, however, that Dickens will use such language and imagery sometimes in comic tones, other times in mythopoeic figures. Piret is one who suggests that Dickens rarely, if ever, does otherwise (124-25). He cites, for instance, a number of obvious metaphors and similes that Dickens uses in various novels, concluding, “Dickens was quick to use such language when he needed a hyperbolic figure to express some extremity of wickedness. But he does not use it with the kind of bare literalism that would denote actual belief in the personality of the Devil” (124). In fact, in the end, Piret argues that there is little, if any, supernaturalism of any sort in Dickens (191-221). Even a cursory reading of Dickens’s work, however, would suggest that to gather all of Dickens’s allusions to supernatural evil under the heads of hyperbole and myth is much too simplistic an approach. More importantly, to do so seems to ignore the evidence of *TLOL* that we have just considered.<sup>99</sup>

It is precisely at this point, then, that *TLOL* plays a pivotal role in providing clarity and insight into Dickens’s larger body of work in this regard. Apart from the theological reflection *TLOL* provides, it might be tempting to agree with those like Piret who maintain that supernatural evil in Dickens is at best mythopoeic. Particularly in his account of the Gerasene demoniac, however, Dickens introduces us to spiritual dimensions of supernatural

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<sup>99</sup> On three occasions, Piret ignores Dickens’s statement in his account of the Gerasene demoniac that the man “was torn by an evil spirit” (See Piret 58-59; 124; 210). While Piret does acknowledge that Dickens included the account of the Gerasene demoniac in *TLOL*, his comment on it is a bit misleading. His observation is that Dickens has omitted from the story the fact that the demon identifies itself as Legion. Piret then remarks, “Although he did include this Gospel episode in the *CNT* [Children’s New Testament], Dickens deleted its references to the ‘legion’ of ‘devils,’ and presented the demoniac as ‘a dreadful madman’” (124, note 26).

evil that go beyond the mythopoeic.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, Dickens was not content to represent evil simply in terms of mythopoeic caricatures of the Devil. For Dickens, evil was quite more substantial than that. In terms of his Christian worldview, Dickens understood evil as a destructive personal force or power in a world in which good and evil collide in spiritual conflict. This spiritual conflict is played out within a cosmic dualism of God's good world and the unseen world of supernatural evil. It is in such a context that Dickens understood the evil that he observed, experienced, and wrote about, and in which the language and imagery of supernatural evil in his work should be read.

Humphry House observed that Dickens possessed a profound understanding of evil and cruelty, as well as an extraordinary power for describing it (*All In Due Time* 183-89). As we have seen above, Angus Wilson and A.E. Dyson discuss Dickens's work and his "very dark vision of the world" along with his belief in demonic forces. Going further than House, both Dyson and Wilson agree that this belief in demonic powers is "a specifically Christian aspect" of his work and that "in profound ways the Christian religion makes sense of his work" (Watts 55-56). Such observations remind us that Dickens was not only unusually alert to the evil around him but also that he understood it and attempted to grapple with it in his work in the context of a Christian worldview.

In his sober essay from *Household Words* (14 December 1850), "A December Vision", Dickens wanted to expose certain evils at the social and institutional levels that, in his mind, threatened the demise of society. As he singled out "Disease" and "pestilence" borne on the "poisoned air" and "charged with heavy retribution", he wrote:

I saw, wheresoever I looked, cunning preparation made for defacing the Creator's

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<sup>100</sup> While the account of the Gerasene demoniac plays a crucial role regarding this idea of supernatural evil, *TLOL* contains clear references to an unseen world of spirit beings, heaven and hell. All of these appear to be a part of Dickens's larger Christian worldview.

Image, from the moment of its appearance here on earth, and stamping over it the image of the Devil. I saw, from those reeking and pernicious stews, the avenging consequences of such Sin issuing forth, and penetrating to the highest places. (Philip and Neuburg, 21)

It is significant that Dickens employed the language of supernatural evil in this essay, drawing a contrast between “the Creator” and “the Devil” that seemed to acknowledge the reality of both. The essay is clearly about social and institutional evil, but Dickens clearly saw these evils in the moral-religious context of his Christian worldview as “a low dull howl of Ignorance [rose] up to the Eternal Heavens”; as “all the gifts of God” in thousands of children were “perverted in their breasts or trampled out”; and as the “wicked, selfish men” who apathetically dismissed such evils were admonished that they shall bear their “portion of that wrong throughout ALL TIME”. It seems plausible, then, to suggest that the evil Dickens observed around him and that he condemned so robustly was in some way connected to the unseen world of spiritual evil.

To some degree, a similar orientation seems to have informed Dickens’s comments in a letter to the Reverend Thomas Robinson, 8 April 1841. The same kinds of evil that Dickens observed in “A December Vision” he describes to Robinson as “cruelty and oppression” and insists his own effort will be given to identifying and denouncing such evil:

While you teach in your walk of life the lessons of tenderness you have learnt in sorrow, trust me that in mine, I will pursue cruelty and oppression, the Enemies of all God’s creatures of all codes and creeds, so long as I have the energy of thought and power of giving it utterance. (Pilgrim *Letters* 2: 257)

It would appear that this exchange of correspondence was not unrelated to the subject matter of *Oliver Twist*, especially as it was discussed in the 1841 Preface, in which Dickens wrote, “I confess I have yet to learn that a lesson of the purest good may not be drawn from the vilest evil” (456). It is clear from this preface that Dickens’s intent in *Oliver Twist* was not simply to expose the dark underbelly of London’s backstreets and slums. He hoped

to reach beyond crime and its symptoms to “pursue cruelty and oppression” and to present the conflict between “the purest good” and “the vilest evil” that lay beneath the surface. In his preface, it is Sikes whom Dickens characterized as having become “utterly and irredeemably bad”; and in the novel it is Fagin who, with “every evil thought and blackest purpose [...] working at his heart” (391), had Oliver “in his toils”, and was “slowly instilling into his soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue for ever” (152). This language suggests it was not enough that Fagin simply turn Oliver into a thief; Dickens wants us to see that Fagin’s intent was to taint Oliver’s soul. Sikes and Fagin, as well as Nancy, are used, as Dickens remarks in his preface, “to serve the purpose of a moral”. As Orwell so astutely observed of Dickens, “He is always preaching a sermon” (56).

In all of this, Dickens is appealing to the moral-religious language and imagery of supernatural evil. It seems quite inadequate, however, to suppose that his use of such language and imagery was simply a literary device employed to provide, in Piret’s words, “a hyperbolic figure to express some extremity of wickedness.” Such a view fails to consider not only the broader scope and context of Dickens’s use of the images and language of supernatural evil, but also the moral-religious textures of his worldview as it is informed by *TLOL*. Dickens is preaching a sermon and the evil with which he grapples in that sermon is not simply of human origin. It is a genuine supernatural evil that plays in the cosmic scheme of Dickens’s worldview that includes a real unseen world of malevolent spirits.

Even his use of the language and imagery of supernatural evil in comic tones or seemingly figurative allusion does not of necessity render the language and imagery void of moral-religious content. On one particular occasion, for instance, Dickens alludes to Jesus’ raising of Lazarus in a rather light or comic tone. When Charley Hexam, in *Our Mutual Friend*, responds to Mortimer Lightwood’s question as to whether any means were taken to

attempt to resuscitate the body pulled from the river, Charley replied, “You wouldn’t ask, sir, if you knew his state. [...] If Lazarus was only half as far gone, that was the greatest of all miracles” (61). The obviously droll tone here does not need to be taken as casting doubt on Dickens’s trust in the veracity of the story. His inclusion of the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead in *TLOL* indicates that he took this story seriously.<sup>101</sup> Using the story in a lighter manner or in a figurative sense does not necessarily mean that Dickens understood it as myth or legend. Similarly, we have no reason to believe that Dickens’s use of the language and imagery of supernatural evil in comic tones or figurative contexts somehow speaks to his lack of belief in an unseen world of spiritual evil.

Using *TLOL* as index, then, provides the clarity and insight we need here to help us better understand Dickens use of such language and imagery. Taken in this context, Dickens’s words in *Barnaby Rudge*, for instance, that it is “the Devil who poured such hot temptation in his brain” (623) when Geoffrey Haredale confronted John Chester for the last time, can be understood as presenting more than just a “hyperbolic figure” or image. Likely, they express a moral-religious judgment that alludes to the conflict between good and evil mentioned above.

Surely Barnaby Rudge, Sr. is one of Dickens’s most diabolical characters, and his characterization as evil is explicit. His confrontations with his estranged wife, Mary, are of particular significance in this characterization. He describes himself to her in one of these confrontations as “a thing from which all creatures shrink, save those curst beings of another world, who will not leave me” (131). Similarly, his further words carry the diabolical force

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<sup>101</sup> I have already remarked above of the significance of Dickens’s including all three of the stories in the Gospels that have the raising of the dead at their center: the raising of Jairus’ daughter, the raising of the son of the widow of Nain, and the raising of Lazarus. These stories and their themes are conspicuous throughout Dickens’s work. For example, see *Uncommerical Traveller*, 39; *Bleak House*, 389; *Christmas Stories*, 1: 99; *Selected Journalism*, 10, 16.

of a curse in keeping with his character when they are understood in the context of genuine and present supernatural evil. “The blood with which I sprinkle it,” he invokes, “be on you and yours, in the name of the Evil Spirit that tempts men to their ruin!” (131). As mere hyperbole or metaphor, these words have little narrative force. In the context of a worldview in which supernatural evil is present, they help to express not only the hateful and odious nature of Rudge, but also a realization of and connection to such evil.

Dickens’s allusion to 1 Peter 5.8 in *Hard Times* is noteworthy as well. In a description of James Harthouse, Dickens writes:

When the Devil goeth about like a roaring lion, he goeth about in a shape by which few but savages and hunters are attracted. But, when he is trimmed, smoothed, and varnished, according to the mode: when he is aweary of vice, and aweary of virtue, used up as to brimstone, and used up as to bliss; then, whether he take to the serving out of red tape, or to the kindling of red fire, he is the very Devil. (207)

In the larger passage of which this citation is a part, Dickens described Harthouse’s covetous designs on Louisa not as the overt wickedness of the Devil who is a “roaring lion” of 1 Peter, but more likely, as a subtle deception like that of the ministers of 2 Corinthians who, like Satan, are transformed into angels of light and ministers of righteousness (2 Cor. 11.14-15). Dickens’s use of the allusion, and such an extended development of it, seems to be derived from a worldview that recognizes a personal devil rather than a mythopoeic invention. Even Monks’ words in *Oliver Twist*, that it is the devil who “throws in the way of his friends sometimes” chance meetings like that between Bumble and himself in the public house (302), seems to invite a literal understanding in light of the moral-religious context established by *TLOL*.

The preceding examples help to demonstrate, then, that Dickens’s understanding of supernatural evil is brought into sharper focus through the lens of *TLOL*. The language and imagery he uses in his larger body of work is given substance and clarity when it is informed

by *TLOL*. Dickens's accounts of the Gerasene demoniac, the lunatic son, and the story of the rich man and Lazarus, as well as his references to angels, miracles, and heaven, offer significant insight into his concept of an unseen spiritual world and the worldview of which it is such an integral part.

#### §4.4 CONCLUSION

Dickens's understanding of the traditional four last things is considerably developed throughout his work especially when the theological insight from *TLOL* is brought to bear upon it. In terms of death, judgment, and heaven, Dickens's personal eschatology reflects the popular Anglican beliefs of his day. His view of heaven was thoroughly popular, his ideas of eschatological judgment were a necessary part of a sensible understanding of cosmic justice, and his understanding of death and responding to it were explicitly Victorian. Undoubtedly, his views on hell and eternal punishment were rather protean and not quite so clearly settled in his mind, say, as his understanding of heaven. Nevertheless, even while he sought more progressive means of understanding such ideas, his views tend to reflect a growing collective reticence among many Christians that was already apparent just before the mid-nineteenth century. In all, Dickens's personal eschatology was reasonably traditional in its formulation and thoroughly popular in its expression.

As a means of scrutinizing Dickens work to capture some sense of his personal eschatology, *TLOL* proves to be a requisite and definitive source. While Dickens provides only a few episodes that inform much of what we have examined, the fact that these episodes were virtually handpicked by Dickens invests them with an unparalleled credibility and authority. Moreover, in each of the episodes we have considered, it is clear that Dickens has deliberately made use of harmonization to carefully craft a narrative that not only reflects accurately the biblical accounts, but that also provides the emphasis he would wish his chil-

dren to recognize. In this, then, we are privy to his thoughts and views in ways that might otherwise be more elusive.

**“IT IS TRUE! HE IS THE SON OF GOD!”**

*“Then in a moment, the wind went down; and the Disciples  
said to one another, ‘It is true! He is the Son of God!’”*

– from *The Life of Our Lord*, Chapter the Fifth

At the end of the opening paragraph of *TLOL*, Dickens’s formal intentions for his “History of Jesus Christ” were outlined in the declaration of his expressed desire to tell his children who Jesus was and what he did (11). In this simple outline, Dickens presented his work as consisting of both Christology and soteriology in the broadest sense. That is, in declaring that he wanted to tell his children about who Jesus was and what he did, he was declaring that he wanted them to know about the person of Jesus (properly, Christology) and the work of Jesus (properly, soteriology). Even though it is unlikely that Dickens would have understood his work in this manner, he has provided in *TLOL*, using the same basic outline that a theologian might, his concept of the Jesus who was so central to his Christian thought and fundamental worldview.

Theologians recognize that this bi-partite division—into distinct categories of the person of Jesus and the work of Jesus—is somewhat artificial and fails to do justice to the finer contours of the theological study of Jesus. For, who Jesus was (the person of Jesus) should be informed by what he did (the work of Jesus) and vice versa. Still, such a division can be used as an effective tool to help present an analysis and its results. I will maintain this division, then, in our theological consideration of Jesus in *TLOL* but will consider, nevertheless, how Dickens brought the work of Jesus to bear on his presentation of the person of Jesus. In looking at who Jesus was in *TLOL*, we will consider in this chapter Jesus’ basic character and his essential nature. A consideration, as well, of an aspect of Jesus’ work, his miracles, will also help us to a better understanding of the person of Jesus in *TLOL*. In the

following chapter, Dickens's understanding of the work of Jesus in salvation, or soteriology, will be examined.

What to make of Jesus in *TLOL*, particularly with regard to his essential nature, is made a more rigorous task by a certain amount of ambiguity generated by the question of Dickens's Unitarian involvement. It was Forster who first noted that Dickens took sittings at the Little Portland Street Unitarian Chapel. Gladys Storey, by way of her conversations with Dickens's daughter, Mrs. Kate Perugini, concluded that Dickens's religious views "were those of a Unitarian" (142). William Kent, in his *Dickens and Religion* (1930), was quite skeptical of any genuine religious belief in Dickens, but was especially dismissive of the idea that Dickens was ever a Unitarian in terms of doctrinal considerations (26-29). Likewise, G. T. Shettle, while noting that Dickens could "scarcely be styled an 'orthodox' churchman", made little of Dickens's Unitarian involvement and presented him as "reverent and real [...] when it came to the fundamentals of the Christian faith" (6-7).

Of more recent commentators, Noel Peyrouton, Dennis Walder, and Peter Ackroyd, on the one hand, are quick to acknowledge what they believe to be less than strictly orthodox Christian thought in Dickens, but are nevertheless reluctant to situate him in the Unitarian camp. On the other hand, Edgar Johnson, John Frazee, and Anthony Cross find, in Johnson's words, a more or less "consistently Unitarian emphasis" in Dickens, especially in *TLOL*. So, the nature of Dickens's Unitarian involvement, particularly in terms of a doctrinal stance, has remained a point of irresolution. There are, however, significant observations that remain to be made about Dickens and Unitarianism, especially as mediated by *TLOL*, that offer substantial reasons for rethinking our ideas about Dickens's participation in Unitarianism and that provide added insight into Dickens's Christological thought. It should prove productive, then, to attempt to clarify the nature of Dickens's Unitarian in-

volvement before considering his Christology in *TLOL*.

### §5.1 DICKENS AND UNITARIANISM

On 2 March 1843, Dickens wrote to Cornelius Felton in America:

Disgusted with our Established Church, and its Puseyisms, and daily outrages on common sense and humanity, I have carried into effect an old idea of mine, and joined the Unitarians, who would do something for human improvement if they could; and who practice Charity and Toleration. (*Pilgrim Letters* 3: 455-56)

While this is taken by some to provide substantial evidence that Dickens had become a Unitarian, other considerations, which will be taken up shortly, caution against drawing such a conclusion too hastily. In fact, it is worth considering, to borrow a phrase from Dennis Walder, whether Dickens was, at this time, turning toward Unitarian thought or Unitarian thought was turning toward him.<sup>102</sup> It would appear the latter rather than the former.

That Dickens was a great admirer of the American Unitarian, William Ellery Channing and that he began attending a Unitarian Chapel soon after his return from America in 1842, where he had met Channing, is common knowledge. It was the Essex Street Chapel that Dickens first attended and later, upon hearing Reverend Edward Tagart preach a memorial service in honor of Channing, began attending the Little Portland Street Chapel where Tagart was the minister. A footnote to Dickens's letter to Felton in the *Pilgrim Letters* (see above) indicates that, after a memorial service for Channing on 20 November 1842, Dickens approached Tagart and learned that they shared some common thoughts about religion. From that evening, Dickens began an association with Unitarianism and a lifelong friendship with Tagart.

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<sup>102</sup> Walder turns this phrase in his *Dickens and Religion* regarding Dickens and the Broad Church rather than Unitarianism. "In a sense, it would be difficult to say whether Dickens was turning towards Broad Church ideas or whether they were turning towards him" (176).

Dickens's main attraction to Unitarianism seems to have been Tagart and the humanitarian concern of the Unitarians. It seems obvious, also, that Dickens would have found attractive the Unitarian views of the inherent goodness of humanity, the Fatherhood of God, and their disassociation from the doctrines of total depravity and original sin, ideas about which he already felt strongly. Nonetheless, the extent to which Dickens may have committed to Unitarianism or a Unitarian creed remains an open question.

That Dickens shared certain ideas and ideals with Unitarianism is admitted; that he was a Unitarian is a dubious claim. First, and most significantly, no compelling reasons have yet been put on offer that call into serious question Forster's comments regarding Dickens's relationship to the Established Church. They remain determinative: "Upon essential points he had never any sympathy so strong as with the leading doctrines of the Church of England; to these, as time went on, he found himself able to accommodate all minor differences" (1: 325). It is precisely this claim, however, that John Frazee, in his article, "Dickens and Unitarianism," calls into question. Citing Forster's biographer, James A. Davies, Frazee suggests that Forster altered the truth about Dickens's religious proclivities here to protect and "preserve Dickens's status as a national monument, even at the expense of the truth" (138). That Forster would want to protect Dickens and his reputation is certainly conceivable; that he did so in this case seems questionable.

The only real credible evidence that Frazee produces to support his contention, based on historian R.V. Holt's observations, is that Unitarianism might have been viewed by Forster as an embarrassment to Dickens's reputation. Three things argue against this view, however. First, that Forster, himself a professed Unitarian, would have yielded in this regard is doubtful. Second, Frazee's suggestion that Unitarianism might have been thought by Forster to be a blot on Dickens's reputation is debatable. Owen Chadwick notes that James

Martineau, along with “eminent converts” such as Blanco White, Frank Newman, John Sterling and Arthur Clough “brought new ability and stimulus to and social prestige to Unitarianism” (1: 397). Gillian Avery also points out, “The Unitarians were strongly represented among the wealthy commercial classes like the Chamberlains” (Dickens, *Holiday* xxvii). More importantly, R.K. Webb has questioned the very credibility of Holt’s work in general and tends to portray the Unitarianism of the mid- to late nineteenth century (Forster was writing Dickens’s biography in the early 1870s) in a more favourable way than Frazee<sup>103</sup> (Paz, 101-2).

A third point argues that Frazee has misconstrued Holt’s meaning, especially relative to Forster’s work, regarding the tendency of biographers to try to protect their subjects’ reputations. Holt wrote, “Even as late as the nineteenth century, biographers often felt that to have been a Unitarian was a stain on the reputation of the subject of their biography and in characteristic fashion strove to conceal this stain” (14). It is clear that Forster was not trying to “conceal” Dickens’s involvement in Unitarianism in the way that Holt implies.

These observations seem to undercut Frazee’s argument. Forster’s comments on Dickens’s remaining within the bounds of Anglicanism, then, should still be taken at face value and should be understood, as well, to vindicate those who see Dickens’s Unitarian sympathies as a “period,” a “phase,” or, in Peyrouton’s apt description, a “flirtation.”

A second consideration that contributes to doubt about Dickens’s Unitarian commitment are his stated reasons for “joining the Unitarians,” reasons having nothing to do with doctrine. Rather, it seems, he was exasperated by the petty bickering and quarreling over ecclesiastical minutiae within the Anglican Church. For instance, Dickens took excep-

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<sup>103</sup> Not only do Owen Chadwick and R.K. Webb present Unitarianism in a more positive light than do Frazee’s comments, but so also Gerald Parsons, *Religion in Victorian Britain: Volume I, Traditions and Volume II, Controversies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

tion to the use of “the church catechism and other mere formularies and subtleties, in reference to the education of the young and ignorant.” Again, Forster’s remarks are pertinent: “It was his impatience of differences on this point with clergymen of the Established Church that led him, for the past year or two, to take sittings in the Little Portland Street Unitarian Chapel” (1: 324). This, of course, is precisely what is indicated in Dickens’s letter to Felton and is thoroughly in line with his concerns for social involvement and relief for the poor.

From this perspective, it would seem that his “joining” the Unitarians was a pragmatic decision, not a doctrinal or even ideological one. Moreover, it is interesting that Dickens does say that he “joined” the Unitarians, not that he had “become” a Unitarian. Such a suggestion, it may be insisted, is purely semantic. Yet, it must be allowed that Dickens meant no more by his “joining the Unitarians” than that he was going to identify with the Unitarians in the same manner that he had identified with the Establishment—rather loosely at best. The very anti-sectarian bias that Dickens wore on his sleeve would have kept the doctrines of Unitarianism, or any organized religion for that matter, at arm’s length. Furthermore, in the larger context of his dissatisfaction with the Anglican Church, his criticisms seem to be spoken as a reformer from within rather than a detractor from without. In “joining the Unitarians”, it is more likely that Dickens had found an association more in line with his thoughts on practical religion than that he had embraced the doctrine and creed of a religious denomination or sect. He had found a place in which he was comfortable in unobtrusive and simple worship and that, from his perspective, identified with his concerns and his interests.

None of this, of course, prevents the suggestion that there may be Unitarian influence in Dickens’s work in general or in *TLOL* in particular. It does, however, suggest that Unitarian influence in Dickens’s life may not have been as profound as some have proposed.

In fact, it suggests that Unitarianism was no more influential in Dickens's thought than orthodoxy or partisan Anglican thought. A conscientious study of the Christology of *TLOL* will invite us not only to rethink the alleged Unitarian character often assumed for *TLOL*, but also will reveal a tendency in Dickens's Christian orientation toward a more orthodox trinitarian outlook.

While Dickens's Christian thought seems to have been shaped predominantly in the mold of popular Anglicanism, we can discern, nevertheless, in *TLOL* what some claim to be influences of Unitarian thought. Such instances, while they may seem inconsistent to some, are not lapses on Dickens's part nor are they simple carelessness. Rather, they seem to indicate that Dickens deliberately purposed to present in *TLOL* a non-sectarian portrait of Jesus that not only intended to remain faithful to the Gospel witness, but also, and most importantly, provided his children with the example of real Christianity and how to live the life of faith. His basis for creating such a non-sectarian portrait was to appeal to the broadest categories of thinking about Jesus that the Gospels would allow and that his convictions could accommodate. That would mean attempting to expand the typical Anglican categories of thinking about Jesus. It would not mean writing a Unitarian life of Jesus, but it would certainly involve the possibility of bringing some freer and more inclusive ideas to bear on his portrait of Jesus. A life of Jesus that at least appeared to think in broader, more creative categories would be, for Dickens, a non-sectarian one.

## §5.2 THE BASIC CHARACTER OF JESUS IN *THE LIFE OF OUR LORD*

As a deliberate attempt at a non-sectarian account of the life of Jesus, *TLOL* was composed in order that his children might come to understand Christianity, and what it meant to be a Christian, exclusively through the person of Jesus. To that end, he wanted to portray Jesus as the exemplar of Christian character and virtue. Accordingly, a clear picture

of the basic character of Jesus was central to Dickens's purposes in writing *TLOL*, and from its very beginning, he offered that clarity. "No one ever lived," Dickens asserted, "who was so good, so kind, so gentle, and so sorry for all people who did wrong, or were in any way ill or miserable, as he was" (11). Dickens's basic characterization of the person of Jesus in *TLOL* is simply a broader development of that assertion informed by certain virtues or qualities he identified as principal aspects of Jesus' basic character.

In the first place, that Jesus was good and did what was good is his most distinctive characteristic. The sinful woman at the house of Simon the Pharisee "trusted so much in his goodness" (43); he was feared and hated by the religious leaders "because of his goodness" (62), but in spite of that, he continued "to do good" (87); and the people followed him "because they knew He did nothing but Good" (47). It is clearly this goodness that Dickens wanted to establish as central to the basic character of Jesus and to which he wanted his children to be most receptive. "Remember!—It is Christianity TO DO GOOD always—even to those who do evil to us," he emphatically declared in his conclusion (127). Of what precisely this goodness consisted is more clearly and fully articulated in the remaining character qualities of Jesus that we see articulated in *TLOL*.

A second quality of the basic character of Jesus that emerges from *TLOL*, and that is an element of his goodness, is his compassion. When Dickens exhorted his children to look after the needs of the poor, he asked them to think "how Jesus Christ went among them [the poor] and taught them, and thought them worthy of his care" (28). For Jesus "was always merciful and tender" (34), Dickens observed, and just as the woman at Simon's house trusted in his goodness, she also trusted in his compassion (43). Jesus "took pity" on the man at the pool of Bethesda, healing him (46), and "full of pity" for the palsied man, healed him (31). When he visited Mary and Martha upon the death of their brother Lazarus, "Jesus

was so full of compassion for their sorrow, that He wept, too” (81). Perhaps the most significant thing in each of these encounters is that Jesus’ compassion and mercy is not mentioned in the Biblical accounts. Jesus’ compassionate response to the plight of infirmity or sin in these episodes in *TLOL* is Dickens’s own perception of Jesus’ character as he read it in the Gospel accounts.

A third facet of Jesus’ character in *TLOL* is that he was a servant, one who consistently thought of others and looked after their needs. On the verge of beginning his public ministry, Jesus spent his forty days and forty nights in the wilderness “praying that he might be of use to men and women” (24). Clearly, the story of Jesus as it unfolds in *TLOL* is one of service to others. We have just seen above how Jesus was always mindful of the poor, but his concern was not limited to the poor alone. In fact, “No one ever loved all people so well and so truly,” Dickens observed, “as He did” (58). Such genuine love was manifested in Jesus’ desire to “be of use to men and women.” The acted parable in the footwashing recorded in John 13.1-17 is rendered by Dickens in the larger context of this concept of servanthood in which Jesus provides an example for his disciples to follow. Jesus explains his action to a reluctant Peter by telling him that, “He did this, in order that they, remembering it, might be always kind and gentle to one another, and might know no pride or ill-will among themselves” (88).

Another significant aspect of Jesus’ character in *TLOL* is that he was the model of forgiveness. On several occasions, we observe Jesus either teaching on forgiveness or offering forgiveness. For instance, he offers forgiveness to the sinful woman at Simon’s house (44); he offers forgiveness to the woman taken in adultery who was brought before him by the angry mob (62-64); and he asks God to forgive the soldiers who “ill-used him in many cruel ways” just prior to his crucifixion (105). Accordingly, Dickens includes two parables in

*TLOL* in which Jesus teaches the importance of forgiveness (44; 59-60). On both occasions, Dickens follows his account of the Gospel story with his own exhortation teaching his children the necessity of a forgiving spirit. It is this forgiving spirit to which Dickens referred in the concluding exhortation in *TLOL* and which seems to be a critical part of “the life and lessons of Our Lord Jesus Christ” that he wished his children to remember and act upon.

A fifth characteristic which seems to draw all the others into its sphere is Dickens’s portrayal of Jesus as the consummate teacher. One of the most conspicuous aspects of Jesus’ mission and ministry in *TLOL* is his teaching. Dickens referred to teaching in connection with and as an integral part of Jesus ministry no fewer than sixteen times. In some broader descriptive statements, we learn from *TLOL* that Jesus taught men and women “to be better” (24), and that he taught them “how to love God and how to hope to go to heaven after death”(34). We can also gather from the eight parables Dickens chose to include in *TLOL* what he thought the import and essence of Jesus’ teaching might have been. In addition, Dickens included eleven other passages in which he saw either an overt or implicit didactic purpose.<sup>104</sup> In all of this, Dickens presents the teaching of Jesus almost exclusively as moral-ethical instruction that encompasses those Christian virtues of goodness, compassion, humility, forgiveness and service that are exemplified in Jesus’ character. Thus, Dickens portrayed Jesus preeminently as good, developing that idea more fully in the basic qualities and

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<sup>104</sup> The parables included are The Parable of the Unjust Servant (Matt. 18.21-35), The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20.1-16), The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37), A Parable on Humility (Luke 14.7-11), The Parable of the Feast for the Poor (Luke 14.16-24), The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11-32), The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31), and The Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18.9-14). Those passages in which Dickens sees either an obvious or implied didactic purpose include The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), the healing of the man with the withered hand (Matthew 12.1-14), the Parable of the Two Debtors told to Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7.36-50), the story of the woman taken in adultery (John 7.53-8.11), Jesus’ identification of the greatest commandment (Matt. 22.34-40; Mark 12.28-31; Luke 10.25-28), the episode of the widow’s mite (Mark 12.41-44; Luke 20.19-26), the footwashing (John 13.1-17), the occasion of the Last Supper (Matt. 26.26-30; Mark 14.22-26; Luke 22.17-20), Jesus being ill-used by Pilate’s soldiers (Matt. 27.27-31; Mark 15.16-20; John 19.1-5), Jesus’ conversation with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24.13-43), and the post-resurrection teaching of Jesus to his disciples (Matt. 28.16-20; Mark 16.14-20; Luke 24.44-53; I Cor. 15.5-7; Acts 1.1-11).

virtues outlined above. In this way, Dickens presented to his children the basic character of Jesus as exemplar.

One last observation concerning Dickens's portrayal of Jesus in *TLOL* is not only pertinent to the basic character of Jesus, but is also able to introduce our discussion of the essential nature of Jesus in *TLOL*. It seems clear that Dickens portrayed Jesus as cognizant of his identity and his mission. He informs us that Jesus performed miracles in order that "people might know he was not a common man, and might believe what he taught them and also believe that God had sent him" (25-26). Whether Jesus is simply being described here or we are being informed of his self-consciousness, we learn that Jesus was quite aware of his being and his purpose. We learn, too, that Jesus told his disciples:

That he must one day go back to Jerusalem where he would suffer a great deal, and where he would certainly be put to Death. But he said to them that on the third day after he was dead, he would rise from the grave, and ascend to Heaven, where he would sit at the right hand of God, beseeching God's pardon to sinners. (52-53)

This is clearly not only a prediction of the future, but is also recognition by Jesus of his unique identity and mission. The last two statements—about Jesus' ascension to heaven and sitting at the right hand of God—are not found in the Gospel sources on which Dickens has drawn here, but they are found in the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed and the Apostles' Creed in what must have seemed to Dickens a similar context.<sup>105</sup> Dickens's inclusion of

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<sup>105</sup> It seems clear that Dickens's sources here are Matt. 16.21; Mark 8.31; and Luke 9.21-22. But Dickens's statements on ascending to heaven, sitting at the right hand of God, and beseeching God's pardon to sinners are not found in these verses or in the larger passages of which these verses are a part. There does seem to be a clear overlap, however, between the Gospel material Dickens uses and similar statements in the creeds (The Nicene Creed, The Athanasian Creed and the Apostles' Creed). Following their respective affirmations of Jesus suffering, dying and being buried, each of the creeds includes that Jesus rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father. It is possible that Dickens used the material from the creeds to express in a sort of summary the material that rounds out the larger Synoptic accounts (i.e., Matt. 16.27-28; Mark 8.38-9.1; Luke 9.26-27). It is more likely, however, that the material from the creeds naturally suggested itself to Dickens's mind following the almost formulaic sound of Matt. 16.21; Mark 8.31; and Luke 9.21-22. Dickens's closing phrase, "beseeching God's pardon for sinners" is found neither in the Synoptics nor the Creeds. It is an addition by Dickens possibly inspired by a second overlap of "the right hand of God" and Romans 8.34, "Who *is* he that condemneth? *It is* Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at

such statements serves the purpose of conveying a sense of intuitive knowledge and deliberate purpose in Jesus' self-identity here.

It is Jesus' understanding himself to be the Son of God, however, that more than anything else defines his essential character and self-understanding. God's own declaration concerning Jesus—made twice—that “This is my beloved Son” (24, 54) is answered in Jesus identifying God peculiarly as his Father (117). Furthermore, in the various instances in which others claim that Jesus called himself the Son of God (e.g., 47, 81, 105), Dickens wants us to believe that he, in fact, did so. That is, Dickens's Jesus understood himself to be the Son of God. As such, then, we have arrived at the key ascription regarding the essential nature of Jesus in *TLOL*. Precisely how Dickens understood and used this ascription in *TLOL* demands further exploration.

### §5.3 THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF JESUS IN *THE LIFE OF OUR LORD*

Most narratives of the life of Jesus, especially those that are of the sort of *TLOL*, will likely include a characterization not only of his basic character but also of his essential nature. Accordingly, our study of the Christology of *TLOL* naturally raises questions about the essential nature of Jesus. That is, is Jesus the Son of God? And if he is the Son of God, does Dickens mean by that that he is co-equal with God, the second person of the triune Godhead? Or does he use “Son of God” as an ascription that merely points to Jesus' anointing as Messiah and his mission as the appointed messenger of God's salvation? In the study of *TLOL*, consideration of the essential nature of Jesus is significant because of the insight it can provide for our understanding of Dickens's Christian thought and concept of Jesus. It also invites us to examine the alleged role of Unitarianism in Dickens's life and to consider

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the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.”

the degree to which Unitarianism may or may not have shaped his Christian thought and worldview.

### §5.3.1 *JESUS AS SON OF GOD IN THE LIFE OF OUR LORD*

When Dickens referred to Jesus in *TLOL*, he used the ascription “Jesus” or “Jesus Christ” more than any other. Together, he used these names well over 100 times and both appear to have been used by him essentially as proper names for Jesus. Dickens also employed the title “Saviour” or “Our Saviour” over forty times in *TLOL* and seems partial to that ascription when he speaks of Jesus in his other work. As we will see in the next chapter, and consider in more detail there, Dickens explicitly defined “Saviour” in chapter three of *TLOL* and so it has significance for his Christology. Perhaps the most significant ascription in *TLOL*, however, is “Son of God”. While Jesus is called “Son of God” or referred to as God’s “son” only twelve times in *TLOL*, Dickens’s use of the designation and his choice of episodes from which it emerges are of central importance in helping to determine more precisely Dickens’s Christological thought particularly in regard to the person of Jesus and his deity in *TLOL*.

Dickens’s use of “Son of God” in *TLOL* raises questions relative to his own understanding of the title: Did Dickens’s use of the title attribute deity to Jesus? Do Dickens’s alleged Unitarian sympathies suggest anything about his understanding and use of the title? How did Christians typically understand this ascription in the first half of the nineteenth century? Our answers to these questions will help us to determine how Dickens employed the title “Son of God” and what meaning it had for him as a title for Jesus.

A typical nineteenth-century orthodox Anglican understanding of the title “Son of God” was informed by two basic ideas. First, it was understood to point to Jesus’ deity as God the Son incarnate and to his unique relationship to God the Father. It was acknowl-

edged, of course, that the Scriptures did refer to human beings and angels as “sons of God” (e.g., Job 1.6; John 1.12; Romans 8.14), but orthodox scholars and commentators maintained that the Scriptures portrayed Jesus as uniquely the “Son of God” in his relationship to the Father. In his comments on the declaration of the centurion in Mark 15.39, “Truly, this man was the Son of God”, Joseph Hall identified the Son of God with God the Father: “He [Jesus] suffers patiently; [...] the frame of nature suffers with Him, this is proper to the God of nature, the Son of God” (D’Oyly and Mant 4: II, 11Z4). Olshausen’s comments on Jesus’ baptism, in which God declares Jesus His “beloved Son”, are even more to the point:

That the term ‘Son of God’ refers here to the Divine, eternal nature of the Son, is shown by John i. 34. In the baptism of the Spirit, the Saviour himself was assured of his being perfected in that nature and was manifested first of all to John. Ἀγαπητός = אֲהִיבָהּ, Εὐδοκεῖν ἐν τῷ = אֲהִיבָהּ. Nothing but his own image is well-pleasing to God. (1: 166)

A second idea informing the nineteenth-century understanding of the title “Son of God” was its connection with the title “Messiah”, or God’s “Anointed”. Just how the two titles were connected, however, is probably more important than the connection itself. When seen against the backdrop of Psalm 2, God’s declaration at Jesus’ baptism, “This is my beloved son”, is understood to include the idea that Jesus is God’s “Anointed”, the Messiah. Thus, William Hales in D’Oyly and Mant would comment:

The Jews allowed that the Messiah was to be the Son of God, applied to Him the words of the Psalmist, Ps. ii. 7, ‘Thou art My Son;’ see also 2 Sam. vii. 14. It appears, from comparing several passages of the New Testament, that the titles Messiah and Son of God were the same. Compare Matt. xxvi. 63; Luke xxii. 67, 70; John i. 41, 49; and Matt. xvi. 16, 20; with Mark viii. 29; Luke ix. 20. (4: II, 11H)

While Hale’s comments here are accurate as far as they go, the title “Son of God” was not understood simply as another way to express Jesus’ messianic office. True enough, “Son of God” was “Messiah” and “Messiah” was the “Son of God”, but the relationship between the two ascriptions as conjoined in the person of Jesus elicits a necessary clarifica-

tion: Jesus did not become the Son by virtue of his appointment as Messiah; rather, because he was the eternal Son of God, he was designated Messiah. Olshausen's theological assessment of the title "Son of God" in comments on Luke 1.35 is representative: "The phrase usually denotes, in a *metaphysical* sense, the eternal existence of Christ, which he has with the Father, his relation as God to God—as the manifestation of the unseen God" (1: 98).

Olshausen further qualifies the above comments of Hales in his observations on John 1.48-50:

The proof that ὁ. τ. θ. [ὁ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ] was merely a name of the Messiah cannot be adduced from any other quarter (as we have shown in our remarks on Luke i. 35); nay, John x. 33, ff. expressly shews that the Jews themselves considered it arrogance and blasphemy that the Messiah should call himself ὁ. τ. θ., and therefore no false Messiah appropriated this name.<sup>106</sup> (3: 369)

In any case, the more orthodox Christian scholars and commentators understood deity to be implicit in the concept of Messiah when applied to Jesus. Messiah, understood in terms of the New Testament documents, had become a pregnant term made so by its associations with the title Son of God. Olshausen summarizes, "We must, therefore, say that 'Son of God' does indeed designate Messiah, but so far as he was born of the essence of the Father; that, therefore, whoever so called him, either acknowledged him as such, or blamed him for declaring himself to be such" (1: 100). That is, Jesus is appointed Messiah by virtue of his being the eternal Son of God; he was not designated Son by his appointment as Messiah.

While nineteenth-century Unitarians readily accepted the title of Son of God for Jesus, they refused to do so without precise qualification. Indeed, an insistence on the precise

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<sup>106</sup> Olshausen adds an important note to these comments: "In the passage John x. 32, ff. the Jews wish that he would declare himself to be the Messiah, while their purpose was to stone him if he should call himself Son of God; in this they perceive a blasphemous assumption, which they had not found in the name of Messiah. [...] the circumstance that no false Messiah ever ventured to call himself the Son of God appears to me a decisive proof that this appellation, as also the name 'Son of Man,' was unknown to them [the Jews], that it did not occur in the usage of Jewish language, nay, that it was shuddered at as blasphemy" (3: 369 note).

use of terms and language could be seen to be characteristic of nineteenth-century Unitarians. They thought of themselves uniquely and exclusively as strict biblicists in the formulation of doctrine and set themselves apart in that way. Dickens's influential and close friend, the Unitarian minister Edward Tagart wrote:

The admirable Chillingworth [William, 1602-44], himself a Unitarian, was the author of the celebrated maxim, "The Bible, and the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants;" and since his time the Unitarians are almost, if not altogether, the only sect of Protestants who have made the language of the Bible their Creed, its universally admitted truths their Articles. (15)

Accordingly, nineteenth-century Unitarians were careful to qualify biblical language and terminology with precise definitions. The Unitarian, Richard Wright in *An Essay on the Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, as Distinguished from His Deity* (1814) observed, "In the discussion of religious subjects, especially such as are controversial, words should be used with the greatest precision. The want of this has produced many mistakes" (3). James Yates was also adamant about the precise use of terms. Like Wright, and not unexpectedly, Yates did not object to the use of certain words or terms in relation to Jesus. In his sermon, *The Scriptural Meaning of the Title "Saviour" as Applied to Our Lord* (1823), however, he qualified his receptivity to such like terms, "I only wish that they may be used in their proper sense, the sense in which the corresponding Greek words were used by the Apostles and Evangelists" (5).

Given adequate qualifications, then, the Unitarian was quite comfortable with the title "Son of God" for Jesus. William Worsley, in *Six Discourses Intended to Explain the Principles of Unitarianism* (1845) observed concerning the titles "Christ" and "the Son of God", "They equally denote a divine appointment, and are appropriate, in the highest sense, to that prophet who brought life and immortality to light, and who was approved of God, by the signs and wonders and miracles which God did by him" (22). He added further:

That name [Jesus] he bore until he was about thirty years old, when he was set apart and devoted himself to ministry, and then, and not until then, he became known as the Christ the Son of God. He gained the title then not by birth, but by appointment, which is clearly intimated by Peter in his discourse delivered to the Jews on the day of Pentecost. (26)

In this way, Unitarians accepted the title “Son of God”, properly qualified, for Jesus. For them, it was an ascription that was synonymous with “Christ”, or “Messiah”, and was bestowed upon Jesus most likely at his baptism. Consider Henry Ware’s comments in *The Life of the Saviour* (1833). In his account the angel’s announcement of Jesus’ birth to Mary, Ware connected “Messiah” not only to “Son of God” but to “Jesus” and “Saviour” as well:

The angel went on; told her that God had designed for her the great honor of being mother to the Messiah; that she should call his name Jesus, (that is, Saviour,) because he should save his people from their sins; and that because of his miraculous birth, he should be called the son [sic] of God. (7)

He then further clarified the connection in his account of the baptism of Jesus:

Then came the moment for announcing the Messiah to the world. The heavens opened, and the spirit descended in visible form like a dove, and alighted on him; and at the same moment a voice was heard from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” This was the first public attestation to the Messiahship of Jesus. (37)

For Unitarians, then, the ascription “Son of God” was an appointed title equivalent to the title “Messiah”, and not possessed of any connotations of deity. Jesus was surely the Son of God in a special way, but that did not necessitate understanding the title as attributing to him deity. For the Unitarian, Jesus was a man, a human being. He may have been an extraordinary man, perhaps, but he was a man nonetheless.<sup>107</sup> Harriet Martineau is representative in her comments: “They [Jesus’ disciples] received him as their Messiah; but in all

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<sup>107</sup> Unitarians categorically rejected the orthodox tri-unity of God. Thomas Belsham, in a sermon entitled *The Present State of the Religious Parties in England* (1818), described the central doctrine of Unitarianism in simple and concise language as “the great doctrine of the proper unity of God, and the simple humanity of Jesus Christ” (24). Belsham further described this “proper unity of God” in terms of its centrality: “This unspeakably important truth,—that the Father ALONE is God, and the only proper object of religious worship [...] constitutes the sum and substance of the Christian doctrine” (27-28).

besides they remained Jews, ascribing to God alone all divine attributes, worshiping him alone, and paying honour to Jesus only as his most exalted messenger” (5). Martineau further clarified the important distinction between Jesus and God when she wrote of the humanity of Jesus:

Concerning the nature of Christ, we have already declared that, in accordance with what we believe to have been the faith of the primitive ages, we regard the Saviour as human in his nature; but superhuman in his powers, and divinely appointed and sanctioned in his office. The title “Son of God” is peculiarly and indefeasibly his own; for to no other being as far as our knowledge extends, has so immeasurable a portion of authority, of power, of grace and truth, been vouchsafed [...]. (7)

Without doubt, Unitarians honored and revered Jesus as God’s “most exalted messenger”, but were careful to affirm his plain human nature. Jesus was a man chosen by God in the same way Moses and the prophets were, and while deserving preeminent honor among them, was to remain among them in his humanity. As such, the Unitarian could call Jesus “Son of God” in terms of his exalted character (Martineau) or in terms of his messianic appointment (Worsley, Ware), but the title in no way implied his deity.

This, of course, represented one of the primary distinctions between Unitarianism and more orthodox trinitarian thought. It also helped to create some of the ambiguity in *TLOL*. That is, given the variable of the possibility of Unitarian influence, and apart from careful scrutiny, it is not readily apparent how Dickens might have used the title “Son of God” in reference to Jesus. Some scholars, having considered the possible influence of Unitarianism upon Dickens and *TLOL*, have maintained that he does not portray Jesus as the incarnate deity there. Janet Larson, for instance, maintains that Dickens “articulates no clear doctrine of the incarnation” and as to the use of divine titles in reference to Jesus, such as the Son of God, “makes no such claims himself.” Rather, she says, he is careful to put such ascriptions “in the mouths of characters who ‘said’ or ‘believed’ them” (11). It is true that Dickens’s account of the birth narrative includes no clear suggestion of incarnation, but this

is most likely a concession to his audience—his children. Furthermore, that the title “Son of God” is found most often on the lips of observers is precisely what is found in the Gospels themselves.<sup>108</sup> That Dickens “makes no such claims himself” is not at all remarkable. What would be remarkable, not to mention suspect, is for Dickens to have forced his own assertions or claims that Jesus was the Son of God into his text when they were not implied or explicit in his Gospel sources.

Michael Piret, too, insists that there is little in *TLOL* that would suggest the deity of Jesus and that *TLOL* “is probably best described as an ‘inconsistently Unitarian’ book” (162). In his discussion of the title Son of God, Piret suggests, “this status will, it seems, be earned and conferred, in a figurative sense, by some kind of adoption” (165). Like Larson, Piret points out that Dickens includes in *TLOL* no mention of the virgin birth and that Dickens’s “apparent denial of the idea that Christ was ‘True God of True God’ is articulated most clearly in the opening chapter of the book” (163) in Dickens’s account of the nativity. Because much of this debate centers around Dickens’s account of the nativity, a more detailed examination of it should prove beneficial.

Of central importance to the analysis of any passage of *TLOL* is a recognition of the fact that it is composed of material taken directly from the New Testament Gospels, deliberately selected and conscientiously harmonized by Dickens. This is of particular importance when we come to a passage like the nativity account, which Dickens has taken the liberty to paraphrase. Although it might be tempting to suggest that Dickens is freely rewriting the nativity account, as both Larson and Piret seem wont to do, closer consideration would indicate that Dickens, while clearly paraphrasing, is, in fact, attempting to maintain a close

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<sup>108</sup> Of the 28 times the ascription “Son of God” is found in the KJV Gospels (18 occurrences in the Synoptics and 10 in John), it is found only four times on Jesus’ lips, all four of which occur only in John; three of those occurrences are spoken in the third person.

connection with his Lukan source.<sup>109</sup> Recognizing, then, that Dickens was intent upon relating the Gospel story by means of a careful presentation of his selected Gospel sources will help us to better understand his meaning especially in accounts with which he has taken the liberty of extensive paraphrasing. It reminds us, too, that Dickens pays close attention to his Gospel sources and that his habit is to attempt to reproduce the biblical accounts not only as accurately as he can, but also as consistent with the wording of the text as attention to his audience allows.

It is significant that Dickens chose to relate the account of the birth of Jesus using Luke 2:4-20 almost exclusively. While possible intimations of Matthew might be identified in Dickens's rendering, there is probably nothing added into the account in *TLOL* that cannot be directly or indirectly attributed to Luke. Dickens's use of Luke, therefore, seems quite reasonable considering only Matthew and Luke contain accounts of the birth of Jesus and the events immediately surrounding it, and only Luke does so in any detail. Moreover, Matthew's account is largely taken up by the events that involve Joseph in particular, placing him at the center of the narrative. It makes sense, then, that Dickens would choose to follow Luke alone here.

As we know, too, that Dickens was conscientiously attentive to the use of space in *TLOL* and the amount of material he could include to relate any particular episode,<sup>110</sup> it is not especially surprising that he should elect to omit the Annunciation in Luke 1.26-38. Admittedly, it would have been quite easy for Dickens to make a succinct gesture to the virgin birth, at least, and his omission of such a simple gesture does leave the impression that

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<sup>109</sup> To the degree that paraphrasing in its very exercise involves interpretation, Dickens can be said to be interpreting here. We need not assume, however, that Dickens is necessarily departing dramatically from a plain understanding of his source material.

<sup>110</sup> The original manuscript of *TLOL* indicates that Dickens had pre-numbered his chapters, allowing himself four pages for each chapter. He followed that plan carefully through chapter 6. Chapter 7 extends almost three pages past his designated limit, and he attempts to make up space in chapters 8 through 10.

he wanted to avoid it. It is quite plausible in the case of *TLOL*, however, to suggest that such an omission is likely the result of reasons other than his aversion to a particular doctrine.

Obviously, his concern for the space available, predetermined in his manuscript, would have played in decisions concerning the selection or omission of Gospel material. It is also quite likely that such an omission was a concession to his children in order to spare them the inclusion of a perplexing explanation. More substantially, if Dickens were not interested in teaching doctrine to his children, there would be no good reason to divert their attention from the story at hand with what would be to a child a curious mystery. We have every reason to believe, then, that even while other children's Gospels might include explanations of the virgin birth and incarnation, Dickens might well have felt both doctrines, imperfectly understood by adults, need not be presented in an account of the story of Jesus' birth to children.<sup>111</sup>

Moreover, when it is understood that this material was intended to be read aloud by Dickens to his children, there is little that would cause one to consider his rendering suspect. As it stands, this account is precisely what Dickens, or any other parent, might have read to an audience of five of his own children between the ages of two and ten,<sup>112</sup> especially if he were not particularly interested in attempting to teach theological doctrine directly. Given these facts, this account, as Dickens has recorded it, represents his understanding of the

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<sup>111</sup> Adam Clarke's comments on the Incarnation are noteworthy in this regard: "How this [Incarnation] could be, we cannot tell; indeed the union of the soul with its body is not less mysterious; we can just as easily comprehend the former as the latter [...]. These things are so; but how they are so belongs to God alone to comprehend; and, as the manner is not explained in any part of Divine revelation, though the facts themselves are plain; yet the proofs and evidences of the reasons of these facts, and the manner of their operation, lie beyond the sphere of human knowledge" (Clarke, *Christian Theology* 121-22).

<sup>112</sup> If, for instance, Dickens read *TLOL* to his children on Christmas Eve of 1849, Kate would have been 10 years old, Walter 8, Francis 5, Alfred 4, and Sydney 2. Henry, born 16 January 1849, would have been 11 months old. The two eldest, Charley and Mary, would have been twelve and eleven respectively.

story of Jesus' birth as told by Luke rendered in words and ideas appropriate to his audience. It was deliberately composed as an oral presentation of the nativity story, intended for an audience of children, and free of language that might need theological explanation.

If, then, we can entertain the reasons just given as plausible, and if we can consider that Dickens was paraphrasing this portion of Luke's second chapter consistent with his method, there is very little here to see as beyond the purview of Luke's second chapter nor is there any reason to suppose the account to have been manipulated or recast according to Unitarian ideas. That Dickens omits the virgin birth and the incarnation is consistent with Luke at this point. In fact, Dickens's, "There is a child born to-day in the city of Bethlehem near here, who will grow up to be so good that God will love him as his own son", is his own rendering of Luke's "For unto you is born in the city of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord".<sup>113</sup> It is Dickens, then, who introduces an explicit reference to a filial relationship into the account here, not Luke.

That Dickens refers to Joseph as Jesus' "father" is not remarkable and need not be understood as the introduction of Unitarian prejudice. For children, the title father would most likely have suggested to them a domestic role, not a procreative one.<sup>114</sup> Likewise, "that God will love him as his own son" need not be construed as Unitarian influence. To try to help children understand the relationship between this baby just born and God, and for someone who was being careful to avoid theological complexities, this must have seemed the effective way to articulate it. Dickens's rendering could easily be understood to mean that

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<sup>113</sup> It might be argued here that, while Dickens has added material about Jesus as God's Son, he has omitted Luke's important mention of Jesus as Saviour. Clearly, Dickens does omit the reference to Jesus as Saviour here, but the entirety of *TLOL* shows that Dickens does not shy from "Saviour" as an appropriate ascription for Jesus. Dickens defines this title and uses it no fewer than forty times in *TLOL*. In fact, it seems to be Dickens's favourite title for Jesus outside of *TLOL*.

<sup>114</sup> It is, perhaps, significant to note that in Luke 2.27 and Luke 2.41 both Mary and Joseph are referred to as Jesus' parents, and in Luke 2.48 Mary herself refers to Joseph as Jesus' "father".

God will love Jesus as His own son because he is the object of special love by God; but it could also be understood to mean that God will love him as His own son because they share a special and unique relationship. Indeed, Dickens's use the title "Son of God" to refer to Jesus as he does in *TLOL* would seem to support the argument that Dickens has chosen this way to indicate Jesus' authentic sonship in the birth narrative.

It is quite unnecessary, then, to read a Unitarian bias into Dickens's nativity account. It is, after all, only the beginning of the story, and Dickens is not trying to present the full-orbed portrait of Jesus in the simple account of his birth. If one were predisposed to read the nativity account in *TLOL* as Unitarian, he or she would find nothing there with which to disagree. By the same token, it is not difficult to see in this nativity account a more or less mainstream description shaped to a child's understanding by Dickens. In light of Dickens's desire to present to his children a Jesus unencumbered by sectarian and dogmatic prejudice, this might be considered a most successful presentation of his birth.

After the nativity account, Dickens's indications of Jesus' sonship in *TLOL* appear to take on a more obviously conventional trinitarian hue, suggesting a unique, one-of-a-kind filial relationship between Jesus and God. The baby of *TLOL* born in Bethlehem whom "God will love as his own son" will quickly become the unqualified Son of God of the Gospel accounts. In fact, Dickens's use and development of the title "Son of God" and his apparent gestures to the deity of Jesus present a temptation to find a much more orthodox portrait of Jesus in *TLOL* than Dickens scholars have accepted to this point.

When Dickens used the term "Son of God" in *TLOL*, he used it economically and provocatively, with the more theologically nuanced "Son of God" terminology finding its significance not in the frequency of its occurrence but in the nature of its occurrence. Specifically, Dickens selected for inclusion in *TLOL* the most Christologically charged "Son of

God” passages in the Gospels. He reported God’s declaration of Jesus as Son at Jesus’ Baptism and His Transfiguration, (24, 54) both recorded in the Synoptics, and absent in John; the Centurion’s declaration at the Cross (113), reported in all three Synoptics, is found in Matthew and Mark as, “Truly, this was the Son of God”; and the confession of the disciples after Jesus had walked on water and calmed the sea (48-51), reported in Matthew, Mark and John, is found only in Matthew as, “Of a truth, thou art the Son of God.”<sup>115</sup> The significance of these passages in the Gospels is that they provide testimony of Jesus as the Son of God from the voice of God Himself, from the Apostles and from a representative from among the Gentiles. Dickens even included the important Gospel testimony of demons who also recognized Jesus as the Son of God (39).

One observation to be made about these various accounts is the way Dickens used the title “Son of God” naturally and without qualification. These usages indicate that, however Dickens may have understood the theological significance of the title, he did not waver over the fact that Jesus was, indeed, the Son of God. In both the account of Jesus’ baptism and of the Transfiguration, Dickens clearly and without qualification reported the words of God verbatim identifying Jesus as His Son. In simple and explicit assertions in the accounts of the raising of Jairus’ daughter and Jesus’ anointing by the woman at Simon’s house, Dickens identified Jesus as God’s Son apart from any Gospel testimony. In his account of the raising of Jairus’ daughter, Dickens added his own conclusion to the story, “Oh what a sight it must have been to see her parents clasp her in their arms, and kiss her, and thank God, and Jesus Christ His Son, for such great mercy!” (33). In his account of Jesus’ being

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<sup>115</sup> This is one of several instances in which Dickens as sole editor and composer of *TLOL* could have easily avoided a passage that might have caused his intended purposes in *TLOL* to be misconstrued. Mark and John have nothing in their accounts about the declaration of the disciples that Jesus must be the Son of God. Only Matthew includes that declaration. Based on the renderings of Mark and John, Dickens could easily have omitted the declaration if he were uneasy about using the title “Son of God” for Jesus.

anointed by the woman at Simon's house (43-44), Dickens described the woman as one "who had led a bad and sinful life, and was ashamed that the Son of God should see her". These examples demonstrate that Dickens had no qualms about identifying Jesus as the Son of God.

As has been noted above, however, a Unitarian would not shy from using the title "Son of God" for Jesus even as Dickens has employed it in the passages just considered. But further consideration shows that Dickens's use of the title seems to go beyond that with which a Unitarian might feel comfortable. In the first instance, Dickens use of "Son of God" in the accounts of Jesus' baptism and his transfiguration pose an interesting dilemma. On the one hand, both accounts nuance the title in such a way that the Unitarian would likely ascribe its use to identifying Jesus as the Messiah. Dickens, on the other hand, developed no messianic theology associated with Jesus at any point in *TLOL*. Indeed, nothing in *TLOL* would lead us to believe that Dickens associated the title "Son of God" with Messiah.<sup>116</sup> Taken together with Dickens's further use and development of the title, this could suggest that he understood "Son of God" as signifying something about Jesus other and more than his messianic office.

A second observation to be taken into account is Dickens's rendering of the Gospels' report of the centurion's confession with a collective declaration by the guard at the Cross, "Surely this was the Son of God!" (113). In nineteenth-century Anglican theological thought, this was considered a central and key affirmation of Christ's divine Sonship. Beilby Porteus identified the characteristic orthodox interpretation of this event in D'Oyly and Mant:

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<sup>116</sup> In contrast to *TLOL*, Henry Ware's Unitarian *The Life of the Saviour* is careful to introduce and develop the idea of Jesus' messiahship as a primary feature. It should be noted that Dickens makes one reference to Jesus as the son of David (87), but only in passing, and provides no further development of the idea of Jesus as Messiah here or anywhere else in *TLOL*.

Here then we have a testimony to the divine character of our Lord, which must be considered as in the highest degree impartial and incorrupt: the honest, unsolicited testimony of a plain man, a soldier and a heathen; the testimony, not of one who was prejudiced in favour of Christ and His religion, but of one, who by habit and education was probably strongly prejudiced against them. (4: II, 11T)

Furthermore, Dickens had an attractive option open to him, in terms of a more measured Unitarian expression in reporting this incident. While Matthew (27.54) and Mark (15.39) report the declaration as, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Matthew omits “man”), Luke (23.47) has, “Certainly, this was a righteous man.” Luke’s statement is perfectly suited to a Unitarian expression of the person of Jesus. That Dickens was quite aware of Luke’s account is demonstrated by the fact that he concluded his own account observing that the people who witnessed the crucifixion, in the end, “smote upon their breasts, and went fearfully and sadly, home” (*TLOL* 113), a detail found only in Luke. Dickens’s choice, then, of the title “Son of God” over the more Unitarian-friendly “righteous man” may be indicative of a comfort level with the title “Son of God” that went beyond that of a committed Unitarian.<sup>117</sup>

A third observation that seems to undermine a plain Unitarian understanding of Jesus in *TLOL* concerns Dickens twice connecting the religious leaders’ desire to kill Jesus to their accusations that he called himself the Son of God. The first accusation comes in a transitional passage in *TLOL* after Dickens had just related the account of the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda (only in John 5:1-8). Dickens pointed out that “many Jews” witnessed this healing and, as a result, “they said to one another that Jesus Christ should be killed, because he cured people on the Sabbath Day (which was against their strict law) and because he called himself the Son of God” (46-47). It is significant that John has,

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<sup>117</sup> It should be noted, however, that while Henry Ware reports the declaration of the centurion from Matthew (228), as Dickens does here, he has also demarcated the title Son of God synonymous with Messiah so that he clearly intends the expression to be understood as such. See Ware 26-35 for his explanation of the messianic expectation of the Jews; 36-37 for his understanding of the baptism relative to the messianic mission.

“Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the Sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God” (5:18). Implicit in Dickens’s understanding that Jesus should be killed because he called himself the Son of God is the idea that doing so is blasphemy, that is, making himself equal with God and worthy of the same honor as the Father (John 5:23). It is notable, too, that Dickens has rendered John’s “but also said God was his Father, making himself equal with God” as “because he called himself the Son of God” indicating that, for him, the ascription “Son of God” is more than just a synonym for “Messiah”.

Daniel Whitby’s comments, representative of nineteenth-century Anglican commentators on this passage, are noteworthy:

Here note that he is here said to stile [sic] God his Father after a manner proper and peculiar to himself, as being  $\acute{o}$   $\acute{\iota}$  $\delta$  $\iota$  $\omicron$  $\varsigma$   $\theta$  $\epsilon$  $\acute{o}$  $\varsigma$   $\upsilon$  $\acute{\iota}$  $\omicron$  $\varsigma$ , ‘the proper Son of God,’ not as Adam and the angels were, by creation, nor as good men are by adoption only [...]. It is therefore evident the Jews thought Christ, by saying, ‘God was his Father,’ made himself his Son, in such a manner as rendered him equal to God in nature, as a son is to his father; and yet they thought he did this, not as the Socinians say, by saying he did the works of his Father, but as their words testify by calling God his Father in a sense peculiar to himself; and hence they accuse him of blasphemy for saying that he was the Son of God. Matt. xxvi. 63, 64, 65. John x. 33, 36. which they never do for saying he was the Messiah, or that he did the works of God. (1: 433)

Whitby’s comments here indicate how orthodox Christians typically understood this passage and suggest, by implication, a basic framework by which Dickens could have approached it himself. Note, also, how Whitby challenges the Socinian—or Unitarian—explanation of the passage.

A second accusation comes in Dickens’s account of Jesus before Pilate in John 19:4-12. As the chief priests are arguing with Pilate and accusing Jesus before him, Dickens reports in *TLOL* that they cried out, “He called himself the Son of God; and that, by the Jewish Law is Death!” (105). This renders John’s “The Jews answered him, We have a law,

and by our law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God” (19:7). In this account and the one immediately above, Dickens recognized that in taking the ascription “Son of God” to himself, Jesus committed an offense that warranted the death penalty for blasphemy.

It is likely that Dickens had this in mind when, in his account of Jesus before Caiaphas, he wrote, “Jesus answered little; but the Scribes and Priests agreed that He was guilty of blasphemy, and should be put to death” (98-99). It appears that Dickens began this account depending upon John (18:12-14, 19-24), but added details from the Synoptics.<sup>118</sup> What is significant, however, is that the accusation of blasphemy comes only in Matthew and Mark and only after Jesus has responded positively to the question by the High Priest concerning his identity as Son of God (in Matthew, “I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God”; in Mark, “Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”). Had Dickens given any indication at all in *TLOL* of Jesus’ messianic office, it would be plausible to suggest he sees the blasphemy involved only as claiming to be Messiah (but note Whitby’s comments above). Without that line of thought developed in *TLOL*, that plausibility diminishes particularly under the force of other obvious references to Jesus’ deity.

### §5.3.2 *THE DEITY OF JESUS IN THE LIFE OF OUR LORD*

As we have already observed, while the “Son of God” passages cited above certainly are significant, they are not by themselves conclusive regarding the person of Jesus in *TLOL*, especially in terms of his deity. Aligned with other, more compelling material, however, these “Son of God” ascriptions might affirm the deity of Jesus as a feature not only of

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<sup>118</sup> Each of the Synoptics include the basic information that Dickens reports in his account, but the fact that Dickens speaks of “two false witnesses” points to his giving special attention to Matthew.

*TLOL*, but also of Dickens's own Christological thought. Dickens includes two passages in *TLOL* that have a particular and crucial bearing on this issue.

In an important episode toward the end of *TLOL*, Dickens pointed out that the women who had gone to the sepulcher early on the day of the Resurrection actually worshipped Jesus. Dickens's narrative described Mary Magdalene finding the disciples and telling them that she had seen the risen Christ and that he had spoken to her. When she had found the disciples, with them were the other women who had gone with her to the tomb, of whom Dickens wrote:

These women told her and the rest that they had seen at the tomb two men in shining garments, at sight of whom they had been afraid, [...] and also that as they came to tell this, they had seen Christ, on the way, and had held Him by the feet, and worshipped Him. (118)

That Dickens included an explicit statement of Jesus being worshipped is remarkable in that it challenges the basic premise of those who hold that Dickens's Jesus is shaped by Unitarian influences. Moreover, "the women had held Him by the feet, and worshipped Him" is found in the Synoptics only at Matthew 28.9 and is absent from John. That such an almost incidental observation by Matthew could have been easily overlooked and easily omitted from *TLOL*, coupled with its powerful statement, makes Dickens's inclusion of it especially conspicuous.

Unitarianism categorically rejected the legitimacy of the worship of Jesus, of course. For the Unitarian, God alone was the object of Christian worship. Certainly, Jesus was to be honored and held in highest esteem, but he was not to be worshipped. "Jehovah being thus sole in the possession of the attributes of Deity," wrote Harriet Martineau, "is the sole object of religious worship; for to God alone may such adoration be innocently paid" (13). For Dickens to deliberately include such a conspicuous reference to the worship of Jesus must give us pause in asserting that *TLOL* is essentially Unitarian in character.

Perhaps even more significant is the inclusion of the account of Thomas' doubt and subsequent confession in which he declared Jesus "my Lord and my God" (cf. *TLOL* 121 and John 20.28). This is important clearly in that Thomas confesses Jesus as his "God." This particular passage is one of the most significant to which nineteenth-century orthodox commentators appealed in order to establish in the clearest language the deity of Jesus, and one with which Unitarians struggled. "This is the most signal and important confession of faith in Christ to be found in the Gospels," observed William Hales. "It clearly and distinctly recognizes His proper sovereignty and Divinity, as our immediate Lord or governour, Ps. xxii. 28; and our future Judge or mighty God" (D'Oyly and Mant 4: II, 12R3). Olshausen comments, "The words εἶπεν αὐτῷ demand that they should be referred to Christ personally. Hence, therefore, it only remains to say that Thomas styled Jesus 'God' "(4: 294).

This comment by Olshausen clearly has in view the Unitarian explanation that suggests Thomas' response includes an acknowledgement addressed to Jesus—"My Lord"—and an exclamation addressed to God—"My God". Arguing that there are here two distinct exclamations addressed to Jesus and God respectively, the Unitarian W.J. Fox states, "By the first he [Thomas] recognizes the identity of Christ, and in the second he reverences the power of God who had raised him from the dead" (33).

In light of the fact that the passage is so central to an orthodox Christology and the Unitarian explanation so tenuous, Dickens's best course of action, had he been attempting to portray a Unitarian Jesus, may have been to follow Henry Ware. Ware's brief account of the incident has Jesus inviting Thomas to "examine for himself as he had desired to do", that is, "to see and feel the print of the nails." Ware's conclusion, then, is simply, "Thomas did so, and was convinced by irresistible proof, that there was no delusion, but that his Lord

was actually risen” (237). Dickens, however, makes no attempt to soften Thomas’ declaration or otherwise alter its force. Rather, Dickens reports the episode almost verbatim. Indeed, Dickens reports the confrontation and dialogue between Thomas and Jesus word for word from John 20.27-29. In this way, Dickens preserves the full force of a central trinitarian declaration.

Yet, the inclusion of this episode is important for other reasons as well. First, structurally Dickens situated this episode in *TLOL* at the climax certainly of his Resurrection story and perhaps his entire work. Following this climactic declaration is a very brief account (fourteen lines), in falling action, of other post-resurrection appearances and the ascension, which brings the narrative proper to a close. What follows then is an epilogue of sorts in which Dickens rehearsed in two or three paragraphs the history of the early Church and the first Christians. So, as Dickens’s climax of at least the Resurrection account, this story carries significant weight. If, indeed, Dickens saw this episode as affirming Jesus’ deity, it would serve well as a fitting climax to his entire narrative as well as his development of the person of Jesus in *TLOL* as the Son of God.

Second, it was not uncommon in Dickens’s day for Thomas’ declaration to be seen not only as an affirmation of Christ’s deity but also as a liturgical confession, an act of worship. Thomas Arnold remarked of this confession, “May we and all the whole Church join in the first fruits of Christian worship offered by the Apostle, now at last resigning himself to the fulness of his joy; may we from the bottom of our hearts say, as he did to our risen Saviour, “My Lord and my God!” (238-9). Seen in this way, the declaration affirms Jesus’ deity and acclaims him worthy of worship. Had Dickens been trying to maintain a Unitarian tenor in *TLOL*, it is likely that he would have taken a different direction than he did with both the passage and the declaration.

This same sense of the affirmation of Jesus' deity is found in an intriguing passage of Dickens's *Dombey and Son*, the writing of which may have overlapped with the writing of *TLOL*. When Paul saw in his deathbed vision two figures standing on the shore apparently to greet him, we learn from Dickens's explanation and description that one of the figures was Paul's mother. The other figure, it becomes clear, was Jesus. "Mama is like you Floy. I know her by the face!" Paul says to Florence of his mother. By the same sense of familiarity, Paul recognized Jesus, and his impression of Jesus was one of deity. He bids Florence, "But tell them that the print upon the stairs at school is not Divine enough" (241). This is quite a provocative statement by Dickens especially as he seldom, if ever, engages in any sort of theological speculation in his novels. Having come face to face with Jesus in his vision, Paul recognizes something lacking in the earthly representations of Jesus. We are allowed such a "revelation" because Paul is granted this deathbed vision. Dickens would have us understand that human representations of Jesus, while they may capture His humanity and His compassion and even His self-sacrificing love, cannot do justice to his deity (cf. Walder 133-4).

The Unitarian would, of course, claim that divinity is not the same as deity and that a distinction is to be made between the two.<sup>119</sup> However, the distinction between the two is qualified in such a way that Dickens's use of "divine" and related words for Jesus actually seems to suggest his deity. Richard Wright's qualifications are such that he can accept an ascription of "divine" to describe, for instance, Jesus' ministry or things related to Jesus, but that such an ascription only suggests divine authority. Wright states:

The words, *the deity of Christ*, must relate to his person, and mean that he is God by nature. The phrase, *the divinity of Christ*, may have the same, it may also have a very different, meaning; it may have no relation to his abstract nature, or person; but

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<sup>119</sup> See Richard Wright, *An Essay on the Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, as Distinguished from His Deity* (Liverpool: F.B. Wright, 1814) and *An Essay on the Doctrine of the Two Natures of Christ* (Liverpool: F. B. Wright, 1813).

simply to something which he hath received of God, or to some relation in which he stands to others: consequently, divinity may be ascribed to him, though in his person he be simply a man” (*Essay on Divinity* 3).

What Wright means here is that even a Unitarian can comfortably speak of the divinity of Jesus’ mission or the divinity of his teaching or the divinity of his work. So, he adds:

The words, *Divine Nature of Christ*, are capable of a meaning to which Unitarians would not object. If used to express, that the mission of Jesus was divine; that he spoke and acted by divine authority; that he possessed a godlike temper and godlike powers; that the Father was with him and in him; this all Unitarians admit; in this sense they believe the divinity of Christ” (*Essay on Doctrine* 4).

In other words, Wright says that Unitarians are comfortable with the word “Divine” in relation to Jesus when it is used to describe a character or quality of Jesus’ activity or aspect of his piety. But Wright would neither be comfortable with nor admit the use of the term divine or divinity to describe the essential personhood or ontological nature of Jesus, for that would be to ascribe to him deity. So, Wright, speaking for Unitarians generally, would not admit the deity of Jesus or accept the ascription of “divine” for Jesus if that might suggest his deity. Indeed, it was the idea of the Divine Nature of Christ that the Unitarian so strenuously denied.

Dickens does not seem to be too careful to make such a distinction and sometimes used the ascription in a way that likely would have made Wright and his fellow Unitarians uncomfortable. In *David Copperfield*, for instance, Dickens made a seemingly absolute distinction between what is human and what is divine. Describing Martha’s commitment to helping David and Mr. Pegotty find Em’ly, Dickens related the consequences that Martha would wish come to her if she abandoned this one “object she now had in life”: “And then might all help, human and Divine, renounce her evermore!” (632). Of similar significance in the same novel is Mr. Chillip’s stated admiration for his wife’s observing that, “Mr. Murdstone sets up an image of himself, and calls it the Divine Nature” (766). These are

sentiments similar to the ones Dickens repeats in *Little Dorrit*. Observing the obstinate Mrs. Clennam before the rogue Rigaud, Dickens wrote:

Yet, gone those more than forty years, and come this Nemesis now looking her in the face, she still abided by her old impiety—still reversed the order of Creation, and breathed her own breath into a clay image of her Creator. Verily, verily, travellers have seen many monstrous idols in many countries; but no human eyes have ever seen more daring, gross, and shocking images of the Divine nature than we creatures of the dust make in our own likenesses, of our own bad passions. (*LD* 740)

In each of these examples, Dickens is satisfied to use the term “divine” as establishing a contrast between that which is of humanity and that which is of God, as well as connoting the proper deity of God himself.

This becomes all the more significant when Dickens uses this same terminology in reference to Jesus. Dickens refers to Jesus as “the divine Master” (*LD* 673), “the Divine friend of children” (*TTC* 218), and “the Divine preacher” (Macrae 128). Admittedly, these ascriptions are by no means conclusive in themselves in claiming deity for Jesus and could be taken to bear a Unitarian stamp. Given the evidence above, however, it seems more likely that Dickens tends to use such ascriptions in the more orthodox sense of conveying the idea of deity to Jesus. Other instances of Dickens’s use of the term would support such a conclusion. Most significant in this regard is his description of Jesus in a letter on capital punishment to *The Daily News*, 16 March 1846 (Dickens, *Misc. Papers* 40)<sup>120</sup> as “the Divinity who walked the earth”.

Equally significant, perhaps, would be intimations in Dickens’s *Hymn of the Wiltshire Labourers*, which William Kent believes reflect more conventional notions of the trinity and deity of Jesus. “There is here enough ‘confounding of the persons’ of the Trinity to make a theological professor weep,” Kent writes, “but generally it seems to endorse a high

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<sup>120</sup> This was the third in a series of three letters that Dickens wrote on capital punishment to the *Daily News* on 9, 13, 16 March 1846.

doctrine of the deity of Christ” (29). Kent likely has in mind those portions of the poem that appear to address God directly but refer to activities associated with Jesus in the Gospels. For instance, Dickens obviously was alluding to the Synoptics (Matt 18.1-5; Mark 9.33-37; Luke 9.46-48) when in the second stanza he wrote:

The God who took a little child  
And set him in the midst,  
And promised him His mercy mild,  
As, by Thy Son, Thou didst:

It is possible also that Kent sees an allusion to John 8.6 in the fourth stanza:

The God who with His finger drew  
The judgment coming on,  
Write, for these men, what must ensue,  
Ere many years be gone!

Finally, an allusion to Luke 22.20 (Cf. 1 Cor 11.23-25) is found in the last stanza:

O God, remind them! In the bread  
They break upon the knee,  
These sacred words may yet be read,  
“In memory of Me!”

Admittedly, such lines of poetry are far from determinative, but as Kent observed, “There is here enough ‘confounding of the persons’ of the Trinity” and enough ambiguity to contribute to a rethinking of claims that Dickens’s Jesus is Unitarian—whether consistently or inconsistently so.

The deity of Jesus, then, seems to be included as part of Dickens’s Christology and is affirmed in *TLOL* as well as in his other work. Likely, Dickens would have accepted it, in part, as an element of the presuppositions about the triunity of the Godhead that he took for granted. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Dickens would have understood the deity of Jesus as the most important aspect of Jesus’ person. Perhaps the sentiments of Thomas Arnold would have best reflected Dickens’s thought in this regard. Discussing the centrality of the worship of Jesus with William Smith in a letter of 9 March 1833, Arnold wrote: “It appears

to me that the feelings with which we regard Him [Jesus] are of much greater importance than such metaphysical questions as those between Homoousians and Homoiousians, or even than the question of His humanity or proper divinity” (Stanley 1: 305).<sup>121</sup> Like Arnold, Dickens would have been more concerned about the person of Jesus as a moral example than as a theological topic, but that does not mean that he would have overlooked or ignored the deity of Jesus. Whatever role the deity of Jesus played in Dickens’s larger Christian thought, it seems to be a significant part of his Christology in *TLOL*.

#### §5.4 JESUS’ EXERCISE OF DIVINE POWER

We have pointed out that Christology involves an analysis not only of who Jesus was, but also what He did, and that the one can meaningfully inform the other. To get a more comprehensive picture of the person of Jesus, then, we will consider an aspect of his work, his miracles, as Dickens presents it in *TLOL*. In the next chapter, we will be considering his soteriological work with particular attention to Dickens’s understanding of redemption and atonement.

Without question, the miracles of Jesus play a major role in *TLOL*. Dickens includes no fewer than seventeen of the roughly thirty-four miracle stories in the Gospels in which the miracle is attributed to Jesus.<sup>122</sup> He records six miracles in which an illness or infirmity is healed, one in which an exorcism is performed, eight in which natural elements are involved

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<sup>121</sup> It is perhaps significant that this statement from Arthur Penrhyn Stanley’s, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold*, 2 vols. 12<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: John Murray, 1881) was quoted in Forster’s *Examiner* review, making it one of the citations of which Dickens said, “I must have that book. Every sentence that you quote from it is the text-book of my faith” (Forster 1: 389).

<sup>122</sup> John P. Meier notes, “It is difficult to give precise statistics on how many separate miracle stories there are in the Gospels, since scholars do not always agree on which pericope should be counted as a separate story and which pericope is just a literary parallel or variant of a story present in another Gospel” (Meier 618). For instance, Meier inventories 31 miracle stories while B.L. Blackburn lists 36 (See “Miracles and Miracle Stories”, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B Green, Scot McKnight; Consulting editor, I. Howard Marshall. Leicester: IVP, 1992). Colin Brown lists 33 miracles by Jesus (See “Miracle”, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* Vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). Dwight Pentecost (See *The Works and Words of Jesus*, 588-89) and the editors of *The NIV Study Bible* list 34 (See chart p. 1596).

(e.g., Jesus walking on water, stilling the tempest, or changing water into wine), and all three of the miracles recorded in the Gospels in which Jesus raises the dead to life. In including these miracles, Dickens is quite unconcerned about their theological significance. He is only concerned with the fact that Jesus performed them and that they tell us something about who Jesus was.

Dickens introduces the miracles by providing his children with a brief description of what miracles are:

When he came out of the Wilderness, he began to cure sick people by only laying his hand upon them; for God had given him power to heal the sick, and to give sight to the blind, and to do many wonderful and solemn things of which I shall tell you more by and by, and which are called the *Miracles* of Christ. I wish you would remember that word, because I shall use it again, and I should like you to know that it means something which is very wonderful and which could not be done without God's leave and assistance. (*TLOL* 24-25)

Taken in the context of Dickens's arrangement of his material in this early part of *TLOL*, this passage seems to bear a certain affinity to Matt. 4.23-25 and in general captures the tenor of the transition in the Synoptics between Jesus' sojourn and temptation in the wilderness and the beginning of his public ministry. Dickens has chosen to omit Matthew's prophetic citation concerning Galilee of the Gentiles (4.12-16) and has transposed the call of Simon and Andrew, and James and John (4.18-22) to his next chapter. Having done so, not only would it have been natural for Dickens to introduce the idea of Jesus' miraculous activity here,<sup>123</sup> it also would have been consistent with the Synoptic emphasis on the proclamation of the Kingdom of God (in which Jesus' miraculous activity plays a large part) at

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<sup>123</sup> If Dickens were following Matthew at this point, of course, this would have been not only natural but also obvious to even the most untrained reader of the Gospels. In omitting the prophecy concerning Galilee and the call of the disciples, the only thing lying between Matt. 4.11 and 4.23 is Matt. 4.17, "From that time Jesus began to preach and say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Dickens's account of Jesus' baptism gives us good reason to believe that he was likely following Matthew here. His recounting of John's protestation upon his baptizing Jesus and God's words as "This is my beloved son [...]" (Mark and Luke have "Thou art my beloved son [...]") are found only in Matthew.

this point in the story of Jesus.

More importantly, in introducing the idea of miracles to *TLOL* here, Dickens provided a working definition of what a miracle is. A miracle, he wrote, is “something which is very wonderful and which could not be done without God’s leave and assistance” (25). Clearly, this is a simple definition intended by Dickens to help his children understand much of what Jesus did. Having defined the term, Dickens immediately provided an example of Jesus performing a miracle, “the first miracle which Jesus Christ did” (25). Dickens’s account of Jesus’ first miracle, turning water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana, is quite brief and nondescript: “But Jesus turned this water into wine, by only lifting up his hand” (25). The recording of this first miracle is important for what it suggests about the person of Christ in *TLOL*.

Significantly, Dickens concluded his account of the miracle at Cana with a further word on Jesus and miracles. “For God had given Jesus Christ the power to do such wonders,” Dickens wrote, “and he did them, that people might know he was not a common man, and might believe what he taught them, and also believe that God had sent him” (25-26). Here, Dickens subtly has drawn attention to both the source of miracles and the purpose of miracles. He explained the purpose of miracles as authenticating Jesus’ ministry, but in a very careful way apparently. That is, the miracle is done so that people might know that Jesus was not a common man, that they might believe what he taught them, and that they might believe that God had sent him. It is not difficult to see in such phraseology a Unitarian description of the significance of miracles in the life of Jesus. Add to this Dickens’s relating the fact that God had given Jesus the power to do miracles and a case for Unitarian influence seems strengthened.

For the Unitarian, Jesus power to do miracles was derived, not inherent. Moreover,

the Unitarian understood miracles as a demonstration of God's authentication and stamp of approval on Jesus' mission. Comparing the ministry of the prophets of old with the ministry of Jesus, Edward Tagart remarked:

In later days he [the Unitarian] hears the voice of the same God speaking to mankind by his Son, "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God by miracles, and wonders, and signs, which God did by him," (Acts ii. 22,) speaking in sweeter and more moving tones, winning souls to God by gentler and more hallowing influence, making known the ways of life, and filling us with joy at his countenance. (32)

According to a Unitarian understanding, Jesus is the messenger of God's grace and the mediator of the new covenant, and the authority of his ministry, affirmed here by Acts 2.22, is confirmed in part by his mighty and miraculous deeds. In order that he could perform such deeds, God, through His Spirit, empowered Jesus. In this way, Jesus' power was understood as derived not inherent, that is, "God had given Jesus Christ the power to do such wonders."

As we have already suggested, however, the theological language shared by both Unitarians and more orthodox Christians is much too slippery to be cornered by either group. Dickens's language in describing miracles here, then, is no more Unitarian than it is orthodox. While orthodox Christian commentators normally understood the miracles of Jesus to testify not only of his authority but also of his deity, they showed no reservation with the type of language that Dickens used to communicate these Scriptural ideas to his children. After all, the Scriptures, themselves use very similar language. When Jesus told the palsied man, "Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house" (Matt. 9.6), Matthew records the reaction, "But when the multitudes saw it, they marveled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men"<sup>124</sup> (Matt. 9.8).

When James Knight attempted to define the idea of miracle, but for using more so-

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<sup>124</sup> This idea will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. It should be noted here, however, that while orthodox commentators readily acknowledged such statements, they were also careful to balance them with others that, taken with the accepted Scriptural teaching of Jesus' deity, suggested Jesus' power to do miracles was inherent.

phisticated language, he came close to Dickens's definition:

Without attempting then to enumerate the various definitions which have been given of a miracle, we would understand by the expression *a sensible effect produced by the power of Almighty God, contrary in itself or in its circumstances to the ordinary course and power of nature*, and which we consequently call *supernatural*. (3)

Discussing the purpose of Jesus' miracles, Knight stated, "In the first place, then, we may observe respecting them collectively, that they were performed for the most important purpose; namely, *to prove his own character, and to establish his Divine Mission*" (8).<sup>125</sup> In fact, in his discussion of the purpose of miracles, Knight never indicates that miracles demonstrate the deity of Jesus, although his larger work unequivocally affirms the deity of Jesus. Knight takes for granted certain trinitarian presuppositions and writes in such a context. Had Dickens accepted the same presuppositions, or tapped into the shared theological language, his rendering would have been acceptable to both the more orthodox trinitarian and the Unitarian alike.

An extended citation from the moderate High Churchman R.C. Trench (1847) illustrates how an orthodox statement could be compatible with a Unitarian orientation:

The miracles are to be the credentials for the bearer of that good word, signs that he has a special mission for the realization of the purposes of God in regard of humanity. When the truth had found a receptive heart, has awoken deep echoes in the innermost soul of man, he who brings it may thus show that he stands yet nearer to God than others, that he is to be heard not merely as one that is true, but as himself the Truth, (see Matt. xi. 4, 5; John v. 36;) or if not this, as an immediate messenger standing in direct connexion with him who is the Truth, (1 Kings xiii. 3;) claiming unreserved submission, and the reception, upon his authority, of other statements which transcend the mind of man,—mysteries, which though, of course, not against that measure and standard of truth which God has given unto every man, yet which cannot be weighed or measured by it. (24-25)

While such a statement is certainly intended to convey orthodox ideas about the miracles of

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<sup>125</sup> We can see in these two citations from Knight the fundamental elements of Dickens's definition, that a miracle was "something which is very wonderful and which could not be done without God's leave and assistance", that "God had given Jesus Christ the power to do such wonders", and that "he did them, that people might know he was not a common man, [...] and also believe that God had sent him".

Jesus, Trench is not concerned with making certain his statement is clearly trinitarian over and against Unitarian.<sup>126</sup> Consequently, there is nothing in his statement that a Unitarian could not endorse. Thus, we see again how the descriptive theological language functions as a shared commodity of trinitarians and Unitarians.

There are, of course, passages in *TLOL* that suggest a more clearly orthodox orientation in Dickens's thought toward Jesus' performance of miracles. Three incidents in particular are notable. First, in his epilogue, Dickens wrote of Jesus imparting to the first Christians the power to do the deeds that he did:

When Christ was seen no more, the Apostles began to teach the People as He had commanded them. And having chosen a new apostle, named Matthias, to replace the Wicked Judas, they wandered into all countries, telling the People of Christ's Life and Death - and of the Crucifixion and Resurrection - and of the Lessons he had taught - and baptizing them in Christ's name. And through the power He had given them they healed the sick, and gave sight to the Blind, and speech to the Dumb, and Hearing to the Deaf, as he had done. (122-25)

Likewise, in chapter five, Dickens wrote, "He now divided the disciples, and sent them into many towns and villages, teaching the people, and giving them power to cure, in the name of God, all those who were ill" (52). Consistent with an orthodox understanding of the deity of Christ, in both instances Jesus imparted the power to do miracles. The implication is that Jesus had this power inherent within him to impart. It is noteworthy that Dickens added, in this second example, that Jesus gave his disciples their power "in the name of God". It might be suggested here, then, that Dickens was trying to maintain a delicate balance of Unitarian and trinitarian thought. In a third incident, however, Dickens is not so

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<sup>126</sup> It should be noted that those who embraced the triunity of the Godhead were seldom, if ever, concerned with engaging in an apologetic for this language over and against that of the Unitarian. For good or bad, the idea of triunity was the norm for nineteenth-century Christians, especially on the popular level, and it would have been quite uncommon for even orthodox commentators and scholars to keep at the forefront of their thought the task of making certain that they left no room for being misconstrued as Unitarian in their articulation of ideas. The nineteenth-century Christian who embraced the triunity of the Godhead would have employed the shared language without reference to Unitarianism or Unitarian qualification.

conscientious, recounting that a miracle was done in the name of Christ. Describing in his epilogue the events surrounding the conversion of Saul, Dickens wrote, “When they raised him, they found that he was blind; and so he remained for three days, neither eating nor drinking, until one of the Christians (sent to him by an angel for that purpose) restored his sight in the name of Jesus Christ” (126).

The miracles of Jesus, then, do contribute to our understanding of the person of Jesus in *TLOL*. What he did informs who he was. In this case, Jesus’ performing miracles and the manner in which Dickens reports them speaks to our understanding of the essential nature of Jesus, and while a sense of ambiguity may persist in the shared language, the presentation of the miracles of Jesus in *TLOL* is quite consistent with the more conventional belief in the triunity of the Godhead. Like all aspects of the person of Jesus that we have considered in this chapter, it could be argued that Dickens presentation of Jesus’ miracles is Unitarian, but there is nothing in that presentation that would suggest a plain Unitarian understanding of *TLOL* over an orthodox one.

## §5.5 CONCLUSION

As this chapter demonstrates, the common descriptive theological terminology that the Anglican and the Unitarian shared, but employed with quite distinct meaning, not only contributes to an apparent ambiguity, but also can create confusion for those seeking to understand Dickens’s Christian thought. This analysis has attempted both to understand the terminology and its respective distinctions, and to identify signature elements in *TLOL* that can arbitrate those distinctions effectively and plausibly in order to help clarify Dickens’s Christian thought in general and his Christology in *TLOL* in particular. So, while a certain ambiguity may persist as the result of Dickens’s use of the shared terminology, his implicit development of the concepts represented brings particular clarity to the terminology. Spe-

cifically, his use and development of the title “Son of God”, his portrayal of Jesus as the object of worship, and his use of deity/divinity language focus the Christology and the identity of the person of Jesus in *TLOL*. Most significantly in this regard, Dickens’s portrait of Jesus emerges not from any formal theological speculation about Jesus, but rather from Dickens’s own concept of Jesus expressed in the use of his Gospel sources and his editorial selection of that material.

Given this context, and in light of Forster’s determinative affirmation of Dickens’s Anglican sympathies, Dickens’s portrait of Jesus appears to be of a more orthodox stamp than has generally been allowed by some Dickens scholars. The hypothesis that *TLOL* is a Unitarian composition has been tested and found inadequate to deal with the nuances of Dickens’s Christology in the subtleties of his expression and the use of his selected Gospel source material. While there are suggestions of Unitarian influences in *TLOL*, in the end, a careful consideration of the person of Jesus there reveals that Dickens’s portrait is most profoundly shaped by the influence and presuppositions of a popular Anglicanism within the broadest parameters of a moderate, conventional Christianity.

Christologically, then, Dickens’s Jesus, as he emerges from *TLOL*, is the divine Son of God, the second person of the triune Godhead. He performs miracles, raises the dead, is the object of worship, and is declared God at the climax of his story. Thus, Dickens presents the person of Jesus, or who Jesus was, in *TLOL*.

In all of this, however, it should be remembered that, as important as an analysis of Dickens’s Christology is for our understanding of his Christian thought, his own purpose was never to convey a pristine Christological doctrinal statement to his children. His intent with regard to the person of Jesus, rather, was to present to his children in as non-sectarian terms as possible a Jesus who, in his mind at least, emerged from the Gospels unsullied by

denominational or sectarian influences and provided the example of real Christianity. As we have seen in earlier chapters, Dickens sought to be mindful not to burden his children with what he took to be unnecessary and distracting doctrinal formulation in order that they might appreciate Christianity as it was taught by its Founder himself. In *TLOL*, it seems Dickens took these convictions to heart, presenting to his children the life and lessons of Jesus as they are found in the Gospels apart from the narrowing influence of any sect or party. In this way, he attempted to provide for his children a foundation for real Christianity, hopeful that they might, in later life, be ready to fill in the details themselves.

## OUR BLESSED SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST

*“Bearing His cross upon His shoulder, like the commonest and most wicked criminal, Our Blessed Saviour, Jesus Christ, surrounded by the persecuting crowd, went out of Jerusalem to a place called... Golgotha.”*

– from *The Life of Our Lord*, Chapter the Eleventh

Having considered in the previous chapter the person of Jesus, particularly in terms of his essential nature, we will turn our attention in this chapter to the work of Jesus, particularly his work in salvation and redemption. Our study of the work of Jesus here will attempt to understand Dickens’s view of Jesus as Saviour and his redemptive work as it is developed in *TLOL* and seen in Dickens’s other work. Obviously, Jesus is “Our Saviour” in Dickens’s thought and fulfills a redemptive role in *TLOL*, but Dickens never explicitly connects Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection with redemption and salvation there. Rather, he seems to consider Jesus redemptive work on the cross as a given. Our study, then, will focus on just how Jesus was “Our Saviour” and more specifically, to what degree Dickens understood redemption and how developed that understanding was.

### §6.1 REDEMPTION AND SALVATION IN *THE LIFE OF OUR LORD*

Perhaps Dickens’s favourite ascription for Jesus was “Our Saviour”. It is not the ascription most frequently used for Jesus in *TLOL*, but it is the only one for which he supplied a clear description or definition, and it is one that he employs regularly outside of *TLOL*. Precisely because it speaks not only to who Jesus was, but more importantly, to what he did, the ascription, “Our Saviour”, plays a key role in our study of the soteriology of *TLOL*.

### §6.1.1 JESUS AS SAVIOUR

Dickens's very first use of "Our Saviour" occurs at the end of the third chapter of *TLOL*, which itself has been an illustration of his description of the designation. That description concludes the chapter, "But he was always merciful and tender. And because He did such good, and taught people how to love God and how to hope to go to Heaven after death, he was called *Our Saviour*" (*TLOL* 34). According to Dickens, Jesus is Saviour because he did three things: 1) He did good, 2) He taught people how to love God, and 3) He taught people how to hope to go to Heaven after death. At first glance, this appears to be a rather simplistic and innocuous description of Jesus. A careful consideration of Dickens's portrayal of Jesus as Saviour along these lines, however, will point to major soteriological themes in *TLOL* and provide a substantial understanding of Dickens's characterization of the work of Jesus.

It is clear early on that Jesus, as "Our Saviour", is cast in some sort of redemptive role in *TLOL*, but just how Dickens understood that role is not explicit. On the surface, Dickens's understanding of Jesus' work in redemption and salvation seems to align with a popular Anglican understanding that conjoined good works with belief in Christ as the means to salvation. Still, the work of Jesus in accomplishing redemption is not clearly delineated. On closer inspection, Jesus' death on the cross simply appears to be taken for granted as redemptive work in *TLOL* and in Dickens's larger Christian thought. Precisely how Jesus' death on the cross is redemptive, however, invites further careful study. What Jesus' death on the cross meant in *TLOL* and in Dickens's thought seems to have been shaped by a diversity of tensions created by Unitarian and other influences on his Anglican preunderstanding on the one hand and his personal ideas of sin and humanity on the other. These tensions helped to produce subtle nuances in Dickens's view of salvation and redemption

that suggest he gave considerable thought to some of the pressing soteriological issues of his day, at least on the popular level. As we consider Dickens's understanding of the work of redemption and salvation in *TLOL*, we will see these tensions giving shape to the composite that is his understanding of the work of redemption and salvation in the work of Jesus, "Our Saviour".

Dickens's initial use of "Our Saviour" at the close of his third chapter is bracketed by eight instances of the Saviour "saving": four preceding his introduction of the title and four following it. In the former case are three healings and the raising from the dead of Jairus' daughter; in the latter, a healing, the raising from the dead of the son of the widow of Nain, the calming of the sea and storm, and an exorcism. What is significant here is that Dickens illustrated in all of this the first characteristic in his description of "Our Saviour," that is, that Jesus "did such good." More than that, Dickens demonstrated in these miracles that Jesus had power over disease, over nature, over demons and over death. These miraculous deeds are all illustrative of salvation in its broadest sense, empowered by divine resources. Although it is unlikely that Dickens would have been fully aware of the theological subtleties at work here, he appears to have recognized, in this full catalogue of miracles, the saving activity of God in Jesus.

A further significance extends to the title of "Our Saviour" in Dickens's second characteristic, that Jesus "taught" people. When Dickens introduced and referred to the parables of Jesus, he called them "The Parables of Our Saviour" (*TLOL* 61). In fact, almost one-third of the occurrences of the title "Our Saviour" were used as the subject of teaching or were in some other way connected to teaching. Moreover, the content of the teaching to which Dickens referred was "how to love God" and "how to hope to go to heaven after death." On the one hand, the phrase "how to love God," for which Dickens provided no

substantial explanation or illustration, seems to be used in an absolute sense. Certainly, Dickens included parables of Jesus in *TLOL* that teach one's duty to God; and, of course, for Dickens, one's duty to God was most fully accomplished in one's fulfillment of duty toward other human beings. Still, Dickens included no explicit or sustained passage on simply loving God.<sup>127</sup> For Dickens, the duty to love God was self-evident, and to say that Jesus taught people "how to love God" was simply indicative of the whole of Jesus' life and ministry. On the other hand, Jesus' teaching on "how to hope to go to heaven after death" introduces what becomes a more fully developed thought in *TLOL* and suggests that Dickens's use of the title "Our Saviour" involved, in some form, ideas of redemption and atonement.

Two passages are especially significant in this regard. The first is found in Dickens's account of the story of the raising of Lazarus, found only in John 11.1-57. In describing the response of the people to Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead and commanding him to come forth, Dickens remarked, "At this sight, so awful and affecting, many of the people there believed that Christ was indeed the Son of God, come to instruct and save mankind" (*TLOL* 81-2). In the clear gesture Dickens makes toward Jesus' redemptive role here, it is significant that his description is couched in the shared language of conventional trinitarian Christian thought and Unitarianism.

The possibility that Dickens intentionally conjoined here "instruct" and "save", thus rendering the sense "to instruct and thereby save", could commend a Unitarian reading of the remark. For the Unitarian, Jesus' teaching is precisely the means by which he effected salvation. In fact, according to this suggested reading, that Jesus "did such good, and taught

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<sup>127</sup> Dickens does include in *TLOL* Jesus' declaration of the Greatest Commandment (Matt. 22.34-40; Mark 12.28-34; Luke 10.25-28; *TLOL* 69), but does so according to its use in Luke to introduce the Parable of the Good Samaritan and develops the idea no further.

people how to love God and how to hope to go to Heaven after death” could, itself, suggest a Unitarian understanding of both the character of salvation and Jesus as Saviour. For the Unitarian, salvation consisted not in rescue from a state or condition of personal sinfulness and its consequent condemnation. Rather, salvation consisted mainly in instruction and knowledge about God and His ways, and about moral rectitude.

In reference to the response of the Samaritans to Jesus in John 4.42, the Unitarian James Yates wrote: “By hearing him they were led to adopt the conclusion at which the woman had before arrived, and to accept him as ‘the Saviour of the world,’ by which they must have meant its Saviour in a *moral* sense, its enlightener, its instructor, its reformer” (33). Here, in his sermon, “The Scriptural Meaning of the Title ‘Saviour’ as Applied to Our Lord”, Yates was specifically concerned with clarifying the Unitarian idea of Jesus as Saviour. He added:

Jesus Christ then, according to the scriptural representation, saves the world inasmuch as he brings light into it; that is, inasmuch as he gives to mankind the knowledge of God and of themselves, the knowledge of their duty and of the means of obtaining happiness here and hereafter. (32)

In a written sermon entitled “Five Points of Christian Faith” (1841), James Martineau hints at his own understanding of Jesus as Saviour according to the same notions as Yates. Jesus’ purpose, he observes, was “simply to ‘*show* us the Father’; to leave upon the human heart a new, deep, vivid impression of what God is in himself, and of what he designs for his creature, man; to become, in short, the accepted interpreter of heaven and life” (*Studies* 193). If, then, Dickens had conjoined “instruct” and “save”, he may have allowed for a Unitarian understanding of Jesus’ mission and purpose.

A further consideration that may suggest a Unitarian reading is the fact that this description in *TLOL* of the people’s response is an interpolation by Dickens of what the “many” believed, “that Christ was indeed the Son of God, come to instruct and save man-

kind.” John has simply, “Many [...] believed on him” (John 11.45). “That Christ was indeed the Son of God, come to instruct and save mankind” is Dickens own construction, one that represents central and significant themes in *TLOL*. In the larger Johannine context, that Jesus had come to teach and effect salvation would clearly be understood as the content of what the many believed here in the Lazarus story. Dickens inclusion of this interpolation speaks not only to his understanding of the Johannine formulation but also to his own perception of the life and ministry of Jesus. If, then, Dickens meant that Jesus had come to instruct and thereby save mankind, this interpolation could be taken to convey a more Unitarian understanding of the purpose of Jesus coming.<sup>128</sup>

But such a postulated reading is not convincing for two reasons. First, as was acknowledged in the previous chapter, the shared descriptive theological language that Dickens employed in *TLOL* is often ambiguous. In this particular instance, his language is by no means conclusively Unitarian and could easily represent the expression of a more orthodox thinker. It is equally reasonable to believe, and equally likely, that Dickens meant by the phrase, Jesus had come “both to instruct and to save mankind”. If Dickens intended the remark in this manner, it represents a plain orthodox rendering and diminishes the strength of a Unitarian reading.

Second, quite central to the content of what Dickens said the people believed was that “Christ was indeed the Son of God”. As such, it was Jesus, the Son of God, as that ascription is developed in *TLOL*, who had come to instruct and save. The presence of the ascription “Son of God”, as Dickens understood it, casts a more orthodox trinitarian light on the entire idea, especially as it seems to be a central idea in the interpolation. Considering

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<sup>128</sup> If, on the other hand, the remark is understood to mean Jesus came “both to instruct and to save mankind” as I argue immediately following, this argument (that Dickens’s remark on what the many believed is an interpolation, Dickens’s own construction) would serve a more conventional understanding of the remark just as easily.

Dickens's development of the idea of Jesus as the Son of God as it was outlined in the previous chapter, it is unlikely that this would have been the most effective language with which to convey a Unitarian idea.

The second significant reference to Jesus as Saviour in a redemptive sense is found in a curious statement in the account of the crucifixion in which Dickens described the crowd taunting Jesus saying, "He came to save sinners. Let Him save Himself" (109). The taunt, "He came to save sinners," is another interpolation by Dickens of the Synoptic Evangelists' phrase, "He saved others; himself he cannot save" (Matt. 27.42; Mark 15.31; cf. Luke 23.35, "He saved others; let him save himself."). Furthermore, the occurrence is conspicuous not only as to its presence here but also as to its content—Jesus had given people the impression that he had come to save sinners. For Dickens to have introduced the term "sinners" into this context without a Scriptural precedent is interesting in itself and is well-suited to represent Dickens's filling out the meaning of the "saved" of the Evangelists with his own understanding of what that saving entails—salvation from sin. It is perhaps the clearest suggestion of Jesus' redemptive role that we will find in *TLOL*.

A redemptive role for Jesus, then, is clearly a part of Dickens's thought and manifests itself outside of *TLOL* as well. Consider, for example, Dickens's use of the language of redemption in relation to Jesus in his other work. In his essay, "In Memoriam to W. M. Thackeray," originally published in *Cornhill Magazine*, February 1864, Dickens appealed to the term Redeemer:

God grant that on that Christmas Eve when he laid his head back on his pillow and threw up his arms as he had been wont to do when very weary, some consciousness of duty done and Christian hope throughout life humbly cherished, may have caused his own heart so to throb, when he passed away to his Redeemer's rest! (*Selected Journalism*, 593)

At the death of Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*, Dickens observed, "The Star had shown

him where to find the God of the poor; and through humility, and sorrow, and forgiveness, he had gone to his Redeemer's rest" (292). He made use of the term "Redeemer", too, in the article "Pet Prisoners" from *Household Words*, 27 April 1850: "Now God forbid that we, unworthily believing in the Redeemer, should shut out hope, or even humble trustfulness, from any criminal at the dread pass; but it is not in us to call this state of mind repentance" (Philip and Neuberg, 78).

Obviously, Dickens found the term "Redeemer" a fitting designation for Jesus,<sup>129</sup> and the portrait that Dickens paints in *TLOL* is one that obviously included the idea of Jesus as a Saviour-Redeemer. For, while there is no explicit statement that the most significant thing Jesus did was to die on the cross as the atonement for the sins of humanity, there is much to suggest in the Christological titles and in his soteriological themes that Dickens is not using empty words and ascriptions devoid of substance or content. For Dickens, Jesus was the Redeemer who had come "to save sinners", he was "indeed the Son of God, come to instruct and save mankind." In this way, then, the work of Jesus in redemption and salvation is represented in the ascription, "Our Saviour".

A citation that seems to have broad significance regarding this discussion is found in a letter to Angela Burdett-Coutts dated 28 October 1847. Dickens enclosed in that letter "An Appeal to Fallen Women," which he had written and which had been read to the women of Urania House to encourage them and to impress upon them a sense of accountability and discipline. Exhorting them to their responsibility toward other residents in the house, he wrote:

But you must solemnly remember that if you enter this Home without such con-

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<sup>129</sup> That Dickens used this term to describe Jesus (not God the Father) is suggested not only by the normal Christological use of the term but also by his uses of it in, for instance, *Pictures from Italy* (Dickens, *American Notes* 276) and "Mugbie Junction" (Dickens, *Christmas Stories* 2: 152).

stant resolutions, you occupy, unworthily and uselessly, the place of some other unhappy girl, now wandering and lost; and that her ruin, no less than your own, will be upon your head, before Almighty God, who knows the secrets of our breasts; and Christ, who died upon the cross to save us. (*Letters Cousts* 100)

Certainly, Dickens was not attempting to teach soteriology here, which perhaps gives this assertion even more force, but such a statement, taken with what we have seen above, strongly suggests that redemption and salvation are connected to Jesus work on the cross.

In all of this, the ambiguity of the shared language reminds us to be cautious in the conclusions that we draw at this point. Notwithstanding, the language remains sufficiently clear, whether from the Unitarian or the more orthodox trinitarian perspective, in representing Jesus as Saviour-Redeemer and his death on the cross as part of the work of redemption and salvation. Furthermore, if we were correct in the previous chapter to take Forster at his word and to recognize in Dickens a tendency to default to the fundamental Anglican presuppositions, we are nearer an understanding of precisely how Dickens thought of Jesus as Saviour and how he understood redemption and salvation.

#### §6.1.2 JESUS AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN

In addition to the redemptive implications of Jesus as Saviour, it is significant to note that in *TLOL*, Jesus was also the forgiver of sins. There is a rather obvious emphasis in *TLOL* on the fundamental themes of repentance and forgiveness, both of which seem to have a connection to redemption and salvation in Dickens's thought. It certainly is fair to say that Dickens connected good works with going to heaven after death, but to suppose that he embraced a religion of good works with no concept of the redemptive significance of the forgiveness of sin is not representative of Dickens's thought. Consider a letter to David Dickson, 10 May 1843, apparently a response to Dickson's criticism of Dickens's references to the doctrine of the new birth in *The Pickwick Papers* (266-7). Apparently, with some con-

cept of conversion in mind, Dickens wrote:

That every man who seeks heaven must be born again, in good thoughts of his Maker, I sincerely believe. That it is expedient for every hound to say so in a certain snuffling form of words, to which he attaches no good meaning, I do not believe. I take it there is no difference between us. (*Pilgrim Letters* 3: 485)

Dickens was not usually given to use the cant of the “snuffling” Evangelicals in a serious manner, yet here he was willing to affirm his belief in the necessity of being “born again” to make his point. He did, however, qualify his use of the term with the phrase, “in good thoughts of his Maker.” Still, that does not dilute this affirmation or otherwise render his words hollow. Rather, it seems to suggest his own understanding of spiritual rebirth or conversion. What Dickens said straightforwardly, Edward Bouverie Pusey, the Oxford High Church Tractarian, said in a more developed manner:

In its widest sense ‘conversion’ is turning towards God [...] [it] is a course of being conformed to God, a learning to have Him more simply in our minds, to be turned wholly to Him, solely to Him, [...] opening our hearts to Him, to have their warmth, their health, their life, from Him. (3: 20)

This, Dickens might say, is being “born again in good thoughts of his Maker.”<sup>130</sup> Clearly, Dickens would not have used the term “born again” in the same sense that an Evangelical would have. Of crucial significance here, however, is that Dickens affirmed, in a rather conventional manner, a concept of conversion or regeneration. *TLOL* illustrates more completely Dickens’s understanding of this concept of conversion by developing the fundamental themes of repentance and forgiveness.

The basic ideas of repentance and forgiveness are a dominant feature of *TLOL*, and Dickens continued throughout to develop those themes, alternating freely between the concept of God’s forgiveness of repentant sinners and human responsibility to forgive one an-

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<sup>130</sup> Consider, also, Thomas Arnold’s remarks in this regard in a letter to Sir Thomas Pasley, 14 December 1836: “The salvation of a man’s soul is effected by the change in his heart and life, wrought by Christ’s spirit” (*Stanley* 2: 58).

other unconditionally. Yet, there is no lack of emphasis on God's forgiveness of repentant sinners. In a typical example of the manner in which he conveyed these themes, Dickens related the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard following it by one of no fewer than fifteen interpretive asides in which he taught, "People who have been wicked [...] and who are truly sorry for it, however late in their lives, and pray God to forgive them, will be forgiven and will go to Heaven, too" (61). Here, Dickens presented simply the fundamental principles of sorrow for sin in repentance, seeking God's forgiveness, and the mercy of God extended in forgiveness.

Likewise, the Parable of the Prodigal Son includes another of Dickens's interpretive asides in which he teaches his children about God's eternal mercy and ready forgiveness. Dickens writes, "Those who have done wrong and forgotten God, are always welcome to Him and will always receive his mercy, if they will only return to Him in sorrow for the sin of which they have been guilty" (73). Clearly, the emphasis here is not simply God's willingness to forgive sins, but on approaching God in repentance to seek forgiveness. This is basic to the teaching of *TLOL* and quite basic as well to the teaching of the Gospels.

While the forgiveness of repentant sinners is conspicuously God's prerogative in *TLOL*, the alert reader will also recognize Jesus in a prominent role as forgiver of sins. Shortly after the description of Jesus as "Our Saviour", Dickens's first inclusion of Jesus forgiving sins was taken from the Lukan account of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, washing them with her tears and drying them with her hair (Luke 7.36-50). She was, as Dickens described her, a woman "who had led a bad and sinful life and was ashamed that the Son of God should see her; and yet," he continued, "she trusted so much to His goodness and His compassion for all who, having done wrong were truly sorry for it in their hearts" (*TLOL* 43). To the utter dismay of his host, Jesus allowed this sinner to touch him.

Knowing the thoughts of his host, Jesus proceeded to relate a parable of forgiveness and then, to the amazement of the entire company present, declared to her, “God forgives you!”

The Unitarian might argue here that Jesus is simply announcing God’s forgiveness. It should be pointed out, however, that Dickens immediately added to his narrative, “The company who were present wondered that Jesus Christ had power to forgive sins, but God had given it to Him” (44-45). This seems to lend credence to Jesus’ inherent power and authority to forgive sins. Indeed, the entire account appears to be couched in a salvific context of repentance and forgiveness in which Jesus is the chief protagonist, possessing the prerogative and the power to forgive sins. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the language remains sufficiently ambiguous to indicate little or no difference between a Unitarian expression and a more orthodox one. Accordingly, the Unitarian might argue further that the declaration, “The company who were present wondered that Jesus Christ had power to forgive sins but God had given it to Him” (44-45), demonstrates that Dickens understood Jesus’ power and authority to forgive sins as derivative not inherent, thereby, implying that Jesus at best forgave sins by proxy, or more likely, simply announced the glad tidings of God’s pardon.

The issue raised here is the same one considered in the previous chapter relative to Jesus’ power to perform miracles. Here, the issue is perhaps more pronounced in that the question involves the essential nature of Jesus as it bears on his salvific work: Did Dickens’s Jesus possess the power in and of himself to forgive sins or was he only a messenger announcing God’s forgiveness?

The Unitarian was adamant, of course, that Jesus had no inherent power or authority to forgive sins. As in this instance, Jesus simply announced God’s free forgiveness of sins. That is, Jesus was not himself forgiving the sin nor did he possess the redemptive authority

to do so. His authority lay only in the veracity of his message of God's pardon. Thus, the Unitarian Lant Carpenter in his *Lectures on the Scripture Doctrine of Atonement* (1843) remarked:

God is represented as pardoning sins, out of His own essential mercy, and sending forth Jesus Christ as the Messenger and Minister of His love and grace, to give us the glad tidings of salvation, and to convey and assure to us the covenant of pardon and eternal life. (198)

Notwithstanding, Dickens's language here is quite orthodox in its phraseology and intent. This is demonstrated most clearly in a similar passage involving the legitimacy of Jesus' power and authority to forgive sins, reported by the Synoptic Evangelists. All three report the miracle story of the paralytic lowered through the roof of a house in order to get him close to Jesus for healing (Mark 2.3-12, Matthew 9.2-8 and Luke 5.18-26). Not only did Jesus heal him, but, to the consternation and the outrage of many of those present, also pronounced the man's sins forgiven. Matthew's Gospel included the crucial observation, "But when the multitude saw it, they marveled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men" (Matt. 9.8). Most likely, this is where Dickens borrowed the notion of God giving Jesus the power to forgive sins. It is a basic Scriptural affirmation. It is also an excellent example of how a shared descriptive theological language posed no difficulty for the more conventional Christian thinker.

The Matthean account, harmonized with the two other Synoptic Evangelists, would affirm for Dickens that God had given Jesus the power and authority to forgive sins while at the same time allowing him to hold in tension next to it the expressed deity of Jesus consistent with orthodox principles of biblical interpretation in his day. Consider, for instance, Whitby's comments on Matt. 9.6:

Moreover, that Christ here speaks of a power inherent in him, and not only of the power of God assisting him, as it did the apostles, when they healed diseases, is evident; because if Christ had only pronounced, that the sins of this paralytic were re-

mitted by God, and the cure performed by his power, the Pharisees could have had no cause to be offended with him, and much less to have accused him of blasphemy. (1: 81)

Note also D'Oyly and Mant on the same passage:

The principle on which this accusation went, our Lord plainly allows; but then He clears Himself of it by this consequence, that, as no power but God's could forgive sins, so none but God's could work this miracle of healing, If therefore He could give them a sensible proof of His divinity in one of the instances, they ought to be satisfied that He had done no more than became Him in the other. (4: II, 11K4-5)

Typical of a more conventional view, these commentators acknowledged the tension without seeking to resolve it. For them, that God had given to Jesus the power to forgive sins was consistent with a triune understanding of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Moreover, it was understood to be the clear teaching of Scripture and was in no way taken as compromising the deity of Jesus. Jesus forgave sins—and performed miracles—by means of his inherent power and authority as God the Son.

Dickens chose to include another passage that seems to acknowledge Jesus' authority to forgive sins. Relating the story of the woman accused of adultery brought before Jesus, he reported almost verbatim the concluding dialogue between Jesus and the woman. It is perhaps significant that when Jesus assured the woman, "Neither do *I* condemn thee," Dickens used the ascription "Our Saviour" to signify Jesus. More importantly, Jesus forgave the woman of her sin rather than imposing the penalty of the Law. Dickens seems to want to indicate emphatically that it was Jesus himself who granted her pardon. His manuscript reveals that the "I" in "Neither do I condemn thee" is twice underlined, a technique that we have seen before to indicate an emphasis. In this context, it appears that Dickens wanted us to recognize that it was Jesus who exerted his own authority to pardon a sin that according to the law deserved the death penalty (*TLOL* 64). It is not simply indicative of Jesus' will-

ingness to forgive others, but highlights his prerogative to forgive sins.<sup>131</sup>

Even in his novels, where we often see an emphasis on patient forgiveness in personal relationships and encounters, it is clear that Dickens saw such behavior and attitudes as predicated upon Jesus' example as the one who forgives sins. In a letter to David Macrae, Dickens emphasized that Jesus was the model for his "good people" and that they were all "disciples" who were expressions of the "forgiving" and merciful "Founder" of Christianity (127). This is exemplified throughout *David Copperfield*, but rather poignantly in one particular episode. In chapter fifty-one, Dickens included what could easily be taken as a scene of repentance, confession and forgiveness as Em'ly knelt before the feet of Mr. Peggotty "humbled, as it might be in the dust our Saviour wrote in with his blessed hand" (690). The allusion to the woman brought before Jesus in John 8.1-11 is too clear and places the scene of Em'ly before her uncle, at least in Dickens's mind, in the context of sin and forgiveness in the Gospels. Clearly, Em'ly understood herself as having sinned and was humbled in repentance; and clearly Mr. Peggotty was the one who would offer grace, mercy and forgiveness. This is precisely the same pattern of repentance and forgiveness found repeatedly in *TLOL*.

This survey of Jesus' role in the forgiveness of sins, then, seems to bring even more clarity to Dickens's understanding of the work of Jesus in redemption and salvation. According to *TLOL*, we have good reason to believe that salvation, which in Dickens's thought meant going to heaven, was contingent upon the forgiveness of sins and that Jesus, as Saviour, forgave sins. Granted, the shared language remains a bit slippery, but not to an extent that it obscures a more focused portrait of the work of Jesus in redemption and salvation as Saviour-Redeemer.

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<sup>131</sup> That Dickens sees this as a story of forgiveness rather than as Jesus' resourcefulness in avoiding entrapment over an issue involving the passing of magisterial judgment seems to be supported by the fact that it functions in *TLOL* as the climactic story of a series of teachings and parables on forgiveness that takes up the major portion of his sixth chapter.

A more precise understanding of Dickens's view of the work of Jesus in redemption and salvation requires a consideration of the larger soteriological issues of human sin and atonement. Before we draw any final conclusions then, and in an attempt to prevent superficial misreadings and careless misconstruals of Dickens's religious thought, we must place the work of Jesus in redemption and salvation in this larger soteriological context. Because atonement was clearly one of the defining theological issues of Dickens's day, seeking to understand how Dickens thought about the issues will aid our understanding of his conception of the work of Jesus in redemption and salvation. In addition to providing valuable insight into the trinitarian and Unitarian issues, doing so can contribute to a greater understanding of Dickens's thought on the forgiveness of sins and how Jesus was Saviour.

## §6.2 DICKENS AND ATONEMENT

Important to any view of redemption and salvation, of course, is an understanding of the concept of atonement that undergirds that view. A more informed view of Dickens's understanding of the work of Jesus in redemption and salvation, then, may be acquired in an attempt to understand his concept of atonement and some of the theological issues related to it. Such a consideration will prove to be problematic, however, as Dickens nowhere explicitly articulated his understanding of atonement in positive terms. In fact, all we can really be certain of concerning Dickens's view of atonement are of those things with which he took issue.

Consequently, even though Dickens had some very clear and settled notions about atonement and its related issues, particularly the ideas of vicarious atonement, original sin, and total depravity, all of which he found particularly disagreeable, there is not much of a base upon which to reconstruct a viable model of Dickens's view of atonement in a positive way. What seems to emerge with some clarity, however, is that Dickens embraced some sort

of pattern of atonement that allowed him to understand sin, evil, and salvation in a way that was consistent with his view of the work of Jesus and his broader Christian worldview. The pattern itself was not always consistent nor was the theology it suggested, but Dickens seemed satisfied with it. If the formative tensions of Dickens's view raises questions for us today, these were not questions that mattered to him nor were the answers to the questions ones with which he troubled himself. His views made sense in his understanding of Christianity and that is all that mattered to him.

In attempting, to draw some conclusions about Dickens and his thought on atonement, many have assumed that, because Dickens rejected vicarious atonement as it was typically understood in the early to mid-nineteenth century, he must have rejected the idea of atonement categorically. Thus, Janet Larson, discussing *TLOL*, asserts that Dickens is a "Victorian who cannot believe in the Bible promises of Christ's full atonement for sin" (12). If she meant by this, as it appears she did, that Dickens did not subscribe to a doctrine of vicarious atonement, she would be right. As we will see, however, in Dickens's day the idea of vicarious atonement was not the only way to understand "the Bible promises of Christ's full atonement for sin." Larson does not include any discussion of atonement in Dickens's work nor does she acknowledge the various theories of atonement that circulated during the nineteenth century—early and late—some of which may have influenced Dickens. Instead, she is satisfied to default to the ever-ready expedient of Dickens's Unitarian sympathies as evidence of his rejection of or reluctance to embrace a doctrine of atonement (read "vicarious atonement").

While certainly not all Dickens scholars are as dismissive as Larson, her almost casual approach to Dickens's understanding of the doctrine of atonement seems to be the rule rather than the exception. Such views have missed or ignored the nuances and tensions of

the pattern of atonement in Dickens and have thus left untapped an extremely significant aspect of his religious thought. Madonna Egan, in her work on *TLOL*, has identified this deficit concerning any substantial consideration of atonement in Dickens (364-69), and while her discussion of atonement is not conclusive, she has perceptively drawn attention to the necessity of a more careful and thorough investigation into the subject. Accordingly, if our goal is to arrive at a clearer understanding of the work of Jesus in redemption and salvation in Dickens's thought, it will be imperative to recognize that there were more ways to understand atonement in Dickens's day than just in terms of a substitutionary model.

To begin, then, it will be instructive and necessary to know a little about the theological currents of the mid-nineteenth century regarding the doctrine of atonement, in that those currents likely contributed to shaping Dickens's thought.

#### *§6.2.1 THE DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT IN DICKENS'S DAY*

In Dickens's day, not unlike our own, the concept of atonement was varied and controversial. "The doctrine of atonement," wrote Benjamin Jowett in his 1855 commentary on Thessalonians, Galatians, Romans, "as commonly understood, is the doctrine of the sacrifice or satisfaction of Christ for the sins of men" (2: 469). To clarify, the idea of atonement is that the death and resurrection of Jesus dealt with the problem of human sin and provided the means by which a relationship with God might be established. The precise details as to how that was brought to pass were issues of controversy, of course, and views varied according to church party, denomination and personal preference. Whatever the view, any formulation of atonement rested on the understanding and the explanation of the precise meaning and significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. The two related and fundamental issues that fueled the controversy were: 1) whether or not Jesus was a propitiatory sacrifice for sins satisfying God's wrath, and 2) whether or not Jesus died on the cross in

place of men and women, substituting for them there.

Evangelicals (along with many Nonconformists) were characterized by their emphasis on the doctrine of vicarious or substitutionary atonement, which stressed that Christ died in the sinner's place and as a propitiatory sacrifice for sins. Whitby observed concerning Romans 3.25, "When therefore the apostle saith, that God hath set forth Jesus Christ to be a mercy-seat to us through faith in his blood, we have reason to believe the blood of Christ, as our sin-offering, doth make atonement for, and render God propitious to us."<sup>132</sup> Whitby continued: we have reason, from what is asserted in Romans 3.25 "of Christ our *piacular victim*, to conceive he suffered in our stead, and that his blood, shed for us, procured the remission of our sins, as it atoned an offended God for our transgressions" (2:16-17).

It was not uncommon, of course, for High Churchmen to hold to the doctrine of vicarious atonement while attempting, at the same time, to maintain a distinction and a distance between themselves and Evangelicals. That distance and distinction were maintained for the most part by not giving atonement so central a place as did the Evangelicals<sup>133</sup> and by recognizing that vicarious atonement itself was not an articulated doctrine. Nevertheless, an orthodox High Church view tended toward that of vicarious atonement. D'Oyly and Mant, for instance, commented on Matthew 20.28 regarding the word *ransom* (λύτρον): "This expression proves that Christ suffered in our stead, and gave His life to redeem mankind, who were subject to death, the wages of sin" (4: II, 11P1). Further, D'Oyly and Mant, in commenting on John 3.16, cited the *Church Homilies*:

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<sup>132</sup> While Whitby was not a nineteenth-century Evangelical, his comment here represents the view of vicarious atonement nicely.

<sup>133</sup> See in particular *Tract No. 87 On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge* by Isaac Williams, in which he writes of Atonement, "Surely the doctrine of the Atonement may be taught in all its fulness, on all occasions, and all seasons, more effectually, more really, and truly, according to the proportion of the faith, or the need of circumstances, without being brought out from the context of Holy Scripture into prominent and explicit mention." Cited in Elizabeth Jay, ed., *The Evangelical and Oxford Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 117.

The end of Christ's coming was to give light unto the world, to call sinners to repentance, to cast out the prince of this world, to reconcile us in the body of His flesh, to dissolve the works of the devil; to become a propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. (4: II, 12K4)

Clearly, then, substitutionary or vicarious atonement was the predominant, as well as the most familiar, view of atonement in the early to mid-nineteenth century.<sup>134</sup>

Nonetheless, there were dissenting views of atonement that were voiced and heard at this time. For instance, Benjamin Jowett, a Broad Churchman, represented one particular line of dissent and was quite vocal in rejecting vicarious atonement as barbaric and primitive. Jowett commented in comparing Jewish sacrifices to the death of Christ, "Jewish sacrifices rather show us what the sacrifice of Christ was not, than what it was. They are the dim, vague, rude, (may we not say?) almost barbarous expression of that want in human nature which has received satisfaction in Him only" (2: 479). Further, Jowett remarked, "The logical view of the doctrine of the atonement commences with the idea of a satisfaction to be made for the sins of men," to which he later adds, "In what did this satisfaction consist? Was it that God was angry, and needed to be propitiated like some heathen deity of old? Such a thought refutes itself by the very indignation which it calls up in the human bosom" (2: 270, 272). Jowett was not so much denying atonement, at least at this point in his thinking, as he was vigorously rejecting the substitutionary view of atonement.

Unitarians, too, vigorously rejected vicarious atonement as, in essence, blasphemous—a doctrine not to be found in the Scriptures. Lant Carpenter's *Lectures on the Scripture Doctrine of Atonement*, in conciliatory yet direct tones, explained the Unitarian position

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<sup>134</sup> W.J. Conybeare, discussing the Broad Church, pointed out in his important article "Church Parties" in the *Edinburgh Review* (October, 1853), "The doctrines taught by this party are the same in which both High and Low Church are agreed. The Incarnation and the Atonement, conversion by Grace, and Justification by Faith, are fundamental articles of their creed" (142). The point here, of course, is that according to Conybeare, Atonement was one of those doctrines with which there was a general affinity among the parties of the Church. Conybeare's article is still perhaps the classic treatment of the Anglican Church Parties in the early-to mid-nineteenth century.

over against the more orthodox trinitarian position:

On the one hand, God is represented [under the Unitarian theory] as pardoning sins, out of His own essential mercy, and sending forth Jesus Christ as the Messenger and Minister of His love and grace, to give the glad tidings of salvation and to convey and assure us the covenant of pardon and eternal life: on the other hand, God is represented [under the substitutionary theory] as pardoning sins in consideration of the interposition and mediation of another being and for his sake. If the Gospel declared this latter, then should we have nothing to do but to receive it as Divine truth: but as it does not, the lover of Scriptural truth should avoid, and set his face against, such representations, as tending to lead away from the sole, original Source of light, peace and blessedness. (198-9)

Harriet Martineau, defending a Unitarian view, strenuously rejected any idea of vicarious atonement, asserting, “We [...] reject the notion that any part of the punishment of sin can be escaped through the sacrifices, or mediation, or intercession of any being whomsoever”<sup>135</sup> (36). Furthermore, she made clear, “We absolutely reject the popular doctrine of the atonement by Christ, while we regard his sacrifices for us with reverential gratitude, and our obligations to him with awe and rejoicing” (42-3).

Carpenter’s lectures give a cogent and representative view of the Unitarian position on atonement in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Integral to the Unitarian view is the basic principle articulated by Carpenter:

The power or disposition of God to pardon sinners on repentance, was not affected by the Death of Christ; nor is the *exercise* of his Pardoning Mercy, except as far as sinners are brought by means of that event, into a state in which God can, consistently with his Holiness and his Justice grant them his mercy and his grace. (xii)

Clearly, the idea that Jesus’ death on the cross as a substitute for humanity satisfied God’s wrath toward the sins of humanity and secured God’s forgiveness for humanity was repugnant to the Unitarian mostly in that it maligned the character of God and challenged his free forgiveness of sin.

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<sup>135</sup> The punishment of which she speaks here is a limited remedial form of punishment that is intended to prepare the person being punished for a blissful eternity. See Martineau, *The Essential Faith* (33-36).

The Unitarian did not reject the biblical language of Christ's suffering on the cross, redemption, salvation, sin, or even Christ's shed blood. Such language was employed, however, in terms consistent with the Unitarian doctrine of the oneness of the Godhead and God's free and independent forgiveness of sin. In seeking to clarify the efficacy of the death of Jesus in this regard, Carpenter wrote:

That our Saviour suffered *for us*, for *our benefit*, is indisputable; it is what every Christian allows with cheerfulness and gratitude. That he suffered *for our sins*, or on account of our sins, no Christian can or does dispute. That he even suffered in our stead, is in one sense perfectly true; since through his sufferings he removes from his disciples those causes of present and future misery with which sin is inevitably attended; or, in other words, by his sufferings he prevented ours. But that he underwent our punishment, that God saw fit to inflict upon him those sufferings of body or mind or both, which mankind must otherwise have endured, as an equivalent or satisfaction to Divine justice, is a doctrine which never could have been derived from the Scriptures alone; and which is plainly inconsistent with them, as it is with the dictates of common equity and plain sense" (47-48).

Without question, then, Unitarian thought rejects the idea of vicarious atonement and its attendant propitiatory sacrifice. But we should note here also how, even in this important theological explanation, the shared descriptive theological language is employed. This is even more apparent as Carpenter speaks of the purpose of Jesus' death:

If the object of the Gospel was the salvation of man, their deliverance from sin and all its evils, and if Christ could not have effected this but through his death, and if he did so effect it;—then to his death we owe, under Divine appointment, the blessings of the Gospel; by his death especially, he became our Saviour and Redeemer; and the sacrifice of his life was our ransom, peculiarly as it respects our Saviour himself, the price of our redemption, our means of deliverance from all the evils from which we are delivered by his work, his Gospels, his death. (94-95)

Clearly, a shared descriptive theological language is employed here. Nevertheless, understood in the larger context of Unitarian doctrine, we are still able to see the Unitarian distinctives and concerns in relation to the more orthodox trinitarian view. As such, it is tempting to some to situate Dickens's thought on atonement and its related theological issues in this camp. The shoe seems to fit. As we have already noted, however, it was not the

Unitarian alone who objected to a vicarious atonement theology. There were, in fact, some who embraced the triunity of the Godhead who not only objected to the substitutionary view, but who also developed viable alternatives to that view. It is perhaps such ideas of atonement that exerted the formative influence on Dickens's thought.

#### *§6.2.2 ALTERNATIVES TO SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT*

Often the sense is subtly and erroneously conveyed that Dickens's objections to vicarious atonement and its related theological issues contributed to his attraction to and association with Unitarianism. We have argued above that Dickens's expressed attraction to Unitarianism was not doctrinal. He was not drawn to Unitarianism to find refuge from objectionable theology, whether vicarious atonement and the issues that surrounded it or anything else. Particularly with regard to atonement, there were obvious and likely familiar formulations by theologians who subscribed to the triunity of the Godhead that Dickens would have found quite palatable. It cannot be ignored, then, that Dickens could very well have found alternative ideas of atonement in non-Unitarian theologies that answered his objections to a substitutionary model.

The Evangelicalism that was so influential in the nineteenth century tended to be characterized and identified with Calvinism. Too often, this Calvinism was represented and known only in extreme and distorted forms that relentlessly assaulted people with their own depravity and sinfulness, emphasized the wrath of God as Lawgiver and Judge, and taught an exclusivist form of election. Included in this extreme Calvinistic doctrine was a central emphasis on a vicarious atonement in which it was necessary for Jesus to have suffered in the place of individuals to appease the wrath of a vengeful God. It was to just such doctrines and just such a Calvinism that Dickens had such strong aversions. In all of it, Dickens's most serious concern was the representation, or better, misrepresentation of God. For Dick-

ens, this misrepresentation of God lay at the heart of his aversions to this distorted Calvinism and its idea of vicarious atonement.

As we have already seen, Dickens would not countenance those views of God that made Him a sort of transcendent Shylock demanding His pound of flesh. Dickens understood God, and desired his children to understand God, as a heavenly Father whose unconditional concern was for their well-being. Such an understanding of God as Father would generate a different understanding of atonement, and it was precisely with this understanding of the Fatherhood of God that some of the alternative views began.

Thomas Erskine of Linlathen and John McLeod Campbell, for instance, two of the most important and influential British theologians in the nineteenth century according to Otto Pfeleiderer (378-82), were of the same mind as Dickens regarding Calvinism and its expression of atonement. In many respects, the theology of Erskine and Campbell was a response to much of the worst part of this distorted Calvinism, especially election and limited atonement. Realizing that one of the greatest causes of anxiety among nineteenth-century Christians was uncertainty concerning their eternal destiny, both Erskine and Campbell attempted to relieve that anxiety by providing new perspectives on the biblical idea of atonement and pardon. In doing so, they addressed many of the issues related to atonement that concerned Dickens and those like him.

Like Dickens, both Erskine and Campbell, working independently, conceived of God preeminently as a loving and merciful Father not as an austere Lawgiver and Judge. Such a fundamental orientation would result in a substantially different understanding of atonement compared to a distorted Calvinism. Based on this starting point, and of first importance, they insisted that any person could have assurance of salvation based on the character of God. In his *The Unconditional Freeness of the Gospel*, Erskine saw it this way:

A very common idea of the object of the gospel is, that it is to show how men may obtain pardon; whereas, in truth, its object is to show how pardon for men has been obtained, or rather to show how God has taken occasion, by the entrance of sin into the world, to manifest the unsearchable riches of holy compassion. (130)

The important point for Erskine (and Campbell) was that God's pardon, or forgiveness, had been given in the work of Christ on the cross prior to man even thinking of it. All that a person must do is believe that.

Erskine was adamant that faith or belief was not the means by which forgiveness is acquired. Rather, faith allows the pardon already given to have "a moral influence, by which it may heal the spiritual diseases of the heart,—which influence it cannot have in the nature of things, unless it is believed" (22). In other words, the forgiveness need only be accepted not earned or acquired. In this way, Erskine sought to encourage assurance in the Gospel promises by placing the efficacy of forgiveness in God's character not a person's activity. "The pardon of the gospel, then," Erskine wrote, "is just a manifestation of the character of God in relation to sinners. And that character is holy compassion" (26), the compassion of a loving Father. This stood over and against the idea implicit in the distorted Calvinism that repentance and faith were conditions for forgiveness or pardon. It was such a conditionalism that Erskine was attempting to dismantle.

In his *The Brazen Serpent*, Erskine offered a new perspective on atonement. While he believed that the idea of vicarious atonement had some truth in it, he found it "a very defective view" containing "much dangerous error" (26). "The humanly devised doctrine of substitution," he remarked, "has come in place of, and has cast out the true doctrine of the headship of Christ, which is the large, and glorious, and true explanation of those passages of Scripture which are commonly interpreted as teaching substitution" (37). Jesus did not die in our place as our substitute, Erskine argued. Rather, he died as our representative head voluntarily and out of holy love, bearing the burden of sin on our behalf, and for our bene-

fit. In the atonement, Jesus as head of the human race suffered under sin in order that we, as partakers of the new and uncondemned life that Jesus won through his suffering, might also be able to suffer the painful hatred of sin and thereby put it away from us. Thus, Erskine observed, “In the very root of the nature, he put the mark of hatred and condemnation on every form of human sin, as a corrosive and a blight upon it, and as a purifying salt infused into the source of life” (46-47). Jesus’ suffering for our benefit has provided us with the spiritual power to live victoriously in a fallen and sinful world where we, in a spiritual sense, suffer the punishment of sin ourselves.<sup>136</sup>

*Accepting our punishment, is just being of one mind with God, in hating and condemning sin, and longing for its destruction. It is submitting ourselves to the process of its destruction, and setting our seals to the righteousness of God in the process. It is the death-pang of the crucified head thrilling through the member, and accomplishing in it what it did in the head. (48)*

Thus, for Erskine:

Here was the mighty effect of the atonement, to open a righteous way for the in-pouring of the uncondemned life, even the eternal life, into the condemned nature. And as it is in that life only that we can condemn sin and accept our punishment, so it is only in that life that we can look on God or approach him. The work of Christ is thus the source of life” (57).

John McLeod Campbell’s perspective was similar to Erskine’s and developed it further. Like Erskine, Campbell emphasized that God’s forgiveness was given and operative prior to the individual’s faith. That is, God’s forgiveness was not conditioned by the individual’s faith. Repentance and faith are a response to grace, not a condition of grace (Campbell 12).

Campbell did not reject the idea of substitutionary atonement. He did, however,

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<sup>136</sup> Erskine is careful to clarify that he is not suggesting that Christ’s atonement is in any way incomplete. “Let me not be misunderstood, when I say that the furnace is necessary to purge away sin, as if I said that the atonement of Christ was incomplete, and that any affliction on our part is necessary to complete it. [...] I am not speaking of atonement, but of the purifying of the nature which is produced by sorrow received in a godly sort. And even with regard to this need of suffering—I do not mean to say that any amount of suffering is necessary to salvation. It is the suffering spirit of Jesus in us that is necessary” (55-56).

understand substitution differently from the typical Calvinistic view of vicarious atonement. In Campbell's view, Jesus did not persuade God to be gracious by appeasing His wrath. Rather, through vicarious penitence and humanity—not vicarious suffering—Jesus fulfilled the Law, absorbing its wrath in his perfect response to the demand of God's justice and the need of humanity. Campbell stated:

For that response has all the elements of a perfect repentance in humanity for all the sin of man—a perfect sorrow—a perfect contrition—all the elements of such a repentance, and that in absolute perfection, all—excepting the personal consciousness of sin—and by that perfect response in Amen to the mind of God in relation to sin is the wrath of God rightly met, and that is accorded to divine justice which is its due, and could alone satisfy it. (118)

In Campbell's thinking, Jesus did not endure penal suffering to accomplish atonement. Rather he provided, on behalf of humanity, a vicarious sorrow for sin and a vicarious repentance as humanity's representative head. The suffering for sin that Jesus endured consisted in just this vicarious confession and repentance. Such action, when carried out by the divine humanity in Jesus, involved a peculiar severity and intensity all its own. So, Campbell observed:

He who so responds to the divine wrath against sin, saying, "Thou art righteous, O Lord, who judgest so," is necessarily receiving the full apprehension and realisation of that wrath, as well as of that sin against which it comes forth into His soul and spirit, into the bosom of the divine humanity [...]. (118)

Thus, Jesus truly became "a sacrifice for sins", and in this way, atonement may be vicarious and expiatory, but not penal. Campbell wrote, "I contemplate [...] the conception of the Son of God suffering in suffering flesh that which is the perfect response of the divine holiness and divine love in humanity to the aspect of the divine mind in the Father towards the sins of men" (120).

Perhaps the most important element Campbell brings to our study, however, even more so than Erskine, is his insistence that any doctrine of atonement must be developed on

the basis of the Fatherhood of God and His desire for communion with his children. Ultimately, for Campbell, the atonement is to be understood as accomplishing the filial purposes of the Father's love in the Incarnation. When atonement is viewed in this way, God is the loving and merciful Father longing to know his children and be known by them. He is not, and can no longer be, an austere Lawgiver and Judge, for His purpose is not simply to uphold the Law at any cost but to seek to bring his children into communion with Him at whatever cost. It is certainly this understanding of God as Father over against an understanding of God as Lawgiver and Judge that would have appealed to Dickens and would have had a formative impact on his idea of atonement and his understanding of the work of Jesus in redemption and salvation.

In considering the views of Erskine and Campbell, our purpose has not been to suggest that Dickens became a student of the various views of atonement or even that he was familiar specifically with the particular work of Erskine or Campbell. Rather, the purpose has been to point out that for Dickens and other nineteenth-century Christians, there were other ways to think about atonement that were not formulated around a substitutionary model. Moreover, many of the issues and concerns that were answered in the doctrines of Unitarianism, especially relative to atonement, were taken up in the views of Erskine and Campbell, but squarely within a trinitarian framework. Concerns of the sort that Dickens bore about atonement and the issues related to it undoubtedly could be met in such formulations. In particular, it seems clear that Dickens would have been drawn to such a conception of the character of God that these views expressed. The Unitarians were not the only ones who placed the Fatherhood of God at the center of their theological thought. Indeed, Campbell's emphasis on and conception of God as Father seems unmatched by Unitarians and a view that Dickens could have embraced without qualification.

In many ways, Campbell's conception of the Fatherhood of God seems to share affinity with Dickens's thought on God the Father. Such a conception had a profound and formative impact not only on Dickens's understanding of atonement, but also on his understanding of certain soteriological issues related to atonement, ones that did not sit particularly well with him. Two of those related issues, original sin and total depravity, were especially influenced in Dickens's thought by this conception of God as Father. Even as the issues of Jesus' substitutionary death and his propitiatory suffering had fueled the controversy over atonement in the nineteenth century, the related issues of original sin and total depravity also played a role. The extent and nature of human sinfulness, of course, lies at the heart of the issue as it comes to bear on the necessity and nature of atonement. For Dickens, the extent and nature of human sinfulness was a major issue of tension as he thought through a doctrine of atonement and the work of Jesus in redemption and salvation.

### *§6.2.3 DICKENS ON ORIGINAL SIN AND TOTAL DEPRAVITY*

As it is usually employed in discussions about Dickens and his religious thought in its historical context, original sin refers to the sin of Adam as it is imputed to his posterity from generation to generation so that all of humanity is polluted by sin and is thereby naturally inclined toward evil and sinful deeds. Theologically, the companion of original sin is total depravity, a concept most often identified with Calvinism even, and especially, in the mid-nineteenth century. Total depravity asserts that sin has affected every aspect of the human being—mind, will, emotions, soul. Even the body is affected by sin in that physical death is its inevitable end. The importance of these doctrines for those in the early and mid-nineteenth century and, more importantly, for our study, lies in their logical result. Together, these doctrines identified humanity as estranged from God and at enmity with Him. Those who desired to establish a right relationship with God and to enter heaven needed

God's saving grace in forgiveness, reconciliation, justification and atonement. Furthermore, and importantly, the implications of such thinking were that human beings were inherently sinful from birth and were, thereby, apart from the salvation wrought by God's grace in Christ, subject to eternal punishment. Further still, human beings were unable to change this condition apart from the grace of God in Christ. In other words, in the religious vernacular of Dickens's day, all individuals were hopelessly lost in sin and in need of the salvation found only in Christ.

These doctrines, of course, were characteristic doctrines identified especially with a strongly Calvinistic Evangelicalism but were also found in the thought of Anglican churchmen in the nineteenth century. Even orthodox Anglicanism was not immune to the pervasive influence of Evangelicalism in the nineteenth century, and most churchmen of a more orthodox stamp subscribed to the basic view that human beings were inherently sinful and, apart from the grace of God in Christ, eternally lost.

Typically, Dickens is understood to have vigorously rejected such views and, in their place, to have embraced a more Romantic view of humanity and Christianity, believing that human beings were created good, in the image of God, and were not inherently sinful from birth. According to this understanding, sin, for Dickens, was not a condition into which one was born, as the doctrines of original sin and total depravity taught. Rather, sin was a moral choice, more often than not, prompted by a poor or virtually non-existent upbringing. Accordingly, Dickens found the often heavy-handed tactics of Evangelical and Dissenting preachers in castigating their parishioners as sinners more than disconcerting.

Dickens's sensitivity in this regard might be illustrated in a passage from "Two Tickets to a Cheap Theatre" in *The Uncommercial Traveller*. Taking exception to the description of people as "sinners" in terms of total depravity and original sin, he felt it necessary to cor-

rect a preacher in this regard:

Is it necessary or advisable to address such an audience continually as ‘fellow-sinners’? Is it not enough to be fellow-creatures, born yesterday, suffering and striving to-day, dying to-morrow? By our common humanity, my brothers and sisters, by our common capacities for pain and pleasure, by our common laughter and our common tears, by our common aspiration to reach something better than ourselves, by our common tendency to believe in something good, and to invest whatever we love or whatever we lose with some qualities that are superior to our own failings and weaknesses as we know them in our own poor hearts—by these, Hear me!—Surely, it is enough to be fellow-creatures. Surely, it includes the other designation, and some touching meanings over and above. (36)

His ire was considerably raised especially when such ideas were foisted upon children. Whether couched in the ironic expressions of such novels as *Bleak House* or *Little Dorrit*, or in the overt reprimand directed toward Mrs. Godfrey, an author of children’s stories, his aversion to the doctrines of original sin and total depravity applied to children seem only too clear. On the lips of the Reverend Chadband, Dickens’s sardonic message is unmistakable as Chadband assails Jo with a right and proper theology:

O running stream of sparkling joy  
To be a soaring human boy!

And do you cool yourself in that stream now, my young friend? No. Why do you not cool yourself in that stream now? Because you are in a state of darkness, because you are in a state of obscurity, because you are in a state of sinfulness, because you are in a state of bondage. (*BH*, 242-3)

Dickens would insist that Jo was not “in a state of sinfulness,” but rather that he had lacked opportunity, privilege and a proper upbringing. More than once, *TLOL* includes such statements as, “Never be proud or unkind, my dears, to any poor man, woman, or child. If they are bad, think that they would have been better if they had had kind friends, and good homes, and had been better taught” (28).

Dickens seemed ever ready to challenge the theological implications and the severity of the doctrines of total depravity and original sin, especially as articulated in the distorted Calvinism of his day. In *Little Dorrit*, for instance, Dickens sought to expose the harshness

of the doctrines of total depravity and original sin particularly in Mrs. Clennam whose upbringing was, she says, in “wholesome repression, punishment, and fear. The corruption of our hearts, the evil of our ways, the curse that is upon us, the terrors that surround us—these were the themes of my childhood” (739). Her son Arthur, to whom she had purposed to extend this heritage, painfully recollected early in the novel “a horrible tract” from his Sunday school days as a child, “which commenced business with the poor child by asking him in its title, why he was going to Perdition?” (42). Both Chadband and Mrs. Clennam are parodies that Dickens employed to expose in bold relief such doctrines that he found so repugnant. In a letter to Mrs. Godfrey, 25 July 1839, Dickens was much more direct and emphatic:

I do most decidedly object, and have almost invincible and powerful repugnance to that frequent reference to the Almighty in small matters, which so many excellent persons consider necessary in the education of children. [. . .] I object decidedly to endeavouring to impress them with a fear of death, before they can be rationally supposed to become accountable creatures, and so great a horror do I feel at the thought of imbuing with strict doctrines those who have just reflection enough to know that if God be as rigid and just as they are told He is, their fathers and mothers and three fourths of their relations and friends must be doomed to Eternal Perdition, and if I were left to choose between the two evils I would far rather that my children acquired their first principle of religion from a contemplation of nature and all the goodness and beneficence of the Great Being Who created it, than I would suffer them with such a strict construction ever to open a Bible or a Prayer Book, or enter a place of Worship. (*Pilgrim Letters* 1: 568)

Whether directly or ironically, Dickens often made clear his objections to the doctrines of original sin and total depravity. As I will attempt to demonstrate below, however, Dickens was under no delusion concerning the inherent goodness of humanity or the propensity for human beings to perpetrate evil. On the one hand, it is clear that Dickens objected to belligerent and arrogant pronouncements on human frailty that arose from the doctrines of total depravity and original sin. On the other hand, it would be naïve to suggest that Dickens did not recognize and accept the depths of moral depravity and sin to which

humanity could reach. Indeed, Dickens's insight into moral evil was one of the strengths of his work and an important facet of his Christian worldview.

It has been argued, of course, that Dickens's understanding of sin and evil was not attributable to his Christian worldview. Humphry House, for instance, is reluctant to admit to any overt Christian element in Dickens. House remarks tersely of Dickens, "He rejected Original Sin," and goes on to give a rather simplistic analysis of Dickens's references to sin, repentance and evil. He points out that in chapter forty-seven of *David Copperfield*, while Martha speaks of repentance, "neither she nor David nor Mr. Peggotty says it is sin she must repent of" (*Dickens World*, 112). It seems that House is being a bit tendentious here. Given the context and the diction of the chapter, one wonders what it is that she is to repent of if not sin.

House's observations concerning Dickens's notion of "evil" continue in the same vein. "Evil," says House, "is always terrifyingly real; but the source of it is obscure." House acknowledged that Dickens refers to "The Devil and Hell [...] frequently [...] in passing, but ambiguously; they might be either literal or metaphorical, so that details of belief are left open" (*World*, 112). It appears that while House wanted to acknowledge Dickens's cognizance of evil and wickedness in humanity, he was reluctant to associate it with any serious religious thought on Dickens's part.

In a paper prepared for a BBC radio broadcast talk, House expanded on the topic of evil. In citing the familiar Lord Acton quote that Dickens "knows nothing of sin when it is not crime," he observed:

Within the narrow limits of theological pigeon-holes this is true; the word "sin" hardly occurs in the novels; wickedness is not regarded as an offence against a personal God. But if the judgment is that Dickens knows nothing of evil unless it is recognized and punishable by law, it is quite false. (*All in Due Time* 183-4)

House was then willing to conclude, "It is clear from the evidence of the novels alone that

Dickens's acquaintance with evil was not just acquired *ab extra* [...] ; it was acquired also by introspection" (189). In this essay, House argued that Dickens knew evil from his own inherent experience of it—that Dickens, like all of us, knew the evil in his own heart and of which he was capable. House was not ready to allow, however, that Dickens wrote as a Christian with a biblical orientation.

Against House, Angus Wilson and A.E. Dyson, in *The English Novel*, insist that Dickens's understanding of evil is clearly and overtly Christian and that Dickens should be considered a Christian writer with a Christian worldview. Both Dyson and Wilson agree that Dickens "had a very dark vision of the world. He saw it almost as Hell at times, a place of exile threatened by evil and daemonic powers. This again is a specifically Christian aspect" (Watts 56). According to Wilson and Dyson, then, Dickens's view of human sin and evil should be considered in the context of a Christian worldview. As we do that, we will find that we may need to adjust our understanding of Dickens's concept of depravity and sin.

#### §6.2.4 REVISITING DICKENS'S CONCEPT OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY AND ORIGINAL SIN

In a most significant passage in *Little Dorrit*, a discussion of the criminal Rigaud takes place at the Break of Day Inn, in which some crucial theology is articulated. The landlady of the Break of Day observes of Rigaud:

And I tell you this, my friend, that there are people (men and women both, unfortunately) who have no good in them—none. That there are people whom it is necessary to detest without compromise. That there are people who must be dealt with as enemies of the human race. That there are people who have no human heart, and who must be crushed like savage beasts and cleared out of the way. They are but few, I hope; but I have seen (in this world here where I find myself, and even at the little Break of Day) that there are such people. And I do not doubt that this man—whatever they call him, I forget his name—is one of them. (131)

This observation is important because it comes in response to the comments of "the tall

Swiss who belonged to the church” who had remarked about Rigaud, “It may have been his unfortunate destiny. He may have been the child of circumstances. It is always possible that he had, and has, good in himself one did but know how to find it out. Philosophical philanthropy teaches—” (131). The landlady abruptly cuts off the Swiss at this point, and it is difficult to understand her response as other than contradicting the comments that a man such as Rigaud “had, and has, good in himself”.

Philip Collins, in his *Dickens and Crime* is convinced that this is Dickens’s view.<sup>137</sup> Essentially employing genre lock, drawing especially on Dickens’s journalism and selected correspondence, Collins is lead to observe, “For all his gaiety and high spirits, Dickens was not at bottom very optimistic about human nature” (82). This, of course, runs counter to what was, and is, popularly believed about Dickens. Collins is quick to acknowledge that, but adds in defense of his observation, “His reputation has often blinded his readers to the implications of what he actually wrote” (*Crime* 89). In light of what Dickens did, in fact, write, the observations of Collins can be substantiated.

Beyond the passage in *Little Dorrit* cited above, the recognition of the foibles and moral failings of humanity are captured further in a passage from *Barnaby Rudge*:

In the exhaustless catalogue of Heaven’s mercies to mankind, the power we have of finding some germs of comfort in the hardest trials must ever occupy the foremost place; not only because it supports and upholds us when we most require to be sustained, but because in this source of consolation there is something, we have reason to believe, of the divine spirit; something of that goodness which detects amidst our own evil doings, a redeeming quality; something which even in *our fallen nature*, we possess in common with the angels; which had its being in the old time when they trod the earth and lingers on it, yet, in pity. (285, my italics)

Likewise, similar notions are articulated in *The Old Curiosity Shop*:

Why were the eyes of little Nell wet, that night, with tears like those of the two sisters? Why did she bear a grateful heart because they had met, and feel it pain to

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<sup>137</sup> See his discussion in chapter 3, pp. 52-93, especially pp. 82-93.

think that they would shortly part? Let us not believe that any selfish reference—unconscious though it might have been—to her own trials awoke this sympathy, but thank God that the innocent joys of others can strongly move us, and that we, even in *our fallen nature*, have one source of pure emotion which must be prized in Heaven! (195, my italics)

Taken with the passage from *Little Dorrit*, these passages, and others like them, invite us to reconsider more critically Dickens's understanding of sin and human nature. The above passages seem to move us beyond a view of sin as merely periodic expressions of human frailty or errors in judgment. Indeed, that we are “fellow-sinners” with a “fallen nature” intimates at least some measure of corruption of human nature that stands over and against the inherent goodness of humanity and calls into question whether Dickens might not have somehow come to terms with, or otherwise recast to his own satisfaction, some form of human depravity. In any event, Dickens would celebrate the goodness of Oliver or Nell, Florence or Amy and at the same time recognize the evil nature of Sikes or Quilp, Carker or Rigaud. These latter are not merely villainous criminals. They represent evil and depraved humanity and they do so in a classic Christian sense.

Jonas Chuzzlewit, for instance, is truly Cain for he is never sorry, never penitent and always self-absorbed. “It was no contrition or remorse for what he had done that moved him; it was nothing but alarm for his own security” (*MC*, 725). Jonas, like his depraved counterparts, exhibited a consistent wickedness that was born, in his case, of selfishness, greed and hard-heartedness. He did not simply make mistakes or errors; he was evil and unrepentant. It is difficult to imagine that, in light of the historical context and his Gospels orientation, Dickens saw this sin and evil in any way other than in basic Christian terms. Dickens may not have fully accepted the doctrines of total depravity and original sin, but in characters like Jonas Chuzzlewit, he expressed his sense of the reality of human wickedness in the world, just as he felt the impress of sin around him.

While Dickens inevitably attributed the cause of such sin and evil in children to either a discriminatory and privileged-based social system or to domestic negligence and failure, and usually to both, his view of sin and evil in adults is more complicated. To conjecture that Dickens may have believed that those children who are never rescued from the deprivation of certain social or domestic forces could grow up to become “insensible and callous” adults makes sense, but Dickens does not precisely spell out how this might happen. Without question, he remains reluctant to attribute it to original sin and total depravity. Notwithstanding, he observes in the introduction to the 1841 edition of *Oliver Twist* of Bill Sikes:

I fear there are in the world some insensible and callous natures that do become, at last, utterly and irredeemably bad. But whether this be so or not, of one thing I am certain: that there are such men as Sikes, who, being closely followed through the same space of time, and through the same current of circumstances, would not give, by one look or action of a moment, the faintest indication of a better nature. (460)

Those like Sikes have “become” bad by virtue of an “insensible and callous nature”. Something has happened to them and they have become “lost” in some real sense. For, it is one thing to say that they have “become” bad. It is quite another to suggest that they are “utterly and irredeemably” bad. Such persons have been given over to evil and sin in such a way that they seem beyond the point of repentance. Even worse are those like Rigaud “who have no good in them—none.” “They are but few, I hope,” says the landlady of the Break of Day, “but I have seen [...] that there are such people.” And Dickens has little sympathy for them. Accordingly, Dickens did not refrain from speaking about suffering the torments of Hell in *TLOL* (74) and he employed imagery analogous to that in Fagin’s torments as he awaited imminent execution in his cell.

There are others, however, like Nancy who seem to illustrate the tension that Dickens recognized in coming to terms with human sin and evil, on the one hand, and a desire

to believe that there is some goodness in even the worst individuals, on the other. Dickens finds in Nancy certain “redeeming traits” to which certain of his readers took exception. “It is useless to discuss,” he remarks, “whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. It is true.” He admits, “It is a contradiction, an anomaly, an apparent impossibility, but it is a truth.” Indeed, “It is emphatically God’s truth, for it is the truth He leaves in such depraved and miserable breasts; the hope yet lingering behind; the last fair drop of water at the bottom of the dried-up weed-choked well.” (*OT* 460).

In “A Visit to Newgate” in *Sketches by Boz*, Dickens wrote of one inmate, a female, who was “hardened beyond all hope for redemption” (237). He described the girl as from a class that have, from birth, “entered at once upon the stern realities and miseries of life, and to their better nature it is almost hopeless<sup>138</sup> to appeal in after-times, by any of the references which will awaken, if it be only for a moment, some good feeling in ordinary bosoms, however corrupt they may have become” (238). In both of these instances, we find clear examples of that tension which Dickens felt so acutely, which he could not resolve, but accepted and maybe even embraced. He may not have been anxious to identify men and women as sinners; he may not have been convinced of the total depravity of humanity; but he certainly believed that there were such human beings who could and did exhibit such characteristics.

It seems clear, then, that Dickens recognized a sort of particular corruption if you will—the idea that certain individuals, apart from humanity in general, exhibited characteristics of a depraved nature and sometimes almost a total depravity. In this way, he was able to maintain an anthropology that advanced the inherent goodness of humanity while at the

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<sup>138</sup> Neil Philip and Victor Neuburg in their *A December Vision and Other Thoughtful Writings* (New York: Continuum, 1987) point out that the words “almost hopeless” are in the first edition simply, “hopeless.”

same time accounting for human corruption and sin. An anthropology that held in tension man's tendency toward self and sin with man's latent inclination to want to do good was the sort of anthropology, then, that exerted a formative influence upon Dickens's understanding of atonement. It may not have formed a conscious frame of reference, but ultimately it contributed to the shaping of a pattern of atonement for Dickens that in the end allowed him to see a relationship between Jesus' death on the cross and forgiveness of sin.

Perhaps this is as much as we can say about Dickens's understanding of atonement and the work of Jesus in redemption and salvation. We have components of the idea of atonement, but Dickens has not brought them together in a way that resembles formulation. As such, we see in Dickens a pattern of atonement shaped by the tensions and struggles he felt between theological considerations and human realities. His view of humanity needed to be brought in line with what he knew and understood of biblical truth, and the inherent goodness of humanity had to make sense against Jesus' death on the cross to save sinners. This pattern of atonement was also shaped by the tension between his own doctrines of the inherent goodness of humanity and particular corruption. In Dickens's understanding, human beings clearly committed sins, but there were those, too, who seemed to be characteristically evil.

Theologically speaking, then, we might describe all of this in terms of a doctrine of atonement or of reconciliation, but those are not Dickens's words. Still, the thought that emerges from his work, the anthropology that is implicitly such a large part of his worldview, and his patent Christology with its Saviour-Redeemer language all warrant the conclusion that, while he may have been an atonement minimalist, there is a pattern of atonement that runs not only through *TLOL* but also through his work as a whole.

Thus, Dickens's understanding of atonement places him squarely within the Chris-

tian tradition and at least marginally, if not comfortably, within the scope of the popular Christianity of his day. In fact, Dickens seems to stand well within the Anglican tradition in his understanding of atonement. In a sermon on justification, Pusey remarks, “There is (at least in a healthy state of the soul) combined a trustful hope or confidence in God, whereby we believe that our sins shall be forgiven for the sake of Christ [...] and that He Who hath loved us so as to make us His, will, unless we forsake Him, love us unto the end” (Pusey, *Nine Sermons* 6). The echo of Dickens’s concluding words in *TLOL* is heard here: “If we do this, and remember the life and lessons of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and try to act up to them, we may confidently hope that God will forgive us our sins and mistakes, and enable us to live and die in peace” (128). And *TLOL* certainly points to the fact that Dickens would agree with Pusey’s further assertion, “that good works done by the grace of Christ, are (when they can be performed) essential to a living faith, and necessary to our salvation” (9-10).

That many of his contemporaries (with many of his modern critics) may not have understood him in this way should not dissuade us. Dickens was never eager to maintain the status quo especially in his religious thought. Yet, his liberal attitudes and vocal opinions, while pushing the boundaries of orthodoxy, never really seem to have forced their way decisively through them. Dickens always was willing to test the truth of any proposition, no less religious ones; no less ones concerning atonement. In the end, however, he was not one to abandon his Christian worldview or his own Anglican presuppositions—*not* because his views were Anglican, but because they were his.

### §6.3 THE COVENANT OF PEACE AND HOPE THAT CHANGED THE CROWN OF THORNS INTO A GLORY

Having considered here Dickens’s understanding of the work of Jesus in redemption and salvation, it seems reasonable to conclude that he understood Jesus as the Saviour-

Redeemer, to whatever degree, in a conventional Christian sense. This study has demonstrated that Jesus was the Saviour in a plainly redemptive sense. That he forgave sins, that he “came to save sinners”, and that he “died on the cross to save us” are obvious affirmations. Less obvious is the connection between redemption and the cross in *TLOL*. While no explicit connection is made there, it can be argued that Jesus’ redemptive death on the cross is a foregone conclusion for Dickens. After all, *TLOL* does include the careful narrative of both Jesus’ crucifixion and His resurrection. Certainly they are more than just captivating narrative events to round out his story. They are as much a part of the Jesus’ life as are his goodness and compassion and as much a part of Dickens’s soteriological understanding as they are a part of the soteriological thought behind the Gospels.

The language of the cross found in other contexts in Dickens suggests that we are right to suppose that the cross has a redemptive sense that is taken for granted in *TLOL*. In an interesting observation in “The Murdered Person”, an article in *Household Words*, 11 October 1856, Dickens commented on circumstances surrounding the execution of William Dove on 10 August 1856. Dove had been found guilty of murdering his wife by strychnine poisoning. What rankled Dickens was Dove’s proclamation that God “had adopted this plan to save me” (Dickens, *Gone Astray* 397). In this scathing attack on “pattern penitents”, Dickens sarcastically remarked that Dove had taken “the special express-train to Paradise called the gallows” (398) and then later added, “Thus, the New Drop usurps the place of the Cross” (399). Here, Dickens is clearly associating the cross with redemption and salvation, and does so within the context of an article that has focused, in part, on the way in which God accomplishes redemption.

Consider, too, the words of Mr. Redlaw in “The Haunted Man”, a story of remembrance, grace and forgiveness: “O Thou,” he said, “who through the teaching of pure love,

has graciously restored me to the memory which was the memory of Christ upon the cross, and of all the good who perished in His cause, receive my thanks” (CB 396). In the context of “The Haunted Man”, the restored memory of Redlaw and the memory of Christ are both integrally connected to forgiveness. Likewise, in Dickens’s “A Christmas Tree”, *Household Words*, 21 December 1850, pardon for sin is directly connected to the cross. Dickens describes Jesus, “A Solemn figure [...] dying upon a Cross, watched by armed soldiers, a thick darkness coming on, the earth beginning to shake, and only one voice heard, ‘Forgive them, for they know not what they do.’” (*Selected Journalism* 10).

Perhaps most significant in this regard is Dickens’s obvious affection for Jesus’ words in the story of the Raising of Lazarus in John 11.1-57, particularly 11:25: “I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.” Dickens’s abbreviated use of the verse in *TLOL* is fascinating and important. There, he seems to use it with the same eschatological significance that it possesses in Johannine theology, which is seen in nineteenth-century commentators. For instance, R.C. Trench (1847) commented that Jesus’ words in John 11.25 involved the idea, “In me is victory over the grave, in me is life eternal: by faith in me that becomes yours which makes death not to be death, but only the transition to an [sic] higher life” (400).

In *TLOL*, it appears that Dickens hoped his account of the episode would point to Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life in the fullest sense of that phrase. The raising of Lazarus was not just the resuscitation of a corpse—although it certainly was that—for Dickens; it was also a foreshadowing of the eschatological Resurrection and the hope therein. Dickens is careful to relate the conversation between Jesus and Martha faithfully along the lines of John’s Gospel, juxtaposing Martha’s stated belief that her brother will rise again “at the Resurrection on the Last Day” with Jesus’ claim to be “the Resurrection and the Life”. Martha’s

response to Jesus' query as to whether or not she believes his claim, in John, is that she believes that he is "the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world." In *TLOL*, her response is a simple, "Yes, Lord", that is, that Jesus is, in fact, the Resurrection and the Life. Commenting on this exchange between Jesus and Martha, Olshausen wrote, "He [Jesus] leads her thoughts from the *departed* brother to the *present* Saviour, the Saviour both for Lazarus and for herself, and shews [sic] her, that in him alone she may obtain the perfect remedy against death corporeal and spiritual" (4: 10). Likewise, for Dickens, Jesus' words possessed the broader eschatological significance.

This particular take on Dickens's understanding of these words from John 11.25 seems to be confirmed in *A Tale of Two Cities*, in which these words seem to become the credo of Sydney Carton. They are words that he chooses finally to live by and then to die by. In "The Game Made" (Bk. 3 Chap. 9), a compelling argument can be posited that Sydney Carton experiences a genuine conversion, which is abetted and sustained by the words from John 11.25, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." It is not within the purview of this work to pursue that argument here, but that the words are understood and used by Dickens in a salvific sense seems clear. "The prayer that had broken up out of his heart for a merciful consideration of all his poor blindnesses and errors," Dickens wrote, "ended in the words, 'I am the resurrection and the life.'" (327). These words invigorate Carton and enliven him as we see his boldness and resolve stiffen throughout the chapter, and in the end, they are the words that make it possible for his young companion in death to say, because of Carton, "I have been able to raise my thoughts to Him who was put to death, that we might have hope and comfort here today" (388).

In light of such material in the larger Dickens corpus, it seems reasonable to conclude that Dickens recognized a redemptive significance in Jesus' work on the cross. That

Dickens left it secondary in *TLOL* is likely due, in some degree, to his desire to remain aloof from even the most central doctrines of the faith. Perhaps, too, his strong desire to protect a non-sectarian account of the life of Jesus had some influence on how he portrayed the salvific work of Jesus in *TLOL*.

Still, the ideas of salvation and redemption remain central to *TLOL*. As has already been noted, salvation in *TLOL*, and in Dickens's larger Christian thought, consists in going to heaven. To get there, the individual must be saved or redeemed. Simply, sins must be forgiven. For Dickens, sin is a moral and religious phenomenon and must be dealt with as such. Obviously, Dickens saw sin as an offense against God. Otherwise, why, in *TLOL* does forgiveness of sins play such a prominent role? Consider, then, how Florence pleaded with Edith, "Oh, pray to Heaven, pray to Heaven, Mama, to forgive you all this sin and shame" (*Dombey*, 915); or how Nancy was entreated by Rose that she "might be yet reclaimed" for "it is never too late for penitence and atonement" (*Oliver Twist*, 203). Dickens regularly maintained a connection between sin, repentance, and forgiveness, and while his language was rarely liturgical or even "religious," it was nevertheless the language of one's heart going out to God seeking forgiveness of sins.

#### §6.4 SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In Dickens's Christian thought, then, the individual who comes to God in simple repentance seeking pardon is assured of receiving it. At the same time, Dickens's soteriological thought included the idea that some people are utterly and irredeemably bad. Based on what we have found in *TLOL*, it would appear that even those people could ask for forgiveness and go to heaven. It is just that Dickens did not foresee that happening. That is why he called them utterly and irredeemably bad. They were in some inhuman way, hardened, self-absorbed and wicked. Dickens illustrates this in one story. An extended quotation from his

“Pet Prisoners” in *Household Words*, 27 April 1850, will show not only an example of Dickens’s particular corruption, but also his lack of sympathy for such individuals:

A strange absorbing, selfishness—a spiritual egotism and vanity, real or assumed—is the first result. It is most remarkable to observe, in the cases of murderers who become this kind of object of interest, when they are at last consigned to the condemned cell, how the rule is (of course there are exceptions) that the murdered person disappears from the stage of their thoughts, except as a part of their own important story; and how they occupy the whole scene. *I did this, I feel that, I confide in the mercy of Heaven being extended to me; this is the autograph of me, the unfortunate and unhappy; in my childhood I was so and so; in my youth I did such a thing, to which I attribute my downfall—not this thing of basely and barbarously defacing the image of my Creator, and sending an immortal soul into eternity without a moment’s warning, but something else of a venial kind that many unpunished people do. I don’t want the forgiveness of this foully murdered person’s bereaved wife, husband, brother, sister, child, friend; I don’t ask for it, I don’t care for it. I make no enquiry of the clergyman concerning the salvation of that murdered person’s soul; mine is the matter; and I am almost happy that I came here, as to the gate of Paradise. “I never liked him,” said the repentant Mr. Manning, false of heart to the last, calling a crowbar by a milder name to lessen the cowardly horror of it, “and I beat in his skull with the ripping chisel.” I am going to bliss, exclaims the same authority, in effect. Where my victim went to is not my business at all. (Philip and Neuburg, 77-78)*

That Dickens is unwilling to deny to anyone the opportunity for repentance and pardon is clear from his concluding remarks on this subject, but so, too, is his suggestion that such repentance would unlikely be forthcoming from such an individual: “Now, God forbid that we, unworthily believing in the Redeemer, should shut out hope, or even human trustfulness, from any criminal at the dread pass; but it is not in us to call this state of mind repentance” (Philip and Neuburg, 78).

In Dickens’s perfect world, children said their prayers, grew up to be responsible adults, and enjoyed their family and friends and the good gifts from God’s beneficent hand. They did their duty, loved God, genuinely sought God’s forgiveness for failings and shortcomings, and eventually lived happily ever after in heaven with their families and loved ones. But Dickens did not live in a perfect world and he knew that as well as anyone did. Sin and evil were as much a part of that world as goodness and virtue. Nevertheless, God had given

hope in this less-than-perfect world and that hope was in a Saviour—“Our Saviour”—who did good and taught people how to love God and how to hope to go to heaven after death. It was this hope that sustained Dickens’s positive view of the goodness of humanity even in the midst of a sinful and seemingly fallen world; it was this hope that could make men and women what they were intended to be and make the world what it was intended to be. And for Dickens, it is this hope that was at the heart of Jesus’ work in redemption and salvation.

SEEKING FOR NO OTHER FOOTSTEPS

*“There can be no confusion in following Him, and seeking  
for no other footsteps, I am certain!”*

– from *Little Dorrit*, Bk. 2 Chapter 31

In *The English Novel: Questions in Literature*, Angus Wilson, in a dialogue with A. E. Dyson, remarked concerning “the Christian aspect of Dickens’s work”:

It is in fact an absolutely essential part of his development as a novelist. He thought of himself as centrally a Christian. Two of the most important foreign writers who were influenced by him, namely Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, both speak of him as “that great Christian writer”. He is Christian not merely in the formal sense of the word; in profound ways the Christian religion makes sense of his work. (55-56)

The idea that Dickens “thought of himself as centrally a Christian” and that he might be considered “that great Christian writer” is the subject that will be taken up in this final chapter. The concern will no longer focus on Dickens’s theology, however. Instead, I will consider in what ways Dickens thought of himself as a Christian and in what ways he may be seen as a Christian writer.

Our study of the *TLOL* in the last four chapters has been a study of the implicit theology that is part of *TLOL*. I have attempted to show that *TLOL* provides an index of sorts for the larger Dickens corpus by providing the essence of Dickens’s Christian thought and in what ways it does so. I have also insisted that Dickens’s central purpose was not to teach doctrine to his children in *TLOL*. Nevertheless, through his selection of material, his careful harmonization, and the arrangement, editing, and phrasing of his narrative, he has provided a resource from which we can gather the elements and features of a reasonably coherent expression that fairly and substantially represents his Christian thought. Identifying that theology and taking it seriously provides us with the necessary base, then, to understand more precisely and with greater attention to the depth of his own Christian convictions and

understanding, his larger purposes in composing *TLOL* for his children: to teach them who Jesus was and what he did, in order that they might find in him the Exemplar for living their lives.

Had Dickens ever intended us to read *TLOL* as it has come to us, he likely never would have wanted us to draw from it an outline of his theological thought. Certainly, when he read it to his children, he wanted them to think not about theological doctrines, but about the love of God, the example of Jesus and their own moral responsibility. For Dickens, these were the primary things with which Christianity was to be concerned and the primary things upon which the life of faith must be built. Purity of doctrine, perfecting formulations of theology, and a preoccupation with ecclesiastical polity were so little a part of Dickens's understanding of Christianity as to be virtually insignificant. What mattered to Dickens was the practice of Christianity, and that meant imitating Jesus and following his teaching.

In *TLOL*, Dickens included no fewer than ten descriptions of the character of Jesus that served as an example of common Christian behaviour; more than fifteen instances of Jesus' teaching, all of which centered on Christian conduct; and at least nine directly hortatory passages urging a suitable response to Jesus' teaching or example. In the end, Dickens understood *TLOL* to be a message of moral urgency rather than a doctrinal primer. His conclusion to *TLOL* exhorted his children:

Remember!—It is Christianity TO DO GOOD, always—even to those who do evil to us. It is Christianity to love our neighbours as ourself, and to do to all men as we would have them do to us. It is Christianity to be gentle, merciful, and forgiving, and to keep those qualities quiet in our own hearts, and never make a boast of them, or of our prayers or of our love of God, but always to show that we love Him by humbly trying to do right in everything. If we do this, and remember the life and lessons of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and try to act up to them, we may confidently hope that God will forgive us our sins and mistakes, and enable us to live and die in peace. (128)

Dickens believed that, to be true to itself, Christianity must be lived out; it must be practiced. For Dickens, it was not enough simply to believe all the right doctrines. Rather, a person's Christian faith was to be demonstrated in how he or she treats the people God brings within the sphere of his or her influence; it was to be demonstrated by how a person takes up the cause of the poor, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised; it was to be demonstrated by how a person is ready to forgive others and does; by how a person is ready to involve themselves in the sacrifice and action that bring about change. In *A Christmas Carol*, when Scrooge congratulated Marley's ghost on being a good man of business, the ghost replied with regret and outrage, "Business! Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!" (CB 20). This is surely one of the most profound statements of Dickens's basic worldview and one that articulates the fundamental core of his Christian conviction.

In connection with such statements, an interesting problem arises. Because of Dickens's lack of connection to the Church by way of attendance, worship, and involvement, talk of his Christian conviction is too often met with more than a little skepticism. As a result, such statements as the one above by Marley are attributed to mere moralism at best, or as a commercial attempt to tap into the religious psyche of the nineteenth-century reading public, at worst. Dickens's lack of enthusiasm toward the Church, however, should not be construed as indifference or cynicism toward Christianity. As Andrew Sanders has observed, Dickens's "professions of faith are both constant and, it would seem, heartfelt" and his "religion was both vital and pervasive" (*Resurrectionist* x). Dickens undoubtedly thought of himself as a Christian and likely as one having keen insight into what being a Christian really meant. He was never convinced, however, that being a part of the Church had much

to do with being a Christian.

### §7.1 CHARLES DICKENS: THE RELUCTANT CHURCHMAN

In the 1840s, as Dickens's religious views were beginning to mature, the Church of England seemed to be, especially in Dickens's mind, preoccupied with itself as an institution. The High Church was mostly steeped in Anglican orthodoxy or Tractarian sentiment and arguing about which was more Apostolical. The Low Church, or the Evangelicals,<sup>139</sup> following a rise to prominence and power in the early-nineteenth century, were self-satisfied and consumed with maintaining their own status quo. And both groups together were, for all intents and purposes, privately engaged with one another in petty bickering about Anglican ecclesiology, polity and doctrine. At the same time, the Broad Church was an assortment of individuals simply trying to be heard. In the midst of this, Dickens saw differently and thought differently. His concerns were not those of the partisan groups. In many ways, his concerns seemed to transcend those of the Church parties. His thinking was directed toward an understanding of the very essence of the Christian faith and how it came to bear on life apart from and without concern for the meager ambitions of a self-absorbed Church and its feuding parties. That Dickens was a churchman, at least in the broadest sense of the term, may be conceded. But he was the reluctant churchman, at best, never really finding comfortable quarter in the Church.

Dickens could be brutal in his censure of the Church, but we never get the sense of him standing apart from and outside of it. That is, his ranting against the Church seems to

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<sup>139</sup> As Peter Nockles has pointed out in detail, prior to 1833 the designation Low Church was used to identify Latitudinarians as distinct from Evangelicals. It was not until the 1840s that the designation was regularly used to identify Evangelicals. Because I will be primarily concerned with the later 1830s and the 1840s in treating Dickens's churchmanship, I will use the designations Low Church and Evangelical interchangeably. See Peter Benedict Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship, 1760-1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 25-32. See also Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England, 1734-1984* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 115, n. 7.

be that of a critical churchman rather than the hostility of a disgruntled Dissenter. Dickens expected the Church to live up to what he understood to be its calling, and as such, he may have been one of its harshest critics when it failed to do so; but he never embraced the course of dissent or the cause of disestablishment. His relationship, then, with the Church was an uneasy one and one which is, more often than not, difficult to figure.

It is generally accepted that Dickens's beliefs aligned him with the Broad Church, and to label him as such may serve as well as any designation might. To call Dickens (or anyone else, for that matter) a Broad Churchman, however, says very little about him or his churchmanship. Consider, for instance, that men as diverse in thinking as Thomas Arnold and A.H. Clough, F.D. Maurice and Benjamin Jowett, or S.T. Coleridge and Richard Whately are all classified as Broad Churchmen. The danger, then, of classifying Dickens indiscriminately as a Broad Churchman is that such a designation can easily lead to approaching him with predisposed notions of his Christian thought in terms of a generalized, and often undefined, concept of the Broad Church. The result is that the finer contours of his Christian convictions are distorted and misrepresented.

#### *§7.1.1 DICKENS AND THE BROAD CHURCH*

The Broad Church is often portrayed to the student of Dickens as a convenient catchall for those thinkers and writers who are not easily situated within either the Low Church or the High Church. In fact, those individuals of a Broad Church mindset, while remaining diverse (at times, even antagonistic toward one another) in many aspects of their thinking, were united by certain broader common concerns that provided a sort of platform, if you will, for what was only loosely a party, comprised of a relatively small group of thinkers, and for only a brief period in the latter half of the century. The Broad Church, as it comes to bear on our discussion of Dickens's religion, was incipient it would seem. W.J.

Conybeare, in his *Edinburgh Review* article “Church Parties”, indicated that, as late as 1853, what we call the Broad Church movement was still not constituted as a recognized party in the Church. “Those whom we now describe [i.e., the Broad Church] have so little organization or mutual concert of any kind that they can scarcely be called a party at all” (147). Margaret Crowther, in her *Church Embattled*, goes so far as to suggest, “The Broad Church was not a faction but a restless and critical attitude of mind, and Broad Churchmen were drawn together more by the hostility they provoked than by their common ideas” (29-30). What’s more, when the movement did solidify into a party, it was rather short-lived. If Josef Altholz is correct, the Broad Church movement was a shooting star. “*Essays and Reviews*”, Altholz maintains, “was the culmination and final act of the Broad church movement” (1). Somewhere between 1853 and the early 1860s, then, the movement developed, formed into a party, fomented, and dissolved. This is not meant to imply that what is referred to as the Broad Church tradition or Broad Church thinking didn’t exist until sometime after 1853; nor is it meant to cast doubt on the fact that such a tradition developed recognizable principles at this early stage. It should, however, provide some insight into the nature and constitution of the Broad Church party and Dickens’s relationship to it.

Following the lead of Thomas Arnold and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Broad Churchmen prized and revered the Scriptures but were not hesitant to subject it to the scrutiny of critical study; they were confident that the Bible, in particular the New Testament, was an authoritative moral guide and spiritual revelation that would stand up to critical investigation, but accepted that its inspiration was general rather than plenary; they were Churchmen, in most cases committed to the Establishment and its longevity, while at the same time they saw the need for reform by means of greater comprehension; most of all they were progressive thinkers unafraid to challenge the religious conventions of their day in their

own quest for truth. According to the broader criteria, then, it is plain to see why Dickens is so often situated within the Broad Church camp.

Undoubtedly, Dickens was sympathetic to some of the fundamental principles of the Broad Church as they have been outlined above. He agreed with the idea of allowing greater freedom of thought to the clergy, for instance, but showed no indication of serious interest in the fundamental issue of comprehension. His preference for the New Testament over the Old was also a point of contact with Broad Churchman, but he showed no interest in the critical issues concerning the two Testaments that preoccupied the thought of Broad Churchmen. Likewise, Dickens seems to have viewed the idea of progressive revelation favourably, but does not seem to have involved himself in any theological dialogue about it. In fact, Dickens mentions all of these issues in a single letter to W.F. de Cerjat, 25 October 1864. The letter demonstrates Dickens's familiarity with these ideas, but this lone reference coupled with the tenor and substance of the rest of his work shows that such theological ideas were rarely of interest to him.

The Broad Church movement tended to be more of an academic movement than a popular one. Certainly, like most formative academic movements, Broad Church thought would have trickled down to the popular level, but in quite a different form and with substantially different results. As a moderately progressive thinker, Dickens would have been alert and open to new ideas and fresh formulation of Christian thought, so long as they stayed within the bounds of his religious presuppositions and intellectual curiosities. That would not qualify him as a Broad Churchman, however. Indeed, it makes him little different from many middle-class Christians in the mid-nineteenth century. Our consideration of his thought in the previous four chapters suggests that, while he was receptive to progressive ideas, he was more comfortable with innovations of a mainstream

consensus. To think of Dickens as a Broad Churchman, then, or to indiscriminately situate him in that category is to brand him in a particular way that skews not only our perception of his spiritual orientation but also our understanding of his Christian thought.

Perhaps Dickens's most conspicuous point of contact with the Broad Church is his admiration for Thomas Arnold and the fundamental views of Christianity that they shared.

Charles R. Sanders says of Arnold, in *Coleridge and the Broad Church Movement*:

He followed Coleridge, however, in making the supreme test of truth a moral one. He accepted or rejected various beliefs in accordance with how they were related to the will and to conduct—to how they worked out in action. (100)

The same could be said of Dickens. For him, like Arnold, Christian truth was not measured in terms of theology and doctrine, but in terms of moral responsibility and practice. Consequently, his Christian thought was not constrained by the narrow limits of Anglican partisanship of any sort. It seemed to transcend them. He was not concerned about the petty and limited ecclesiastical issues or doctrinal disputes of the Church—High, Low, or Broad—except where they touched moral responsibility. Indeed, he saw them as a distraction and hindrance. His thought was guided by moral and social concerns even more so than someone like Arnold. For Dickens, the issues and dogma of the Church were quite subordinate to the practical ramifications of Christianity in the moral and social realms, and he was quite comfortable in the life of faith apart from the auspices of the Church.

## §7.2 DICKENS AND RELIGION

Dickens's reputation as a religious outsider has sometimes resulted in certain misperceptions concerning his Christian commitment. His aloof posture relative to the Church has sometimes been interpreted as indifference toward or detachment from Christianity. What seems to be the voice of subversion, however, in the end is found to be the voice of the prophet intending to point out error and call the Church back to its vocation. Sir Henry

Fielding Dickens wrote of his father:

He made no parade of religion, but he was at heart possessed of deep religious convictions, as the terms of his will, as his letters to us on starting life, go to show, as well as the "History of Our Lord's Life," for his children [...]. What he did hate and despise was the cant of religion, of the Pecksniffs, Chadbands and Stigginses in life, and these he attacked with all the weight of his genius. (41)

Dickens was adamant that the charlatans and pretenders not be allowed to operate and influence unchecked. Indeed, it would seem that Dickens took it as a personal responsibility to police such religious pretension. Dickens took exception, not to Christianity in particular, but to external forms of religion that, in his mind, did more damage than good, and which he viewed as counterfeits and counterproductive to the message of the truth of Christianity.

Dickens had written to David Macrae on this head:

I have so strong an objection to mere professions of religion, and to the audacious interposition of vain and ignorant men between the sublime simplicity of the New Testament and the general human mind to which our Saviour addressed it, that I urge that objection as strongly and as positively as I can. In my experience, true practical Christianity has been very much obstructed by the conceit against which I protest. (127)

They err, then, who attempt to suggest that, because Dickens had no apparent connection to the church, his Christian commitment was substandard, flawed, or apathetic. In his *Dickens and Education*, Philip Collins is bold to remark on the observation of Henry Dickens above, "'Sincere' would have been an apter word, for if his religion had been 'deep' his novels would have contained more explicit and insistent reference to Christian worship and belief" (59).

Collins has missed that Dickens's understanding of Christianity is not mediated by the Church but by his concept of Jesus. Moreover, Collins has failed to recognize that the depth of Dickens's religious conviction is not to be found in references to Christian worship and belief in his work, but in the portrayal of Christian conduct and action. It is precisely because Dickens's religious convictions are so deep that we see little in the way of "explicit

and insistent reference to Christian worship and belief.”

Humphry House is similarly mistaken when he observes of Dickens, “His practical humanist kind of Christianity hardly touched the fringes of what is called religious experience, and his work shows no indication of any powerful feeling connected with the genuinely religious subject” (*Dickens* 131). House’s statement is practically unintelligible in light of the Christian themes of, for instance, *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, or *The Old Curiosity Shop*. It is quite difficult to read those novels without a sense of the “powerful feeling” of Dickens’s Christian conviction.

In the end, the statements of both Collins and House tell us more about their own perceptions of Christianity than about Dickens’s. Dickens’s Christianity finds its way into his work, not as formula or platitude, but because it is a part of him, a part of his worldview, and because, as Orwell wrote, “he was always preaching a sermon” (56). To miss this is to miss the heart and power of his writing.

Orwell, in fact, is closer to the truth than Collins or House when he observes of Dickens, “He was essentially a Bible-Christian, as he took care to make plain when writing his will. In any case, he cannot properly be described as a religious man. He ‘believed’, undoubtedly, but religion in the devotional sense does not seem to have entered much into his thoughts” (57). Orwell is right: Dickens was not a religious man. That is, he was not a man who saw Christianity in terms of conspicuous piety and religiosity, especially as it was understood and propagated by the Church. Dickens deliberately, it would seem, sought to avoid cant and the façade of religiosity. And Orwell is right again to say that Dickens was never much concerned with “religion in the devotional sense”. For Dickens, the life of faith did not depend on the Church and its religious exercise. It depended upon individual Christians to do unto to others, as they would be done by; to love God with all their heart,

soul, mind, and strength; to love, forgive, and serve. In Dickens's mind, those things were practicable apart from the Church. For the most part, Dickens felt that those things must be practicable in spite of the Church. Right or wrong, agreeable or not, Dickens did not feel the necessity of involving himself in the activity of a Church that he felt was not fulfilling its calling.

Consequently, Dickens could be scathing in his criticism of the church. His disdain for what he perceived as petty wrangling over irrelevant dogma and ecclesiastical minutiae is well documented. In what is clearly a less than measured reference to High Church preoccupations, Dickens wrote to Albany Fonblanque in 1843, "I find I am getting horribly bitter about Puseyism. Good God to talk in these times of most untimely ignorance among the people, about what Priests shall wear, and whither they shall turn when they say their prayers.—They had best not discuss the latter question too long, or I shrewdly suspect they will turn to the right about: not easily to come back again" (*Pilgrim Letters* 3: 462-63). Further, he wrote to Cornelius Felton in America in that same year that he was "disgusted with our Established Church, and its Puseyisms, and daily outrages on common sense and humanity" (*Pilgrim Letters* 3: 455).

An essay by Dickens in *The Examiner*, again in 1843, entitled, "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Condition of the Persons Variously Engaged in the University of Oxford" was a derisive censure of High Church Anglicanism. By means of sustained irony, he satirizes what he saw as the ridiculous machinations of an institution "established for the Manufacture of Clergymen." His "findings" on the "Prevailing Ignorance" at Oxford revealed:

A vast number of witnesses being interrogated as to what they understood by the words Religion and Salvation, answered Lighted Candles. Some said water; some, bread; others, little boys; others mixed the water, lighted candles, bread, and little boys all up together, and called the compound, Faith. (Dickens, *Amusements* 62)

Further, it was found that, while a certain schoolboy in Derbyshire was not able to spell “‘Church’ [...] there was no doubt that the persons employed in the University of Oxford can all spell Church with great readiness, and, indeed, very seldom spell anything else” (62). Such criticism seems to typify Dickens’s relationship to the Church.

The harshness of his satire of High Churchmen in his journalism is matched only by the harshness of his parodies and caricatures of Evangelicals and Nonconformists<sup>140</sup> especially in his novels. Most of Dickens’s Churchmen—Chadband, Stiggins, Clennam, Pecksniff, Jellyby, Howler and there are more—are objects of his satire, and most are Evangelicals or Dissenters or both. Arthur Adrian<sup>141</sup> points out that Dickens began to criticize Dissenters as early as 1836 beginning with his “Sunday Under Three Heads” and continued his “assaults” throughout his career (Adrian 188-201). Dickens’s Chadband of *Bleak House* is a classic caricature of what he saw as the bogus and hypocritical posture of the most objectionable forms of Dissent. Chadband is a self-important, rambling preacher who loves to hear himself speak. In one instance of his long-winded and reproachful preaching, Chadband caused Jo, the street-sweeper, to feel himself an “unimprovable reprobate” and one who “won’t never know nothink.” Then, in a fascinating editorializing aside that acts as an indictment of Chadband and his brand of Christianity, Dickens speaks to Jo,

It may be, Jo, that there is a history so interesting and affecting even to minds as near the brutes as thine, recording deeds done on this earth for common men, that if the Chadbands, removing their own persons from the light, would but show it thee in simple reverence, would but leave it unimproved, would but regard it as being eloquent enough with out their modest aid—it might hold thee awake, and thou might learn from it yet! (*BH* 323)

Chadband is not a facilitator of what is good and true and pure. In fact, he is detrimental to

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<sup>140</sup> It is often difficult in Dickens’s fiction to distinguish between Low Churchmen and Dissenters (Nonconformists). As such, it will be fair here to discuss them as a group.

<sup>141</sup> While Adrian’s assessment of the causes of Dickens’s disdain toward dissenters is a bit forced and speculative, his survey of Dickens’s portrayal of dissenting hypocrisy and cant still remains an important one.

such causes, a negative influence in those lives with which he comes into contact. For Dickens, this was an example of what was all too common in the Evangelical or Dissenter. The 1867 Preface to *The Pickwick Papers* includes perhaps as informative a statement concerning Dickens's clash with Dissent as he had made. Harangued by the Evangelical press and various dissenting groups for his Pickwickian satire of religion, particularly of the evangelical sort, Dickens provided a statement that acts as almost a line of connection from his early work through his middle novels to his final years. An extended quotation will afford a better feel for that line of connection:

Lest there should be any well-intentioned persons who do not perceive the difference [...] between religion and the cant of religion, piety and the pretence of piety, a humble reverence for the great truths of Scripture and an audacious and offensive obtrusion of its letter and not its spirit in the commonest dissensions and meanest affairs of life, to the extraordinary confusion of ignorant minds, let them understand that it is always the latter, and never the former, which is satirized here. Further, that the latter is here satirized as being, according to all experience, inconsistent with the former, impossible of union with it, and one of the most evil and mischievous falsehoods existent in society—whether it establish its headquarters, for the time being, in Exeter Hall, or Ebenezer Chapel, or both. It may appear unnecessary to offer a word of observation on so plain a head. But it is never out of season to protest against that coarse familiarity with sacred things which is busy on the lip, and idle in the heart; or against the confounding of Christianity with any class of persons who, in the words of Swift, have just enough religion to make them hate, and not enough to make them love, one another. (724-25)

This passage captures in a concise statement the very essence of Dickens's differences with hypocritical religion as he saw it in certain evangelicals and dissenters. In principle, it could extend to any faction of the Church. It is especially interesting that this comment reached from three years before his death back to the beginning of his career as a novelist, and yet, after some thirty years, he made no apology or excuse for his satire. In fact, he seemed even more resolute to affirm his work, reminding his readers of his satire and reemphasizing it for those who might have missed it first time around. It stands as one of his clearest unified statements concerning what he maintained were the most deadly and dead-

ening aspects of Evangelicalism.

Clearly, then, Dickens was never reticent to take on the church and to expose its flaws and its failings, but this does not of necessity call his Christian commitment into question or make it any less genuine. In fact, the only way to truly grasp the depth of Dickens's Christian commitment is against the backdrop of his assessment of the Church. Dickens found no real comfortable identity in the Church primarily because, in his mind, it had lost its moorings and had forsaken its primary duty: to make followers of Jesus and his teaching. He wrote in the Cerjat letter (25 October 1864) cited above, "The Church that is to have its part in the coming time must be a more Christian one, with less arbitrary pretensions and a stronger hold upon the mantle of our Saviour, as He walked and talked upon this earth" (*Pilgrim Letters*, 10: 444).

Certainly, Dickens stood aloof from the Church, but was not ready to jettison the whole institution or to let the Church abandon its calling. He desired more from it and it seems that he hoped it would become what it was intended to be; but he did not believe that it was merely intended to be the dispenser of dogma, the source of the sacraments, or a place in which one might receive a dose of religion or religiosity. For Dickens, the Church, as the servant of Jesus, was intended to be the source of cultural transformation, and neither the institution nor the institutional rigmarole was important or necessary for that, at least in the form in which they presently existed. The only thing that mattered was that the Church produce disciples of its Master—the agents of cultural transformation—and that individual Christians come to terms with their duty to the Saviour.

Dickens was always ready to play his part in the larger scheme. Forster wrote of Dickens's purpose in *The Chimes*, "He was to try to convert Society, as he had converted Scrooge, by showing that its happiness rested on the same foundations as those of the indi-

vidual, which are mercy and charity not less than justice.” Forster closes his remarks, “In varying forms this ambition was in all his life” (1: 386-87).

### §7.3 THAT GREAT CHRISTIAN WRITER

When David Macrae criticized Dickens in 1861 for his lack of a positive portrayal of strong Christian characters, what Macrae called “specimens of earnest Christianity” (127), Dickens replied with a letter that contains perhaps the most important statement we have concerning Dickens’s Christian convictions and the intent of his writing. He wrote:

With a deep sense of my great responsibility always upon me when I exercise my art, one of my most constant and most earnest endeavours has been to exhibit in all my good people some faint reflections of the teachings of our great Master, and unostentatiously to lead the reader up to those teachings as the great source of all moral goodness. All my strongest illustrations are derived from the New Testament; all my social abuses are shown as departures from its spirit; all my good people are humble, charitable, faithful, and forgiving. Over and over again, I claim them in express words as disciples of the Founder of our religion; but I must admit that to a man (or woman) they all arise and wash their faces, and do not appear unto men to fast. (127)

It is certainly noteworthy to observe here that Dickens spoke of a clear and deliberate Christian element in his work, and even the casual reader will acknowledge Dickens’s intent in this way. He wrote further to Macrae in the same letter:

I devised a new kind of book for Christmas years ago [...] absolutely impossible, I think, to be separated from the exemplification of the Christian virtues and the inculcation of the Christian precepts. In every one of those books there is an express text preached on, and that text is always taken from the lips of Christ. (127-28)

In Dickens’s mind, his work was fundamentally Christian in orientation and intent, and this is born out by even a cursory examination of it. Dennis Walder has written that Dickens was not a Christian novelist and that may well be true, especially in terms of how a Christian novelist and the Christian novel was understood and viewed in the mid-nineteenth century. Nevertheless, Dickens was clearly a Christian who wrote novels and whose genuine and resolute Christian convictions naturally found their way into the very fabric of his work.

It is no wonder that, when we examine Dickens's work, it is precisely this Christian orientation and intent that we see. All of Dickens's novels include characters that he presented as "specimens of earnest Christianity", but in the way that he understood the earnest Christian. A few examples will help to demonstrate the Christian presence in the work of Dickens and just how he understood real Christianity. Consider, for instance, Esther Summerson, whose simple aspiration in life was "to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted [or, true-hearted], and to do some good to some one" (*BH* 20). This was an aspiration to true servanthood, repeated by Esther in this precise phrasing three times in *Bleak House*, and exemplified in her character throughout. In this way, Esther showed herself a disciple of Jesus by sharing his servant attitude. Dickens noted this attitude in *TLOL* just before Jesus embarked on his public ministry. Jesus' simple prayer in the wilderness, as he prepared for his ministry, was "that He might be of use to men and women" (24). So was Esther's prayer.

In *Dombey and Son*, Florence Dombey's unconditional love for her father, "a sacred purpose" (341); Paul's "voluntary service" and desire to be "gentle and useful" at Blimber's (198); Harriet Carker's devotion to her brother (466-507) and compassion toward Alice (867-71); all of these exemplify the Christian character of which Dickens spoke in his letter to Macrae and all are true disciples of the Master in following his example. For, "No one ever lived," Dickens wrote of Jesus in *TLOL*, "who was so good, so kind, so gentle, and so sorry of all people who did wrong or were in any way ill or miserable, as He was" (11). Florence, Paul, and Harriet, each in their own way, reflected this character of the Saviour.

In a strikingly similar manner, Amy Dorrit exemplified everything Dickens understood as Christian virtue as manifested by the character of Jesus. Early in *Little Dorrit*, he wrote of Amy, "She was inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest" (80). "She took the place

of eldest of the three [Dorrit children],” Dickens wrote, “in all things but precedence; was the head of the fallen family; and bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and shames” (81). So, Amy cared for her family as well as Maggy, infirm and cruelly done by; made certain that the clothes of Fanny and Tip were “mended and made up”; and provided her father with the food meant for her from Mrs. Clennam’s table. Amy’s purpose is clearly a reflection of Jesus’ when, for instance, he washed the feet of his disciples and reminded Peter “that He did this, in order that they, remembering it, might be always kind and gentle to one another, and might know no pride or ill-will among themselves” (88). Like Jesus in *TLOL*, Amy only and always thought about helping people and doing good.

Nell, too, like those already mentioned, was the humble, selfless servant who not only cared for her grandfather, but also took responsibility for both of their lives and for his rescue. Mr. Marton, the schoolmaster, observed of Nell, “Has this child heroically persevered under all doubts and dangers, struggled with poverty and suffering, upheld and sustained by strong affection and the consciousness of rectitude alone!” (435). In Nell’s sacrificial devotion to her grandfather and her desire always to do what was right (*TLOL* 128), Dickens again presented the character of Jesus and his teaching exemplified.

It is only too clear that the examples listed here demonstrate Dickens’s attempt “to exhibit in all my good people some faint reflections of the teachings of our great Master, and unostentatiously to lead the reader up to those teachings as the great source of all moral goodness.” The list, of course, could be expanded quite considerably by the likes of Agnes Wickfield, Mr. Brownlow, John Jarndyce, Gabriel Varden, and the Cherryble Brothers to name a few. Yet, in every case, the characters just named and the ones we have considered above are never specifically designated “Christian” or identified explicitly as disciples of Jesus. According to Dickens’s intention, and consistent with his own convictions, they did not

parade their Christianity; rather, they all arose and washed their faces and did not appear unto men to fast.<sup>142</sup> They simply exemplified in their duty and relationships the character and the teaching of Jesus.

It seems, then, as Dickens wrote, his desire was to awaken the Christian conscience to its responsibility to the will and the purposes of God. For Dickens, that responsibility was accepted and met by means of the imitation of Jesus in response to his teaching and example, apart from any Church complicity, its Thirty-Nine Articles, its party agendas, and its religious facade. For Dickens, it was the unostentatious expression of Christian character and virtue that was the mark of true Christianity. To that end, he simply showed his characters being who they were. To have them be “saved”, to preach, to give their testimony, to show their conversion or their journey to faith in Christ was entirely beside the point. His concern was not evangelism or conversion. Rather, his concern was “to lead the reader up to those teachings [i.e., the teachings of Jesus] as the great source of all moral goodness.” It makes sense, then, that Dickens took exception to religiosity and superficial piety being practiced at the expense of the “weightier” matters of which Jesus spoke in Matthew 23.23-24. As Arthur Clennam contemplated his future and the vague idea of an act of injustice done by his father, we see Dickens set Arthur’s sense of responsibility to weightier matters against his mother’s “dark teaching”:

He was ready at any moment to lay down all he had, and begin the world anew. As the fierce dark teaching of his childhood had never sunk into his heart, so that first article in his code of morals was, that he must begin, in practical humility, with looking well to his feet on Earth, and that he could never mount on wings of words to Heaven. Duty on earth, restitution on earth, action on earth; these first, as the first step steps upward. Strait was the gate and narrow was the way; far straiter and narrower than the broad high road paved with vain professions and vain repetitions,

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<sup>142</sup> This particular form of humility was part of the hortatory message of *TLOL* (71, 78, 122). He also reminded his sons Edward (Forster 2: 468) and Henry (Hogarth 2: 394) of the importance of humility of faith. And he wrote to J.M. Makeham concerning his faith: “I have never made proclamation of this from the housetops” (Forster 2: 469).

motes from other men's eyes and liberal delivery of others to the judgment—all cheap materials costing absolutely nothing. (311)

Thus, Dickens saw the responsibility of the Christian to do justice, to love mercy and to be ready to walk with God (Micah 6.8); to act decisively and reverently in the concrete realities of this life. That, according to Dickens, must be the priority, and it was in Jesus that Dickens saw the Exemplar for that kind of Christian commitment.

It is precisely for this reason that Dickens wrote *TLOL*. *TLOL* is Dickens's instruction in his basic Jesus-centric worldview specifically intended for his children. It is the fundamental teaching with which he desired to set them off wide-awake on the life of faith. For Dickens, this had to be a life in imitation of Jesus or it was not truly the Christian life. With *TLOL*, then, Dickens set Jesus before his children as the pattern for living. Dickens emphasizes both the teaching and example of Jesus in order to show his children the conduct to be imitated and the lessons to be observed.

Dickens presented to his children Jesus as the Exemplar when he related the foot-washing in John 13. He also reminded them that when Jesus was suffering at the hands of Pilate's soldiers, "They ill-used him in many cruel ways; but Jesus bore it patiently, and only said, 'Father! Forgive them! They know not what they do!'" (105).<sup>143</sup> Further, Jesus was consistently portrayed in *TLOL* as merciful, compassionate, and doing good—character qualities Dickens would have been keen for his children to imitate. As has just been noted, Jesus' desire was to be "of use to men and women" (24), and the multitude constantly followed him "for they knew He did nothing but good" (47). Jesus "was always merciful and tender" (38), Dickens wrote. Jesus was "full of pity" for the man with the palsy (36), he "took pity"

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<sup>143</sup> That this is an intentional transposition by Dickens and not a mistake is indicated by Dickens's use of the same words of Jesus in his essay "The Christmas Tree" (Dickens, *Selected Journalism* 10) more in line with the context of Luke 23.34. The precise reason for the transposition is not clear.

on the sick man at the pool of Bethesda (45-46) when no one else would, and “Jesus was so full of compassion” for the sorrow of the family and friends of Lazarus, “that he wept too” (81). These are the traits of character, the virtues exemplified by Jesus, that Dickens hoped his children would imitate.

*TLOL* also includes direct hortatory passages in which Dickens sought to lead his children to an understanding of Jesus’ teaching and a suitable response to it. Based on Jesus’ choice from among the poor for his disciples, for instance, Dickens exhorted his children in *TLOL* according to Jesus’ example:

Never forget this, when you are grown up. Never be proud or unkind, my dears, to any poor man, woman, or child. If they are bad, think that they would have been better, if they had had kind friends, and good homes, and had been better taught. So, always try to make them better by kind persuading words; and always try to teach them and relieve them if you can. And when people speak ill of the Poor and Miserable, think how Jesus Christ went among them and taught them, and thought them worthy of his care. And always pity them yourselves, and think as well of them as you can. (28)

After he related the story of Jesus forgiving the sins of the woman at Simon’s house, Dickens wrote:

We learn from this, that we must always forgive those who have done us any harm, when they come to us and say they are truly sorry for it. Even if they do not come and say so, we must still forgive them, and never hate them or be unkind to them, if we would hope that God will forgive us. (45)

Dickens concluded the episode of the Widow’s Mites, reminding his children, “Let us never forget what the poor widow did, when we think we are charitable” (78). Additionally, Dickens exhorted his children to humility (58, 67, 75), compassion (67), and never to be too busy for God (69). No fewer than nine times, Dickens pauses in such a manner to attempt to reinforce a lesson or action or attitude of Jesus that he wished his children to emulate.

It was in the life and teaching of Jesus, then, that Dickens saw everything necessary

to Christian life and conduct, and for Dickens, it was all just that straightforward. That it is simple, however, does not mean it is simplistic. It may seem simple to say that the essence of Christianity is to follow Jesus, but there is something quite profound about following Jesus in the way Dickens understood it and in the way he portrayed it in his good people. Even in its simplicity, this kind of Christian commitment was not for the faint of heart. Speculating about theological ideas or talking about the Christian life was easy. Mrs. Jellyby's letter writing campaign, for instance, and all her talk about the mission in Borrioboola-Gha was easy. Living a life of faith in imitation of Jesus, the Christian life as Dickens conceived it, was more than just talk or speculation. It meant forgiveness, humility, compassion, and sacrifice. Yet, in its simplicity, this kind of Christian commitment was settled and unequivocal. As Amy Dorrit reminded Mrs. Clennam, "There can be no confusion in following Him, and seeking for no other footsteps, I am certain!" (*LD* 756). This for Dickens was the simple faith of a child, and the true expression of the Christian life. This was the character of true Christianity as Dickens conceived it, and that resonates through his work: "In the New Testament there is the most beautiful and affecting history conceivable by man, and there are the terse models for all prayer and for all preaching. As to the models, imitate them, [...] As to the history, tell it" (*UT* 38).

#### §7.4 WHEN ALL HAS BEEN HEARD

As an index to the larger Dickens corpus and as a definitive source for our understanding of Dickens Christian thought, *TLOL* opens up to us Dickens's faith and his work in profound ways. By this deliberate and carefully crafted expression of his understanding of the life of Jesus, we are led into a deeper understanding of what it meant, in Dickens's mind, to be a Christian. And as we allow *TLOL* to lead us into his larger body of work, we find the consistent and conspicuous evidence of a worldview shaped by this concept of Jesus and its

practical ramifications.

Certainly, the implicit theology that emerges from *TLOL* aids our understanding of Dickens's Christian thought. It exposes his Christian presuppositions and provides substantial insight into those ideas that he otherwise told us little about. In the end, however, it is the centrality of Jesus that drives *TLOL*. The simplicity of this settled and singular emphasis on the life and teaching of Jesus as set forth in the New Testament being the exclusive and sufficient guide for the life of faith draws our attention to Dickens's essential idea of Christianity. And it demonstrates that Dickens is "the great Christian writer" not because he provided us with his own systematic theology, but because he desired to urge his children toward their moral responsibility and to awaken their conscience to that central pursuit that must be the Christian's—the imitation of Jesus.

In writing *TLOL* he wanted his children to grasp this, and he wanted them to be able to see Jesus through clear lenses. Dickens's desire was that his children would learn to look at Jesus in a fresh way apart from the limited and limiting concepts of Jesus in the Church. He had urged them to get to know the teaching of the New Testament and to follow Jesus "putting aside the interpretations and inventions of Man" and pursuing an understanding of Christianity "as it came from Christ Himself". He hoped that his children might hear the teaching of Jesus without "the audacious interposition of vain and ignorant men between the sublime simplicity of the New Testament and the general human mind to which our Saviour addressed it" (Macrae 127). To that end, Dickens composed *TLOL* by means of the careful harmonization of selected representative episodes that fairly represented the story of Jesus. He hoped that through *TLOL*, his children might hear the Gospels speak, but with an emphasis of praxis over knowledge and information.

Dickens never intended *TLOL* to be published and so, never intended for us to read

it. Nonetheless, it provides us with profound insight into his life and his work, for it is *TLOL* that opens to us Dickens's understanding of the life of faith and the simplicity of following Jesus. It reminds us that, for Dickens, it is Christianity to do good always; that it is Christianity to be gentle, merciful, and forgiving, and that genuine Christianity keeps those qualities quiet in the heart. Most importantly perhaps it impresses upon us those words to Cerjat: "The Church that is to have its part in the coming time must be a more Christian one, with less arbitrary pretensions and a stronger hold upon the mantle of our Saviour, as He walked and talked upon this earth" (*Pilgrim Letters* 10: 444).

## A NOTE ON REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

All works referred to herein are listed in Works Consulted at the end of this dissertation. Except *Barnaby Rudge*, for which I used J.M. Dent's 1996 Everyman edition, *Bleak House* for which I used the 1977 Norton edition, and *Pickwick Papers* for which I used the Oxford Classics edition, the novels to which I refer are Penguin Classics editions.

The *Christmas Books*, *Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces*, *American Notes and Pictures from Italy*, and *Master Humphrey's Clock and A Child's History of England* are the Oxford Illustrated Dickens. *The Christmas Stories* are Chapman and Hall's Gadshill Edition.

I have used the 1934 Associated Newspapers edition of *The Life of Our Lord*.

Throughout, I have used the designation *Pilgrim Letters*, to refer to the Pilgrim Edition of Dickens's letters. See in list of Works Consulted.

The following abbreviations have been used:

<i>TLOL</i>	<i>The Life of Our Lord</i>
<i>SB</i>	<i>Sketches by Boz</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>Pickwick Papers</i>
<i>OT</i>	<i>Oliver Twist</i>
<i>OCS</i>	<i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i>
<i>BR</i>	<i>Barnaby Rudge</i>
<i>MC</i>	<i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i>
<i>D &amp; S</i>	<i>Dombey and Son</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i>
<i>BH</i>	<i>Bleak House</i>
<i>LD</i>	<i>Little Dorrit</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>Hard Times</i>
<i>TTC</i>	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>
<i>GE</i>	<i>Great Expectations</i>
<i>ED</i>	<i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i>
<i>CB</i>	<i>Christmas Books</i>
<i>CS</i>	<i>Christmas Stories</i>
<i>CHE</i>	<i>Master Humphrey's Clock and A Child's History of England</i>
<i>UT</i>	<i>The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces</i>

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