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Subtle Subversion: Gaskell's use of Scripture in Her Social Purpose Novels

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SUBTLE SUBVERSION:
GASKELL'S USE OF SCRIPTURE IN HER SOCIAL PURPOSE NOVELS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by


Jennifer P. Morey

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

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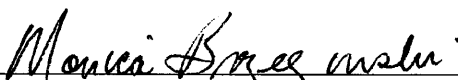


Jennifer P. Morey

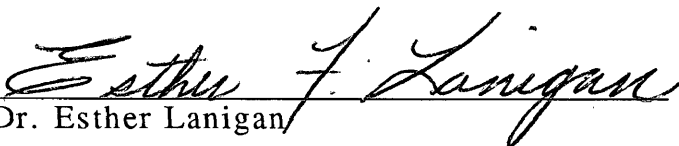
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ABSTRACT

My purpose in this thesis is to discuss Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) as a woman with an acute and independent religious vision who, denied a pulpit by her society, incorporates this vision into her fiction. As a novelist, Gaskell resembles other nineteenth-century women writers who engage in the moral education of their society through fiction. For example, George Eliot directs her readers' sympathies toward a vision of tolerance; Margaret Oliphant indicts the inequities of patriarchal culture, illustrating the limitations against which women struggle.

Gaskell differs from these writers in her novels that fall within the genre of social problem novels, namely Mary Barton, Ruth, and North and South. As a social critic, Gaskell fits into an additional class of women notable for their role in Victorian social history (e.g. Catherine Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, or Josephine Butler, a leader in the fight against the Contagious Diseases Acts).

Furthermore, Gaskell blends these two roles of moral educator and social reformer in the assumption of a third role: that of religious minister. Through the use of scriptural quotations and Biblical allusions, she critiques her society's interpretation of the Bible when it is used to justify what she shows to be an unsound basis for morality and judgment of others. Gaskell consequently interprets scripture and applies it to social problems in a way that counters a more conventional exegesis. Thus, she is subversive as a woman taking on the position of religious minister and teacher and controversial in her exegesis of scripture. But while Gaskell challenges the authority of church doctrine, she does not challenge the authority of the Bible itself.

**SUBTLE SUBVERSION:
GASKELL'S USE OF SCRIPTURE IN HER SOCIAL PURPOSE NOVELS**

As an artist and novelist, Elizabeth Gaskell resembles other nineteenth-century women writers who write to educate and thereby achieve social reform. While Gaskell assumes the novelist's traditional duty of moral educator, she also extends and redefines it. And certainly part of her transformation of this role results from her additional assumption of a traditionally male role held by both her Unitarian father and husband: that of religious minister. In an age in which women were beginning to demand (and were often denied) a voice in the religious sphere, Gaskell incorporates her religious voice into her art. Consequently, her moral education of her readers consists partly in teaching them a new way to read and to think about the Bible.

In their book The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883, Elizabeth Helsinger, Robin Sheets, and William Veeder document many instances of women performing this sort of re-reading of Biblical passages, particularly those that relate to the status and role of women. Not only did these women have to confront "male-oriented translations," but they also faced the problem that the "Bible itself proves ambiguous and contradictory"¹ in its passages dealing explicitly with women. The authors acknowledge that "increasing female influence in Anglo-American religious life was one of the clearest instances of woman's widening sphere": Mary Wollstonecraft and Sarah Grimké provided alternative readings of passages, while Julia Evelina Smith translated the Bible and Elizabeth Cady Stanton produced the Woman's Bible.² Josephine Butler, trying to reverse scripturally supported subjugation of women, argued that Christ's mission was one of freedom and liberation to women.³ Phoebe Palmer, supported by Catherine Booth, attempted to defend and practice women's rights to public ministry.⁴ Nevertheless, in spite of their arguments and demands, women remained excluded from most official clerical privileges. As a result of this option's being cut off, several women turned to fiction as an alternative outlet for their religious views and voice.

While Elizabeth Gaskell fits into a context of women writers who, preaching

through fiction, "present women who speak to rapt listeners and speak about woman's right to speak,"⁵ Gaskell's use of scripture in what Shirley Foster calls her "social purpose novels"⁶—Mary Barton, Ruth, and North and South—accentuates her own peculiar feminist voice within this context. Initially, her stance may appear to accept a traditional prescription of women's roles. Missy Kubitschek accordingly classifies Gaskell among nineteenth-century writers who "masked their resentments in their lives and in their novels"⁷ rather than attack the system with outspoken resistance. But Gaskell's traditional position in society, as a daughter and wife to ministers, was not always accompanied by an equally traditional attitude; as Foster argues, "Without attempting to acclaim her as a sexual iconoclast, we must recognise that she too plays a part in the mid-Victorian female challenge to society's ideologies. Her treatment of the 'woman question' is not as straightforwardly conservative as may at first appear, and even while upholding intrinsically orthodox romantic attitudes she voices her own dissent from contemporary mores."⁸ Summarizing various descriptions of Gaskell's social and political position, Barbara Weiss indicates the difficulty in defining it: "Modern attempts to portray her as a feminist seem equivocal or exaggerated. In spite of her acknowledgment of the special disadvantages under which a talented woman labored, Gaskell was far from a doctrinaire supporter of feminism. . . . Nevertheless, she was vocal on the need for meaningful work for women and was anxious that her writing be taken seriously."⁹

In terms of religion, Gaskell's position is neither so ambivalent nor so difficult to define. A Unitarian, she belonged to a group whose very theology sprung from dissent, and for whom the "relationship was between God and man, with Jesus not as mediator but as example."¹⁰ In his biography of Gaskell, Angus Easson describes her religion as "direct, scriptural and practical. It was above all doing the good that lay to hand."¹¹ Just as the Unitarians' quarrel was with mediation, that is with scriptural interpretation handed down through church officials, and not with scripture itself, Gaskell's subversive and

challenging voice is directed not at religion or the Bible but at self-interested and unchristian interpretation and implementation of scripture. Thus, as a Protestant, a woman, and a writer, Gaskell finds a God and a doctrine that at times contradicts the doctrine passed down through church fathers, but nonetheless remains in accord with the Bible itself.

More specifically, Gaskell's position as a revisionary moral and religious thinker is exemplified by her character Anne Leigh in "Lizzie Leigh." Of the marriage between hard and righteous James Leigh and his wife Anne, parents of fallen Lizzie, Gaskell writes, "Milton's famous line might have been framed and hung up as the rule of their married life, for he was truly the interpreter, who stood between God and her."¹² Anne Leigh, however, subverts this hierarchical Deity-male-female relationship in what Margaret Homans calls a "maternal vision" of the authority behind this "perfect patriarch"; Anne does not share her husband's idea of "God [as] the unforgiving Old Testament God who authorizes the unforgiving condemnation of female sinners."¹³ And Homans continues, "as she takes over possession of the moral categories of the story, Anne provides an alternative to James's interpretation of the Bible. . . . She transmits Biblical texts, but texts of her own choosing, thus revising and bending to her purposes, but not wholly rejecting, her given place in patriliney."¹⁴

Gaskell, too, reminds her readers of an alternative reading of scripture without challenging its essential authority. She effects this kind of re-reading on several different levels by employing a traditional literary topos by which characters applying a false interpretation, usually resulting from passages taken out of context and used to portray a vengeful God or to uphold the Old Testament letter of the law, are countered by characters espousing the New Law set forth in the New Testament, which emphasizes the forgiveness of a merciful God. On one level, Gaskell suggests her revision by inserting individual Biblical passages into the narrators' narrative as well as into the dialogues among characters. This specific and overt use of scripture provides a foundation for the next

layer, which Gaskell creates by framing incidents and characters in her novels with complete Bible stories. In her article that examines the stories characters tell (not necessarily religious) that disrupt the narrative, Weiss defends Gaskell's use of stories within stories as artistic and intended to "encapsulate emotional truths which function as either warning or inspiration, functions which Gaskell, like her Victorian contemporaries, would have considered to be the first obligations of literature."¹⁵ The Biblical stories implied in the narrative, then, serve in part this same function, only their implications as frames for the narrative are generally directed not at the characters but at the readers. Finally, on the broadest level, Gaskell suggests parallels between her characters and major religious figures by metaphorically conflating them. The reinterpretations that take place on the first level, then, prepare the reader and other characters for the implications of the larger comparisons, which otherwise might incite resistance from readers subscribing to a more conventional reading of the Bible. The layered allusions taken together culminate in a sometimes radical application of scripture to the social problems presented in Gaskell's three social purpose novels. While Gaskell's strategy is traditional, the social reform she expects as a result of this scriptural revision is not.

In Mary Barton, the intersection of Biblical narrative with Gaskell's fictional narrative functions most evidently to comment on two subjects: the use of scripture as a basis for moral judgment, of both one's self and others, and its use for comfort, as a panacea applied to individual problems as well as to political and social ills. Catherine Gallagher asserts that "Gaskell's use of contrasting narrative forms is one of the most interesting and overlooked features of Mary Barton. In a sense, the first half of the novel is about the dangers inherent in various conventional ways of organizing reality."¹⁶ The contrast of the narrator's use of scriptural narrative to organize reality with that of the characters' draws attention to the folly of some interpretations of scripture. Gaskell effects her critique of an ineffectual reading and application of scripture through individual use of

references or specific allusions, which she counteracts through the unassuming but opposing voice of the narrator. She also counters inappropriate allusions by reinforcing other Biblical comparisons, supplied by the narrator, with a character's actions. The result is that a judgment which initially seems morally sound is shown to be immoral justification and the kind of religious comfort initially offered proves hollow and antithetical to genuine comfort.

Gaskell's critique of judgment has as its setting individual conscience and involves nearly all of the novel's major characters, as well as a handful of minor ones. In several cases characters' judgmental remarks justified by Biblical authority are ironic in that the reader can easily discern the self-interest or blind injustice motivating the speakers' remarks, remarks which to the speakers seem completely just. For instance, Sally glibly misuses scripture to offer what she believes to be an appropriate comment of sympathy. Finding Mary in tears over Davenport's death, Sally says, "Dear, dear! All flesh is grass; here today and gone tomorrow, as the Bible says. Still he was an old man, and not good for much."¹⁷ Sally may be thinking of the passage in Psalms, "As for man, his days are as grass: as flower of the field, so he flourisheth."¹⁸ She takes the passage out of context, however, and misinterprets its intended comforting message: man is as temporary as the grass, but the "mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting,"¹⁹ unlike the fleeting mercy of Sally. Sally's boss follows suit with her quick judgment of Harry Carson's murderer; unaware that this person is Mary's father, Miss Simmonds remarks to Mary, "I hope the wretch that did it may be hanged as high as Haman" (272). Ironically, Miss Simmonds unknowingly associates Haman, hung for his persecution of Jews, with Carson's murderer, John Barton, who is among the class persecuted by Carson and who risks his life, as does Mordecai in the Biblical story, to save his people.²⁰ Miss Simmonds is correct in associating the two narratives, but, unaware of the persecution going on around her or that which will fall upon Jem from other people's unwise and hasty

judgments, she muddles the analogy, confusing the persecuted with the persecuter.

With equally callous and unfounded judgment, the people present at Jem's trial convict him in their minds before the trial even begins. Remarking on the man whom the real murderer recognizes as being "innocent of any knowledge of it as the babe unborn" (434), one onlooker declares, "I have seen a good number of murderers in my day, but I have seldom seen one with such marks of Cain on his countenance as the man at the bar" (385). Another hasty accuser of Jem, one with perhaps more justification, however, is Harry's father who, too, ironically uses religious metaphor to describe his situation without recognizing the full implication of his allusion. Realizing that Jem would not be convicted, Carson thinks of his "darling Absalom, who had never rebelled" (398). This father does indeed mirror David in his grief over his dead son, but he fails to recognize that just as Absalom's death was due in part to his own carelessness and in part to one of David's own men, so is the elder Carson indirectly responsible for his son's death.

Other inappropriate applications of scripture lead, if not to injustice, to folly. Mary begins to look on money and Harry Carson, the possessor of money, as the "Purchaser of Life" (160). Similarly, though with a different tone and intention, Jem unconsciously likens Mary to a Christ figure as he "loved on and on, ever more fondly . . . he would not give up, for it seemed like giving up life to give up thought of Mary. He did not dare to look to any end of all this; the present, so that he saw her, touched the hem of her garment, was enough" (80). Both Mary and Jem attempt to gain a kind of perfection from an imperfect source and signify this source with a religious metaphor.²¹ While these are certainly not appeals to Biblical authority to justify unjust conclusions, they are problematic in that they suggest a dissonance to the reader caused by the disparity between the human and divine realms, a dissonance of which the characters themselves are not aware. A stronger instance of folly resulting from a character's inability or refusal to distinguish between the human and divine occurs when Jane Wilson is questioned by a police officer

disguised as a workman. Unwilling to believe that a policeman, enforcer of justice, would trick her into implicating her son as a murderer, Jane Wilson says to the real workman who arrives after the officer has left, "Nay; they'd never . . . trick me into telling on my own son. It would be like seething a kid in its mother's milk; and that th' Bible forbids" (278). Jem's mother's trust in the relevancy of Biblical law not only for herself but for her society as well encourages her to tell the truth, on the one hand, but dupes her into implicating her son as a murderer, on the other. Her faith has indeed made her harmless as a dove but she lacks the corollary serpent's wisdom.²²

Jane Wilson's case is typical of a number of other instances where judgment based on Biblical analogy proves ambiguous and consequently more difficult to classify as righteous or unrighteous, appropriate or inappropriate. Both the plot line involving the character relationships among Mary, Esther, and Jem and that involving the elder Carson, John Barton, and Job Legh form a commentary on various passages and stories that evaluates the relevance of these passages to the characters' lives. One strand in the commentary consists of the use of religious analogy by characters to judge other characters. Commenting on this judgment is the narrator's use of allusion for the same purpose but leading to a different conclusion. With this duplicity of judgment resting on two different and, in some cases, opposing applications of scripture, Gaskell accomplishes much: not only does she put the reader in a position to evaluate the characters morally, but also to evaluate their own shaky bases of judgment. She first exposes a reader's judgment and then implicitly encourages a reassessment of the basis for this judgment.

Several of the instances in which judgment is framed in a Biblical context against characters in this first plot line are mentioned above, particularly in relation to Jem Wilson's accusation and trial. Another instance occurs when Jane Wilson, her son in prison as a result of his relationship to Mary (indirectly, at least), thinks back to "the days when she had rocked the cradle of 'her first-born'" and she considers Mary a "Dalilah who had lured

him [Jem] to his danger" (282).²³ Esther, too, finally one of the strongest forces for good in the novel, judges herself in likening herself to fallen Eve: "She looked at herself in the little glass which hung against the wall, and sadly shaking her head, thought how easy were the duties of that Eden of innocence from which she was shut out" (292). Seeing her only son's weaknesses brought out by his love for Mary, Jane could very well feel justified in attributing Dalilah's treacherous motives for seduction of Samson to Mary. And probably Jane's viewpoint would be shared by readers in her same position, especially considering Mary's encouragement of Harry Carson's attentions. Furthermore, Esther has acquired her attitude toward herself from her own (and Gaskell's) society; most adherents of a Christian doctrine would agree that a prostitute should be shut out of the Eden within their own society, even though Christ's teachings²⁴ and the example of Mary Magdalene cannot support this argument.

Countering these judgments and providing another source of influence on the reader's own judgment, the narrator implies contradictory Biblical analogies in relation to these same characters. Revising the judgment made against Jem, the narrator portrays him as a redeemer, a kind of Christ, to Esther: "He was the only one who had spoken to her with hope, that she might yet win her way back to virtue. His words had lingered in her heart with a sort of call to Heaven, like distant Sabbath bells, although in her despair she had turned away from his voice" (291). In her care of the woman who considered her a treacherous Dalilah, Mary parallels Ruth when she begs Jane Wilson to let her stay with her; she "pleaded, with ever the same soft, entreating cry, 'Let me stay with you'" (283). Again, trying to think of everything she could do to help Jem, Mary thinks of his mother, "And then came up the old feeling which first bound Ruth to Naomi; the love they both held towards one object" (324).²⁵ In returning to nurse her father, Mary "would watch over him tenderly, as the Innocent should watch over the Guilty; awaiting the gracious seasons, wherein to pour oil and balm into the bitter wounds" (421). Worded this way,

her actions mirror the Samaritan's who "bound up [the stranger's] wounds, pouring in oil and wine."²⁶ Furthermore, Mary's personal trials encountered while trying save Jem are given a religious tone; listening to the indifferent lawyers talk about Jem's case was "but another drop to Mary's cup" (345), an allusion that frames Mary's experience in the context of Jesus' trial in the Garden of Gethsemane when he appealed to God, "let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt."²⁷ At the same time, however, Mary is conflated with Adam and Eve: "The old leaven, infused years ago by her aunt Esther, fermented in her little bosom, and perhaps all the more, for her father's aversion to the rich and the gentle. Such is the contrariness of the human heart, from Eve downwards, that we all, in our old-Adam state, fancy things forbidden sweetest" (121). And later the narrator foreshadows an actual fall: "Such were the castles in air, the Alnaschar-visions in which Mary indulged, and which she was doomed in after days to expiate with many tears" (122).

The narrator's treatment of Esther is perhaps the most interesting in terms of its application of scripture, particularly in its juxtaposition to the portrayal of Mary. As the novel's heroine, Mary has been compared to Dalilah and Eve, as well as to Ruth and Christ, and she has been given the name of Mary, which resonates religiously in itself, of Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Esther, too, however, has been given a religious name. If her name is taken as an allusion to the Biblical Esther, this down-trodden prostitute is being likened to the Jewish virgin chosen as queen by King Ahasuerus, the woman who eventually risks her life to save her people and Mordecai, her cousin and surrogate father. The narrator's description of Esther's interview with Mary again frames Esther as a Jew, only this time with different implications. Upon leaving, Esther shrinks from Mary's kiss, darts "into the outer darkness of the street; and there wept long and bitterly" (298). Editor Stephen Gill notes that this scene echoes Jesus' remark to the faithful centurion about the Jews who reject him: "many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.

But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."²⁸ Gill remarks that this allusion "reminds us how fully Mrs Gaskell is imagining this tense and delicate scene in terms of Gospel situations."²⁹

The contradiction in these two allusions is answered in Esther's character: as a prostitute, she is indeed "cast out into outer darkness"; as a character with broader experience and perspective than Mary or even John Barton, however, she resembles the Biblical Esther, who acts on the information she gains as a result of her unique position and attempts to save her people. Having made the comparison, Gaskell illustrates the disparity between the Biblical women and the anti-heroine of her novel. The Biblical Esther succeeds in her attempt to save, and the Jews thrown out into darkness reject Jesus' ministry rather than being rejected by him. Gaskell's Esther, however, is rejected by self-righteous Christians; upon meeting her in the street, "John Barton behaves with the self-righteous cruelty He curses and rebuffs her simply because she is a prostitute, even before he recognises her. When he does, he abuses her brutally and calls her the murderer of her sister."³⁰ As Esther implies in her relation of her own story, she has been forced by this same community to follow-up one ill choice with another, having had to become a prostitute to survive.

With each character's actions mirroring those of respected Biblical characters, the juxtaposition of Mary and Esther as heroine and anti-heroine strengthens Gaskell's critique of her society's use of scripture to authorize moral judgment. Although Esther is a minor character, as Patricia Beer suggests, "Esther is both prologue and epilogue to Mary Barton and her story one of the book's most important themes."³¹ Esther is reminded by the thought of Mary of the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (211). But it is fallen Esther, finally, who has the purity of heart to witness the godliness in Mary and to act to preserve it. In addition, Esther's own pure heart reveals itself in her unselfish acts to save Mary, which parallel Mary's acts to save Jem. Recalling his

conversation with Esther about her encouragement of Mary to become a lady like herself, Barton repeats his judgmental response: "I'd rather see her earning her bread by the sweat of her brow, as the Bible tells her she should do . . . than be like a do-nothing lady . . . and going to bed without having done a good turn to any one of God's creatures but herself" (44), a comment that becomes ironic as Esther spends her whole energy trying to do good deeds that, in turn, are continually rejected.

Having countered her characters' judgments (probably calculated to mirror her society's reactions), and having reassessed and reassigned accusation and vindication through her narrator, Gaskell replaces the basis of judgment she has attacked with another, still based on scripture. She begins by implicating everyone, not only for malicious action but for callous or indifferent inaction; Mary, grief-stricken and alone after her long night caring for Alice and Jane, watches people going to church, and of these people the narrator says:

To be sure, there were one or two passengers on that morning whose objects were less innocent and less praiseworthy than those of the people I have already mentioned, and whose animal state of mind and body clashed jarringly on the peacefulness of the day; but upon them I will not dwell; as you and I, and almost every one, I think, may send up our individual cry of self-reproach that we have not done all that we could for the stray and wandering ones of our brethren. (328)

Finally, as if in response to this self-reproach that she has hopefully invoked in the reader, Gaskell includes passages recommending mercy as the harbinger of justice and teaching forgiveness rather than intolerance and self-righteousness. For example, understanding Margaret's disapproval of her, Mary says, "you have a right to judge; you cannot help it; only in your judgement remember mercy, as the Bible says" (319); while the accusation and trial have tainted Jem's reputation at his previous job, he comforts himself with, "God does not judge as hardly as man, that's one comfort for all of us!" (446); and finally Jem and Mary bury Esther with John under a single stone that reads, "For He will not always

chide, neither will He keep his anger for ever" (465).³²

The process of reassessment effected ultimately in the reader through the relationships of Jem, Mary, and Esther, results also from the relationship between Carson and Barton, the reconciliation of whom is based upon an individual reconciliation with scripture on each man's part. Each man at first becomes the object of the other's negative judgment. From Barton's point of view, Carson is guilty of founding his fortune on the misfortune and starvation of others; impersonally, as a member of the upper class, he evokes Barton's "bitter hatred of the happy, whom he, for the time confounded with the selfish" (102). Telling of a conversation he had in London with a Majesty guard, Barton indicates that God would see it as he does; "And why are we to be molested," he had said, "going decently about our business, which is life and death to us, and many a little one clemming at home in Lancashire? Which business is of most consequence i' the sight o' God, think yo', ou'n or them gran' ladies and gentlemen as yo think so much on?" (144). On the other hand, Carson rightly holds Barton guilty for the supremely illegal and immoral murder of his son. Both points of view can be justified by evidence, factual as well as scriptural.

But Gaskell, through her narrator, indicates that this evidence is not enough. Not only is each man guilty for the reasons stated above, but each proves additionally guilty in the narrator's eyes for harboring his judgment against the other. Describing the moral complications of Carson's legally justifiable actions, this narrator says, "Ay! to avenge his wrongs the murderer had singled out his victim, and with one fell action, taken away the life that God had given. To avenge his child's death, the old man lived on; with the single purpose in his heart, of vengeance on the murderer. True, his vengeance was sanctioned by law, but was it the less revenge? Are we worshippers of Christ?" (266). Nor does the narrator vindicate Barton's judgment and reasoning. Echoing Paul when he praises the Gentiles who "having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the

law written in their hearts,"³³ the narrator describes Barton as "a law unto himself, though sometimes a bad, fierce law" (158). Barton's imperfect law of conscience has led him outside the realm of civil law; his basis for judgment proves faulty. The narrator's conclusion, then, is similar to Paul's a few verses earlier than the one referred to above: "thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things."³⁴ The old law of vengeance and retribution must be replaced by the New Testament law of forgiveness and mercy.

Somewhat ironically, the reconciliation begins when Barton, after confessing to Carson, looks on him as a brother at the time when they can least be like brothers—"he knew that he had killed a man, and a brother,—now he knew that no good thing could come out of this evil, even to the sufferers whose cause he had so blindly espoused," those to whom he was acting as a brother (436). This passage makes Barton out to be a kind of Cain, the figure to whom Jem had been incorrectly likened, but, rather than being a condemnation, the comparison comes at the beginning of redemption. Reconciliation having been accomplished in Barton's own conscience—he acknowledges his enemy to be his brother—the narrative offers partial vindication of the basis for Barton's judgment, earlier shown to be faulty. Soon to die, Barton spends his final energies explaining the law he has been to himself, an explanation that, to a degree, finally shifts blame and judgment away from the murderer toward society, ultimately toward the nineteenth-century reader. Barton recollects:

I've so often been hankering after the right way; and it's a hard one for a poor man to find. . . . When I was a little chap they taught me to read, and then they ne'er gave me no books; only I heard say the Bible was a good book. . . . But you'd never believe black was black, or night was night, when you saw all about you acting as if black was white, and night was day. It's not much I can say for myself in t'other world, God forgive me: but I can say this, I would fain have gone after the Bible rules if I'd seen folk credit it; they all spoke up for it, and went and did clean contrary. In those days I would ha' gone about with my Bible, like a little child, my finger in th' place, and asking the meaning of

this or that text, and no one told me. Then I took out two or three texts as clear as glass, and I tried to do what they bid me do. But I don't know how it was; masters and men, all alike cared no more for minding those texts, than I did for th' Lord Mayor of London; so I grew to think it must be a sham put upon poor ignorant folk, women, and such-like. It was not long I tried to live Gospel-wise, but it was liker heaven than any other bit of earth has been. . . . I was tore in two often-times, between my sorrow for poor suffering folk, and my trying to love them as caused their sufferings (to my mind). At last I gave it up in despair, trying to make folks' actions square wi' th' Bible; and I thought I'd no longer labour at following th' Bible myself. (440-41)

The disparity between profession and practice witnessed by Barton, his extreme difficulty of finding and understanding in scripture a clear directive for behaviour in secularized daily life, and the relative ease and frequency with which passages from the Bible could be misused to justify unchristian positions illustrate the wide gulf between this "Christian" society and its central text. Thwarted in his attempt to live in accord with the Gospel, Barton's allegiance to his imperfect law is partially justified. His poor education and impoverished living conditions make Jesus' ministry of forgiveness seem implausible and impractical. Thus, at a point in which the narrative has wholly engaged the reader's sympathy with Barton—a killer, a Cain—his words reverse an earlier judgment against his taking of the law upon himself and suggest that there is no clear and absolute standard of morality operating in his society.

While Barton might question the relevance of the Bible as guide for human affairs, however, Gaskell does not. In Carson's scene of inner reconciliation with himself and scripture, she proposes a different conclusion. Before Carson's angry departure from Barton's house, Job Legh prays, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us," to which Carson replies, "Let my trespasses be unforgiven, so that I may have vengeance for my son's murder"; the narrator's commentary immediately follows, "There are blasphemous actions as well as blasphemous words: all unloving, cruel deeds are acted blasphemy" (436). Having long ago declared the Bible to be essentially irrelevant to his materialistic life—it still had "its leaves adhering together from the bookbinder's press, so little had it been used" (438)—Carson takes this "grand and

golden" object, or idol, down only to write in it the date of his son's death. On the way home, however, he has witnessed a scene of forgiveness. He comes across a young girl who has been pushed violently onto the pavement by a "rough, rude errand-boy" (437). Carson steps in to have justice done to the boy, but the girl (in italics) responds, "He did not know what he was doing" (438). This acting out of scripture in daily life (of Jesus' prayer for his persecutors, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do"³⁵) is something that John Barton indicates he has never seen. It precedes Carson's reading of the gospel and effects his reinterpretation of it. At his desk, Carson

could not hate [his son's murderer] with the vehemence of hatred he had felt, when he had imagined him a young man, full of lusty life, defying all laws, human and divine. In spite of his desire to retain the revengeful feeling he considered as a duty to his dead son, something of pity would steal in for the poor, wasted skeleton of a man, the smitten creature, who had told him of his sin. . . . Unaccustomed wonder filled his mind at the reflection of the different lots of the brethren of mankind. Then he roused himself from his reverie, and turned to the object of his search—the Gospel, where he half expected to find the tender pleading. 'They know not what they do.' He fell to the narrative now, afresh, with all the interest of a little child" and understood "for the first time the full meaning of the story. He came to the end; the awful End. And there were the haunting words of pleading. (439-40)

The same recognition of brotherhood has placed each man in the position of both the slayer Cain (Carson had intended to prosecute and execute Barton) and the crucified Christ. Both men forgive the other, having finally recognized the blindness upon which they based their own judgment; not acknowledging the full humanity of the other man—seeing him as merely an employer or a worker, a cruel master or a murderer—they indeed knew not what they did. Carson, who thought he had too much to forgive and too little to be forgiven, can finally pray honestly, "God be merciful to us sinners.—Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us" (441).

Earlier, begging for his own hanging, thinking death easier than living with his sin, Barton says, "I've kept thinking and thinking if I were but in that world where they say God is, He would, may be, teach me right from wrong, even if it were with many stripes.

I've been sore puzzled here. . . . As for hanging, that's just nought at all" (433). Barton's sins result not from a lack of desire to do right but from a loss of a standard of judgment. Barton cannot find it in the Bible because he cannot understand the passages and finds no examples of behavior in accord with them; Carson has the education to understand the passages, but finds no meaning until he more fully understands the human condition, not only that of his class but of Barton's class, as well. For Gaskell, appropriate interpretation seems to depend on both these elements, but scripture is not the only source of moral guidance. At the close of Carson's interview with Job Legh and Jem Wilson, Carson believes it has been fruitless; Job, however, concludes:

I'm not learned enough to argue. Thoughts come into my head that I'm sure are as true as Gospel, though may be they don't follow each other like the Q. E. D. of a proposition. The masters has it on their own conscience,—you have it on yours, sir, to answer for to God whether you've done, and are doing all in you power to lighten the evils, that seem always to hang on the trades by which you make your fortunes. It's no business of mine, thank God. John Barton took the question in hand, and his answer to it was NO! (458)

Job's answer appeals to each individual's moral responsibility; it appeals to a kind of social familyhood—something akin to Dicken's Family of Man—in which each member answers yes to Cain's question "Am I my brother's keeper?"³⁶ and no to Paul's implicit question, "Am I his judge?" Not only does Gaskell's narrative indicate that an absolute right or wrong cannot easily be determined and that scripture cannot be properly interpreted in isolation (i.e., without an equal acquaintance with other humans, particularly those whom the "upright" would call sinners—without an empathizing understanding of their conditions, feelings, frustrations), but it also implies that the hasty assumption of absolutes is dangerous and misleading. Illustrating once again the relative name and nature of virtue and vice, the narrator concludes a wrenching description of the condition of poor with,

Many a penny that would have gone little way enough in oatmeal or potatoes, bought opium to still the hungry liitle ones, and make them forget their uneasiness in heavy troubled sleep. It was mother's mercy. The evil and the

good of our nature came out strongly then. There were desperate fathers; there were bitter-tongued mothers (O God! what wonder!); there were reckless children; the very closest bonds of nature were snapt in that time of trial and distress. There was Faith such as the rich can never imagine on earth; there was 'Love strong as death'; and self-denial, among rude, coarse men, akin to that of Sir Phillip Sidney's most glorious deed. The vices of the poor sometimes astound us *here*; but when the secrets of all hearts shall be made known, their virtues will astound us in far greater degree. (96)

Instead of espousing church-goers dressed in finery or church officials versed in scripture, the narrator chooses the rough and uneducated poor as strong examples of Christian virtue.

Using a similar strategy of first exposing errors in reasoning based on false interpretation of scripture and then suggesting an alternative application of it, Gaskell extends her critique of the use of the Bible beyond its function as a guide for moral judgment to its function as a comforter. Mary Barton includes numerous instances of characters, particularly those in the lower classes, turning to the Bible in order to comfort themselves or others. And clearly the working classes need comfort: emphasizing the disparity in wealth between classes, Barton says to the elder Wilson, "They'n screwed us down to th' lowest peg, in order to make their great big fortunes, and build their great big houses, and we, why we're just clemming, many and many of us. Can you say there's nought wrong in this?" (104). Just as clearly, their needs are not being met by others. Even during one of the most hopeful scenes of human charity, when Jem Wilson saves his father and another worker from the burning mill, the majority of the population is shown to be entirely inept in offering aid. Trapped in the fire at the mill, "the men were perceptibly, though not audibly, praying the multitude below for help" (89). While the men's prayers are not fruitless, the multitude proves inconstant, faithless, and incapable of answering them; as the men are saved the multitude rejoices, but "then with all the fickleness of interest characteristic of a large body of people, pressed and stumbled, and cursed and swore in the hurry to get out of Dunham Street, and back to the immediate scene of the fire, the mighty diapason of whose roaring flames formed an awful accompaniment to the screams . . . and imprecations, of the struggling crowd" (92). The crowd contributes to

and almost celebrates the hellish nature of this fire scene, while Jem Wilson, alone, acts to prevent its greedy consumption of his father and his friend. His physical act of salvation resonates with a spiritual salvation from this Hellfire, the symbolic nature of which the crowd is gleefully unaware.

Culpable as well are the institutions and people directly capable of offering aid. Either they offer a more unpalatable situation than the one a person is in, or they are unaware of need. The Board of Guardians, for instance, terrifies Davenport: seeing Mrs. Davenport trying to nurse a child with her dried-out breast, Barton asks, "Han ye had no money fra th' town?" And she replies, "No, my master is Buckinghamshire born; and he's feared the town would send him back to his parish, if he went to th' board" (103). And wealthy Mr. Carson and his well-fed staff prove blind to the needs of those around them: during Wilson's visit to the Carsons, "The coffee steamed upon the fire . . . Wilson began to yearn for food to break his fast, which had lasted since dinner the day before. If the servants had known this, they would have willingly given him meat and bread in abundance; but they were like the rest of us, and not feeling hunger themselves, forgot it was possible another might" (106). As conditions worsen for the lower classes, they begin to suspect that "their legislators, their magistrates, their employers, and even the ministers of religion, were in general, their oppressors and enemies; and were in league for their prostration and enthralment" (126).

Thus, many turn to the Bible and to God for comfort. Turned away from the men of parliament, Barton says to Mary, "we mun speak to our God to hear us, for man will not hearken; no, not now, when we weep tears o' blood" (141). God provides an audience that man cannot, but in this case as in others, needs go unmet and suffering goes uncomforted. Jane, for instance, finds comfort in looking forward to an afterlife promised in the Bible. Upon hearing that Mary had not yet returned and assuming that Will had not been secured as a witness, Jane says to Job, "It will all end right . . . but not as thou tak'st

it. Jem will be hung, and will go to his father and the little lads; where the Lord God wipes away all tears, and where the Lord Jesus speaks kindly to the little ones, who look about for the mothers they left upon earth. Eh, Job, yon's a blessed land, and I long to go to it, and yet I fret because Jem is hastening there" (370). Her comfort is couched in a wish for death, and it borders despair. It is an empty wish; she can hardly wish it for someone else. Ben Davenport, too, welcomes death as a blessing, finally comforted not so much by the promise of an afterlife as by the relief that the end of his life brings. At the verge of death he brings "his two hands into the attitude of prayer. They saw his lips move, and bent to catch the words, which came in gasps, and not in tones. 'Oh Lord God! I thank thee, that the hard struggle of living is over'" (110). Although described in a religious framework, death, not religion, is Davenport's true comforter.

Another somewhat unsatisfactory form that the characters' appeal to religion for comfort often takes is in their attributing disasters and suffering to God's will, followed by their attempt to resign themselves to it, a line of reasoning that steals as much comfort as it gives. Alice looks on her deafness as a trial given by God to teach a lesson (167). Job attributes death to God's will; "And in that big mass o' a place I were leaving my blessed child asleep—in her last sleep," he says. "Well, God's will be done!" (148). Not necessarily with reference to the examples above, Gaskell's narrative also indicates that the state of mind frequently needed to facilitate this resignation is that of simple trust, that of a child. Jesus said to his disciples, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."³⁷ Part of Gaskell's critique of the application of scripture as a comforter in the human sphere involves a recurring motif of children. This motif further taints the ambivalent comfort characters derive from religion as Jesus' words are acted out literally in the imperfect human sphere, where adults not only escape from the horror of their everyday lives into a childish daze or reverie, but where they are also treated as children socially by the upper class as a subtle form of oppression.

Nearing death, Alice reverts to "the scenes of her childhood, unchanged and bright as in those long departed days"; in this case her transformation is a "veiled blessing" from God, as Mary and Margaret see it (269). But the blessing of senselessness, just like the blessing of death, is certainly an ambivalent one. Witnessing Alice's peace, or at least absence of conscious pain or disturbance, Mary, too, wishes to be near death: "longing for peace and kindness, for the images of rest and beauty, and sinless times long ago, which the poor old woman's rambling presented, she wished to be as near death as Alice; to have had struggled through this world, whose sufferings she had early learnt, and whose crimes now seemed pressing close upon her" (273). Mary succumbs even more to this soporific temptation as "Old texts from the Bible that her mother used to read . . . came up to her memory" (273). Ironically, the first of these texts is from a lamentation of Job in which he wishes himself never to have been born, for he would still be in that world where "the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest."³⁸ Job is rebuked for his speech and, implicitly, so is Mary.

In addition, Mary herself does experience her own returns to childhood. Alone in the house before Esther's visit, Mary dreams of a return to childhood and a communion with those already dead (286). After her shock Mary wakes as a child: "She smiled gently, as a baby does when it sees its mother tending its little cot; and continued her innocent infantine gaze into [Jem's] face" (416). Again, too exhausted and disheartened to avoid the potential danger she is in after her sailing trip, Mary follows the strange sailor with "the unquestioning docility of a little child" (362). After her father's death, Mary depends on her friends wholly "with the trust of a little child; glad to be undisturbed in the reveries and remembrances which filled her eyes with tears" (443). In each case, Mary's childlikeness emphasizes her exhaustion and weakness, rather than any kind of positive purity. Her childlike trust is not in God, but in strangers; she randomly places her trust in whomever is present at her time of greatest weakness, a practice that has led Esther astray

and does the same for Ruth in Gaskell's second novel.

Other characters, too, revert to childhood. Nearly convinced that he would be killed for a crime he did not commit and in a position wholly dependent on others, Jem stands in court "with compressed lips, looking at the judge with his outward eyes, but with far other and different scenes presented to his mental vision;—a sort of rapid recapitulation of his life,—remembrances of his childhood" (384). Equally powerless and dependent as her son at his trial, Jane tells the truth about Jem's gun with "the fidelity of a little child" (386). While characters receive relief from these returns to childhood, the obvious problem with their becoming literally like children is that children need adults to care and to provide for them. In the theological metaphor, God is this parent; in Mary Barton's society, God seems absent and the surrogate parents'—the educated masters and humanitarian institutions—are ineffectual in meeting the needs of the lower class or indifferent to them. As the examples illustrate, in becoming as children, Jem, Mary, Alice and Jane do not merely assume the qualities or characteristics of figurative childlikeness, but they are governed by a convoluted literal childlikeness that cripples their strength and makes them mentally incapable of caring for themselves or others. Is this the condition of a true Christian? Perhaps the detached joy and happy trust of Alice on her deathbed or Mary recovering from shock does indeed make them "greatest in the kingdom of heaven,"³⁹ but as the narrative continually emphasizes, Mary Barton's world is not the kingdom of heaven, and the qualities mentioned above only seem to contribute to the lower class's oppression.

Through this motif of children coupled with the insufficient aid which the literal and figurative children receive from religion itself, Gaskell points to the folly of the use of Biblical texts to justify Christian inaction, and recommends, by the examples of her characters aligned with the narrator's countering Biblical allusions, acts of charity as the source of true comfort. Bringing aid much more substantial than the promise of comfort

hereafter, John Barton and Job go in person to Davenport's house and nurse him and his family. They provide food, warmth and company to this family regardless of their difference in religious denomination (Davenport is a "Methodee" (97)). Barton even pawns the rest of his saleable possessions to help, and Wilson, without employment, gives what he has: "though 'silver and gold he had none,' he gave heart-service, and love-works of far more value" (99). This reference to the story of Peter and John healing the lame man at the gates of the temple⁴⁰ emphasizes that the relief brought to Davenport's family just as that brought to the lame man was effectual, immediate, and addressed to real human needs. In further describing the aid received by the Davenports, the narrator makes an allusion to the good Samaritan, again re-emphasizing the humane, practical nature of this aid: "The widow had reclaimed her children; her neighbours, in the good Samaritan sense of the word, had paid her little arrears of rent" (114). Mr. and Mrs. Sturgis take Mary into their home and nurse her to health with the same spirit (418-19). With no taint of self-righteous judgment, Mary returns to nurse her father and "watch over him tenderly, as the Innocent should watch over the Guilty" (421).

Praising this kind of personal help offered without judgment, the narrator writes of a visitor who helps Esther in prison after even her own brother-in-law rejects her; "'Sick, and in prison, and ye visited me.' Shall you, or I, receive such blessing? I know one who will. An overseer of a foundry, an aged man, with hoary hair, has spent his Sabbaths, for many years, in visiting the prisoners and the afflicted, in Manchester New Bailey; not merely advising, and comforting, but putting means into their power of regaining the virtue and the peace they had lost" (206). The reference to scripture places this man's acts, a character modeled after philanthropist Thomas Wright,⁴¹ in the context of Jesus' dramatization of the hereafter "when the Son of man shall come in his glory": he says, "Then shall the King say . . . Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you. . . . For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat . . . I was sick, and ye visited

me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me." The listeners respond, "Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed *thee*? . . . Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?" Jesus continues, "the King shall answer and say unto them . . . Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."⁴² This allusion sanctifies Wright and his fictional colleagues' acts of charity; it supports and justifies Gaskell's indication that true prayer, the prayer that brings comfort, is active and social rather than passive and isolated. Even Jane Wilson, whose application of scripture has proven faulty and ineffectual, finally achieves through loving action the result she expected from her religious words; in accepting Mary into her family as her son's wife, she recognizes that "this was heart's-piety, and needed no garnish of texts to make it true religion, pure and undefiled" (448).

Through her commentary on comfort Gaskell shows that the direct use of texts as a kind of band-aid for suffering brings a hollow comfort in making a person senseless (to pain *and* relief) or encouraging resignation to it; she recommends instead the use of scripture to support and spur on acts of Christian charity that strengthen both the giver and the receiver in directly addressing suffering and providing practical, physical comfort. As the reference to Thomas Wright indicates, the solution Gaskell suggests for individual suffering she recommends for collective suffering as well. Her narrative strongly criticizes the use of scripture to justify complaisance and inaction on the part of those who have the means to help the lower classes. During his meeting with John Barton and Job Legh, Carson tries to justify his actions by assigning responsibility and blame to God: "We cannot regulate the demand for labour. . . . It depends on events which God alone can control" (456). Part of Gaskell's rebuke to this attitude comes directly from the characters. Job, for instance, says, "I have lived long enough . . . to see that it is part of His plan to send suffering to bring out a higher good; but surely it's also part of His plan that as much of the burden of the suffering as can be, should be lightened by those whom it is His

pleasure to make happy, and content in their own circumstances. . . . when God gives a blessing to be enjoyed, He gives it with a duty to be done" (457). Job later says to Carson, "If fellow-creatures can give nought but tears, and brave words, we take our trials straight from God, and we know enough of His love to put ourselves blind into His hands" (459). But Gaskell qualifies Job's acceptance of suffering as God's will. In her preface to Mary Barton she writes of the work-people:

Whether the bitter complaints made by them, of the neglect which they experienced from the prosperous—especially from the masters whose fortunes they had helped to build up—were well-founded or no, it is not for me to judge. It is enough to say, that this belief of the injustice and unkindness which they endure from their fellow-creatures, taints what might be resignation to God's will, and turns it to revenge in too many of the poor uneducated factory-workers of Manchester. (37)

This commentary makes Job's acceptance seem almost dangerous in its indirect encouragement of the masters' cruel indifference.

Gaskell's critical response to Carson's attitude also takes form in a series of religious allusions that at once incriminate the upper class and vindicate the lower. The most evident Biblical context for the relation between workers and masters is the parable of Dives and Lazarus: Barton passionately says to the elder Wilson, "We [the poor] are their [the rich] slaves as long as we can work; we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as Dives and Lazarus, with a great gulf betwixt us" (45); and while the characters are speaking of London with all its finery, the narrator interjects, "Still at the old parable of Dives and Lazarus! does it haunt the minds of the rich as it does those of the poor?" (142). The parable tells of Lazarus, a wretchedly poor man who daily waits prostrate outside the gates of a wealthy man hoping for a mere crumb by which to sustain himself. Both men die; Lazarus is rewarded, while the rich man cries for mercy in hell. Abraham says to him, "now [Lazarus] is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from

hence to you cannot."⁴³ Directed to the poor, this parable could be classified along with the other texts used by characters to comfort themselves with the hope of a better existence after death. But in both the Bible and Gaskell's text, the parable is directed at the rich—the Pharisees, in one case, the masters, in the other—and the reader in both. It is not primarily intended to comfort, but to incite the audience to cross the gulf while it is still passable.

The upper class is further indicted by the narrative because it frames them collectively as insufficient providers of unsatisfactory, insubstantial aid. For example, the zeal of the work masters is likened to that of a convert, casting a negative light on both kinds of excessive energy; "It is well known, that there is no religionist so zealous as a convert; not masters so stern, and regardless of the interests of their work-people, as those who have risen from such a station themselves" (222). Furthermore, the rough, starved workers are spoken to by the delegates from the other side in a "high-pitched, psalm-singing voice," an inappropriately condescending tone to accompany the delegate's empty and condescending message (233). The inhumane conditions of the poor as they are intensified by the masters are given the status of a humanly insurmountable enemy: "The people had thought the poverty of the preceding years hard to bear, and had found its yoke heavy; but this year added sorely to its weight. Former times had chastised them with whips, but this chastised them with scorpions" (157). The reference to whips and scorpions alludes to the twelfth chapter of I Kings, and frames Carson—and the masters who share his attitude—as a Rehoboam. Having slaved under Solomon, Jeroboam appeals to Solomon's son, Rehoboam, on behalf of the Israelites: "Thy father made our yoke grievous: now therefore make thou . . . his heavy yoke . . . lighter, and we will serve thee."⁴⁴ Inciting rebellion, Rehoboam replies, "I will add to your yoke: my father . . . chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."⁴⁵ In addition, the workers fail in making parliament understand "the distress which was riding, like the Conqueror on his Pale Horse, among the people; which was crushing their lives out of

them, and stamping woe-marks over the land" (141). This second allusion is to Revelations. The Lamb's opening of the fourth seal reveals the pale horse, "and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them . . . to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death."⁴⁶ These two references together frame the masters as tremendous forces for destruction, furious and unchecked in their oppression.

Finally, in order to redeem himself from this weighty accusation, Carson must learn to apply politically and socially, to humans collectively, the active Christianity that Jane adopts individually. And although his efforts go largely unrecognized, Carson does eventually work to educate workers, to improve their conditions, and to "acknowledge the Spirit of Christ as the regulating law between both parties" in order that "none might suffer from the cause from which he had suffered" (460).

In Ruth, Gaskell shifts her attention away from class conflicts and the strife between workers and masters to focus on the issue to which Esther's presence in Mary Barton only hints. Gaskell speaks out in defense of a fallen woman, and she "insists upon placing Ruth at the centre of the novel."⁴⁷ This very defense of a fallen heroine is in itself a radical act in light of Victorian gender ideology, in which the fallen woman is condemned and cast out. However, Gaskell in no way condones her heroine's actual fall. As part of her defense of Ruth and indictment of the society, she alludes frequently to the Bible. Beer even classifies Ruth as "a story of repentance and redemption straight out of the Gospels."⁴⁸ On the broadest level, Gaskell implies parallels between Ruth, her fallen heroine, and central Biblical figures: Ruth, most obviously, but also Mary Magdalene, the Virgin Mary, and Christ. While Gaskell seems almost heretical in looking to the authority of the Bible for support of her heroine, she effects a feminist re-interpretation and use of Biblical texts, all the while leaving the authority of the Bible inviolable and avoiding any taint of sarcasm or irreverence.

The first Biblical citations in Ruth enter the narrative from the mouth of John, the old resident at Milham Grange. He sits reading aloud from his Prayer Book upon Ruth's arrival, thus drawing specific attention to the actual verses from Psalms. Gaskell positions Ruth and Bellingham so they hear the verses, and she includes the reader in the audience by quoting the verses word for word in the text. Aptly articulating the spiritual uneasiness Thomas will soon feel and Ruth should feel—"Why art thou so vexed, O my soul?"⁴⁹—the passage relates to Ruth's precarious moral position. The narrator points out, however, that the "words of holy trust" were "not fully understood" by Thomas, as yet unaware of Ruth's presence (46). This scene begins a pattern of instances in which characters have an incomplete understanding of scripture until they apply verses to and reconcile them with Ruth's situation. Ruth, as a fallen woman who still exudes purity and child-like goodness, becomes an obstacle that, like a rock in a stream, obstinately redirects an all-too-smooth, traditional interpretation of the Bible.

Perhaps because he is arguably the most sensitive and conscientious character in Ruth, Benson, the godly minister, finds himself adjusting his scriptural interpretations, with his relationship with Ruth acting as a catalyst in these changes. Gaskell inserts direct quotations of the Bible into the narrative to illustrate the re-reading Benson is forced to do. Trying to convince Ruth to wait until he has recovered from his fall in Wales, Benson asks her to stay "for His sake," an invocation which "did not vibrate in [Ruth's] atmosphere" (100). Benson imagines her mentally replying in the words of Legion to Jesus: "What have I to do with Thee?"⁵⁰ He engages in an internal dialogue of scripture, trying to find something in the Bible applicable to Ruth's situation that will penetrate her despair. Desperately, Benson "thought of every softening influence of religion which over his own disciplined heart had power, but put them aside as useless" (101). Here, as in Mary Barton, scripture alone proves an insufficient comforter. Finally instructed by the "still small voice," he reaches Ruth by invoking her in her "mother's name," without scriptural

trappings. This effective injunction subversively echoes "In the name of the Father," and it introduces a motif of the sacredness of the mother that reverberates in Ruth's feelings about her own motherhood and in Gaskell's inclusion of selected scriptural passages. Benson continues his re-reading of scripture while delivering the first sermon Ruth would hear. He admits to having "had Ruth present in his thoughts all the time he had been preparing" and having "tried carefully to eschew everything which she might feel as an allusion to her own case" (153). He inevitably fails, however, apparently finding all passages to apply to her situation, but to curse rather than comfort her, for she is "smitten" with shame despite his efforts.

As Benson's involvement with Ruth develops, however, so does his discomfort with his traditional, but incomplete, interpretation of Biblical texts. His efforts to comfort and instruct his consciousness through the Bible and to justify his own often awkward position—a moral tightrope strung between Ruth and his congregation—become most complicated with regard to the lie he has told and maintained about Ruth's widowhood. Even though the Bensons do not "trouble themselves with marking their progress by self-examination" (142), the lie necessitates some introspection on Mr. Benson's part. "We are not to do evil that good may come" (255), he says during the political discussion at Bradshaw's. Ironically, Benson echoes a passage in Romans that censures liars (even those whose lies result in a good end) and that concludes, "What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin."⁵¹ He is "startled at the deep sound of his own voice as he uttered these words" (255), and these words lead him to the uneasy question "as to how far his practice tallied with his principle" (257).

While these times when Benson's use of scripture undermines him indicate that he has not read thoroughly enough to apply scripture to his situation successfully, his search for Biblical support, guidance, and justification is finally rewarded during the heated

discussion he has with Bradshaw after his lie has been exposed. He implores God to "give me power to speak out convincingly what I believe to be His truth, that not every woman who has fallen is depraved" (350). Even though he does not convince Bradshaw, he does speak powerfully, likening Ruth to Mary Magdalene; and Jesus' example in helping Mary gives Benson strength to "stand with Christ against the world" (351). Benson has finally fully reconciled his actions with scripture, and this reconciliation culminates during his sermon after Ruth's death. Trying to write the sermon, he thinks, "Oh, that he could do her justice! but words seemed hard and inflexible, and refused to fit themselves to his ideas" (456). But the following Sunday he "put the sermon away, and opened the bible, and read the seventh chapter of Revelations" (457). Whereas in Wales his own words succeed while scripture is inadequate in reaching Ruth, in the end, his own words are insufficient, and the Bible, after Benson's long struggle to re-read it and adjust his interpretation of it, speaks strongly and without compromise in support of Ruth.

As a woman and mother interpreting scripture for herself, Ruth undergoes a development similar to Benson's struggle to bring religious doctrine into accord with his relationship with Ruth. From the time of her first sermon, during which she nearly writhes with shame and repentance and declares, "Father! I have sinned against Heaven and before Thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy child!" (154), Ruth begins to develop an understanding of her relationship with God by relating this image of God as father with her position as mother. Admitting that her love for Leonard sometimes exceeded her love for God and admitting it to Him as to an "earthly friend," Ruth's "love for her child led her up to love to God, to the All-knowing, who read her heart" (209). God for her becomes a merciful confidant—He knows what the "human heart could never know" (285); she trusts the justness of His will because "His mercy endureth for ever" (286), a description quoted through Ruth's consciousness from a passage in Psalm 136 that repeatedly reaffirms this mercy in all twenty-six verses. Interestingly, her depiction of God makes Him much more

comparable to the mother-figures (Jemima, Ruth, Faith) than the fathers (Mr. Bradshaw and even Mr. Farquhar) in the novel.

Furthermore, Ruth too, like Benson, finally finds in the Bible apt images for understanding her experience in a religious context, images taken from passages which Gaskell includes in the narrative to represent the fallen woman—images, however, that contradict Victorian conventions of that figure. Unable to sleep during her troubled time in Abermouth (Mr. Donne has recently arrived), Ruth throws "her body half out of the window into the cold night air" (274), and she soothes her intense moral struggle with the rising storm. Ruth thinks of the last part of this passage in Psalms: "Praise the Lord from the earth, ye dragons, and all deeps: Fire, and hail; snow, and vapour; stormy wind fulfilling his word."⁵² Instead of praising God in the manner of a frail and passionless female, Ruth praises Him as a storm, churning and purifying her way to righteousness.

In addition to taking Benson, Ruth, and the reader along with them, the direct references to Biblical passages create, through an accretive re-reading of scripture and its commentary on women, an independent, indirect and often ironic or subversive commentary under the narrative. Elisabeth Jay, for instance, points out the strategic use of Bradshaw as "a professing Christian of Evangelical proclivities" functioning as a "spokesman for a view which does not satisfactorily distinguish between Christian standards and social condemnation"; thus through him Gaskell exposes "the essentially anti-Christian nature of such a habit of mind."⁵³ Somewhat dubiously, Gaskell also associates Bradshaw with St. Paul in the scene where he is casting out Ruth. After Jemima has twice invoked him with the single word "Father!", he commands his daughter, "If ever you, or any child of mine, cared for her, shake her off from you, as St. Paul shook off the viper—even into the fire" (338). At a point when the reader has perhaps the weakest sympathy for Bradshaw, this association with a Biblical figure who—as the authors of The Woman Question point out—is ambivalent at best with regard to the woman question,

accentuates the controversial nature of Bradshaw's position on Ruth.⁵⁴ The association mutually undermines the authority of both Bradshaw and St. Paul (as Bradshaw interprets him), particularly when Benson unequivocally stands "with Christ against the world," against self-righteous Bradshaw, and, by implication, against St. Paul (351).

As mentioned earlier, a second level on which this Biblical re-reading works is with the introduction by allusion of whole stories into the narrative, rather than just independent quotations. By juxtaposing stories from the Bible with the story-narratives of characters, Gaskell unconventionally reinterprets the original stories. She associates Ruth with a number of Biblical characters, who are not necessarily minor characters, but are characters who can be contained in a limited narrative: Rizpah, the prodigal son, and of course, Ruth the Moabite. Describing Ruth's sense of motherhood, the narrator writes, "she would kneel down by [Leonard's] little bed at night—at the deep, still midnight—with the stars that kept watch over Rizpah shining down upon her, and tell God . . . that she feared she loved her child too much, yet could not, would not, love him less" (209). This single reference to Rizpah brings into the novel the sub-narrative of Saul's concubine whose two sons are required to be hanged in order to avenge (in accord with the Old Testament eye-for-an-eye code of justice) Saul's slaying of the Gibeonites. Holding no power to prevent the deaths, Rizpah afterwards dedicates herself night and day to protecting her sons' dead bodies from scavengers.⁵⁵ Considered in the context of Ruth's situation, Rizpah's story aligns the reader's sympathies with the two mothers—one unmarried, the other, a concubine—both powerless in a patriarchal society in which they have been used and cast aside. Even more subversive on Gaskell's part, the conflated stories set motherhood in opposition to the Old Testament vengeful God and put the reader on the side of motherhood. As a result, Rizpah's story makes it harder for a reader to rebuke Ruth for loving her child more than her God.

Gaskell's indirect comparison of Ruth's experience with the parable of the Prodigal

Son also serves to evoke sympathy and compassion for Ruth, and it additionally contrasts a truly Christian reception of a sinner with the self-righteousness that would pass for Christianity in a society of Mr. Bradshaws. Speaking to people who criticize him for inviting sinners into his company, Jesus tells of the son who "wasted his substance with riotous living"⁵⁶ and the father who "saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him,"⁵⁷ and who gladly received, forgave, fed, and clothed his son. With humility comparable to this son's, Ruth, listening to her first sermon in Mr. Benson's church, "sank down; and down, till she was kneeling on the floor of the pew, and speaking to God in the spirit, if not in the words of the Prodigal Son" (154). The son's reconciliation with his father, and implicitly, with God, is repeated in Ruth's reception by Faith, a mother surrogate—a parallel that suggests Ruth's story as a companion parable: the parable of the Fallen Woman.

Finally, the most evident narrative conflation is that between Ruth Hilton Denbigh's story and the Biblical Ruth's story. On the most obvious level, the relationship between Ruth and Faith mirrors that between Ruth and Naomi, as each Ruth determines to stay with a mother-figure who is not her natural mother. In the Biblical account, Ruth leaves her home to go with her husband's family, but when this husband dies, Naomi releases Ruth and encourages her to return to her original home. Ruth, however, chooses to remain with her mother-in-law. Gaskell's Ruth, unwilling to stain her real mother's name with her shame, takes the name of Faith's mother; not without a personal sacrifice, Miss Benson says, "Then, let us call you by my mother's name. . . . She would have--- But I'll talk to you about my mother some other time" (130). Faith's acceptance of Ruth as a daughter is again symbolized when she gives the unmarried mother her own grandmother's wedding ring. The echo of Ruth's bond with Naomi—"whither thou goest, I will go; . . . thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God"⁵⁸—sanctifies the bond between Faith and Ruth and shows a far deeper and purer motive on Faith's part than merely wanting to

salvage her own respectability by hiding Ruth's sin from the community with a false name and wedding band.

The Biblical story of Ruth, however, resonates beyond Ruth's relationship with Faith. Another Naomi seeks Ruth out during Leonard's illness. Ruth receives a "call of inquiry, and a prayer that God would spare the child, from an old crippled woman" (312). Upon returning this call, Ruth "and the old cripple sat hand in hand over the scanty fire on the hearth of the latter, while she told in solemn, broken, homely words, how her child sickened and died" and "after this, Ruth 'clave unto her'⁵⁹" (313). The relationship between Ruth and this old woman characterizes Ruth's relationship with many of the poor and sick citizens in Eccleston, and it is in turn characterized by Ruth's relationship to Naomi. Furthermore, this relationship is not limited to women. Leonard, too, imitates the Biblical Ruth outside the hospital when members of the community flock around him praising his mother. He announces before them all, "Sir, I am her son!" and "She is my mother" (430). The extended comparison is not surprising until one is reminded once again that this good daughter and mother, both a Naomi and a Ruth to the community, is a fallen woman.

This extended comparison between the two Ruth stories borders on the broadest and perhaps the most controversial level of Gaskell's use of scripture: that of drawing parallels between her characters and major religious characters, characters too pervasive in religious tradition to be contained in a single narrative. While trying to calm Faith after discovering Ruth's pregnancy, Benson first connects Ruth with the fallen woman who wept at Jesus' feet in Simon's house: "I have been all this afternoon mourning over the sin which has blighted this young creature . . . I have been thinking of every holy word, every promise to the penitent—of the tenderness which led the Magdalen aright" (119). Benson makes this association again in his argument with Bradshaw over Ruth: that "many, many crave and hunger after a chance for virtue—the help which no man gives to them—help—

that gentle tender help which Jesus gave once to Mary Magdalen" (350). Ruth, too, identifies herself with this reformed harlot; she begs that "the errors of [her] youth may be washed away by [her] tears—it was so once when the gentle, blessed Christ was upon earth" (301). Ruth's story also resonates, however, with suggestions of the other Mary—the virgin mother of Jesus. The actual scene of Ruth's fall and her impregnation are entirely absent from Gaskell's narrative, and as a result Ruth seems as sexless and innocent after her fall as she is before it. Ruth is also comparable to this Mary in that Leonard takes on the qualities and actions of Jesus. Ruth's child, according to Benson, "may be God's messenger to lead her back to Him" (119). Especially as it is Ruth's "motherhood [that] leads to social as well as religious redemption,"⁶⁰ Leonard is comparable to the child who came to "save his people from their sins."⁶¹

Drawing parallels which the characters in Ruth (Mr. Bradshaw, certainly, and probably even Faith) might find blasphemous, the narrative finally implies a connection even between Ruth and Jesus Christ. At church in Abermouth, Ruth finds release and comfort for her own suffering in the twenty-sixth chapter of Matthew—the chapter that relates Jesus' suffering alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. Her internal pain is assuaged by the description of "the extremest suffering that the hushed world has ever heard of," and she prays in "His name, who underwent the agony in the garden" (283). Naturally, as Ruth progresses spiritually, she becomes more and more Christ-like, meekly ministering to the entire community of Eccleston, until her death, when Benson likens her to those in the ninth chapter of Revelation "which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (456).

As if to answer the cynical question in Proverbs, "Who can find a virtuous woman?"⁶² Gaskell has created Ruth, before whom the people of Eccleston "arise up, and call her blessed"⁶³ (430). Gaskell's narrative accretively develops a fallen and condemned woman into a religious figure in a conservative, Victorian setting. Furthermore, Ruth's

status as a religious heroine *relies* on her having fallen; Easson remarks, "her sin is a *felix culpa* . . . which, bad in itself, produces the greater good."⁶⁴ Gaskell also credibly accompanies Ruth's development with a change in her characters' reactions to Ruth from offended self-righteousness into humble tolerance. When Ruth is turned out of the Bradshaw's house, "Jemima touches her garment. This quasi-ritualistic act seems an attempt to repent of the hatred previously felt towards Ruth. . . . She wishes to gain some of Ruth's power, much like the woman who touched Christ's coat to be healed."⁶⁵ Even Bradshaw is finally "anxious to testify his respect for the woman, who, if all had entertained his opinions, would have been driven into hopeless sin" (458). Particularly in this last passage, Gaskell undermines a patriarchal reading of the Bible; she indicts Bradshaw, a pillar of "righteous" Christian faith in his community, as a force that drives women like Ruth into sin, while Benson, who has had earnestly to re-read scripture in order to protect and support Ruth fully, is the force that prevents her from committing greater sin. And he turns her from selfish suicide and despair not in the name of the Father, but in the name of the mother (or should it read *Mother?*).

Having revised the application of scripture to specific social problems in these two novels—the social repugnance on the part of the middle-to-upper classes against the workers in Mary Barton and the moral repugnance by the same group against a fallen woman in Ruth—Gaskell focuses her scriptural critique in North and South on a problem within religion itself, specifically on the schisms resulting from denominational differences. The tone and subject of the novel is similar to that of Mary Barton; describing the relationship of these two novels, Kubitschek writes:

Gaskell's first novel . . . offended manufacturers who felt that it promoted working-class discontent and offered sympathy to strikers. North and South placated these businessmen by showing the factory owners' financial vulnerability. . . . Ironically, this 'conciliatory' novel has as its basis the rejection of the ruling social, religious, political-economic, and military orders.⁶⁶

While her social critique in this novel is indeed thorough, Gaskell's biblical allusions and religious references initially relate less to secular social problems than to religious social problems. By the end of the novel, however, the two categories are difficult to distinguish. In other words, whereas the first two novels expose how scripture was being misapplied to maintain the "great gulf"⁶⁷ between characters and classes, North and South actually points to institutionalized religion itself as an indirect enforcer of social divisions. As Easson remarks in his article about Mr. Hale's doubts, "From the beginning of her writing career, Mrs Gaskell had made something of a speciality of handling controversial subjects. . . . Religion is an obviously controversial topic,"⁶⁸ and it receives an unusual amount of attention in North and South. Nearly each character has a distinct set of religious beliefs, and Easson outlines the plethora of denominations represented: "The varieties of religious experience the novel encompasses are more than we might at first think—Margaret's vivid but orthodox Anglicanism, her father's conscientious Unitarianism, Bessy's overheated visions, Higgins' fervid atheism, Mrs Hales' establishmentarianism, Frederick's matrimonially convenient Catholicism."⁶⁹ In addition, there are the Thorntons and the Shaws, the first demonstrating private religious practice that is remarkable in its absence of affiliation with public institutions, and the latter representing a hollow thoughtlessness that merely muddles the lines of demarcation between denominations.

Again in North and South, as in Mary Barton and Ruth, Gaskell includes in her characterization a commentary of each character's use of scripture and religious practices by the inclusion of Biblical references and through the voice of the narrator and the other characters. The narrator likens Margaret to a number of Biblical characters, thus solidly establishing her in a religious context. She has a relationship to the people in Helstone characterized by the selfless devotion Ruth demonstrates to Naomi with her insistence that "thy people shall be my people"⁷⁰: Margaret "took a pride in her forest. Its people were her people."⁷¹ She has cared for them as family members and fears that "these poor friends

would never understand why she had forsaken them" (41). Firmly insisting on knowing her mother's condition, Margaret "saw, and triumphed over all the obstacles which Dixon threw in her way; assuming her rightful position as daughter of the house in something of the spirit of the Elder Brother" (125), who, in Jesus' parable, was consistent in serving his parents and had a continual share of their love, which Margaret tries to earn in the form of confidence from her mother.⁷² Describing Margaret's feelings for Edith's husband, the narrator also favorably likens her to Queen Vashti,⁷³ a somewhat problematic figure: "Captain Lennox was always extremely kind and brotherly to Margaret. She was really very fond of him, excepting when he was anxiously attentive to Edith's dress and appearance, with a view to her beauty making a sufficient impression on the world. Then all the latent Vashti in Margaret was roused, and she could hardly keep herself from expressing her feelings" (373).⁷⁴ With clear-minded determination, Margaret, like Vashti, rebels against the compelled display of feminine beauty.

Furthermore, Margaret's characterization is steeped in actual scriptural verses, in addition to the indirect allusions that imply her affinity with Biblical characters. She knows the Bible well, as evidenced by the inclusion of Biblical phrases into her own expressions. Ready to take responsibility for her lie, she recognizes that in court she would admit that "she had been as 'a dog, and done this thing'⁷⁵" (277). She phrases her wish to go to Spain ("Let me go to Cadiz, or else I die" [409]) so as to echo Rachel's demand to Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die."⁷⁶ Upon leaving Helstone, Margaret's God is an Almighty being set apart at an infinite distance; "She looked out upon the dark-gray lines of the church tower, square and straight in the centre of the view, cutting against the deep blue transparent depths beyond . . . and yet no sign of God! It seemed to her at the moment, as if the earth was more utterly desolate than if girt in by an iron dome, behind which there might be the ineffaceable peace and glory of the Almighty" (42). But later her own use of scripture to comfort her father comforts her. After her mother's death, "The night was

wearing away, and the day was at hand, when, without a word of preparation, Margaret's voice broke upon the stillness of the room, with a clearness of sound that startled even herself: 'Let not your heart be troubled,' it said, and she went steadily on through all that chapter of unspeakable consolation" (251). The passage she recites is the fourteenth chapter of John in which the disciples, fearing Jesus' permanent removal, frantically ask him questions about what they will do when he is gone, to which he responds patiently and comfortingly.

Because Margaret's father's "doubts" play such an important part in the plot, his religious beliefs receive greater attention, both within the novel and by critics, than Margaret's steady Anglicanism. Determining the plot, Hale's decision of conscience to give up his position in the Anglican church necessitates the Hales' move to Milton. On another level, his dissent brings direct attention to denominational divisions and the problems inherent in institutionalized religion. As Kubitschek writes, it "broadens the attack on social institutions. . . . When Margaret's father . . . reveals that he can no longer make a declaration of conformity to the Liturgy of the Church of England, he emphatically denies that he has religious doubts. He has, therefore, developed a personal definition of religious truth which he cannot reconcile with the institutional definition."⁷⁷ Trying to make Margaret understand the long struggle leading to his decision, Hale says, "You could not understand it all, if I told you—my anxiety, for years past, to know whether I had any right to hold my living—my efforts to quench my smouldering doubts by the authority of the Church. Oh! Margaret, how I love the holy Church from which I am to be shut out!" (34). He continues, "I have been reading to-day of the two thousand who were ejected from their churches . . . trying to steal some of their bravery; but it is of no use—no use—I cannot help feeling it acutely" (34). Easson asserts that Hale's allusions establish him in "a Unitarian context," and, "as he shows by his citation of the ejected ministers of 1662, of those who held Anglican livings after the Restoration but gave them up rather than conform

to the Act of Uniformity, he questions the State's right to prescribe a man's belief or to control his conscience."⁷⁸ In a footnote to Gaskell's text, Editor Easson explains that:

Mr. Hale's difficulties are historical rather than religious, as he himself is at pains to stress. . . . Mrs. Gaskell was at no time thinking of a novel of religious doubt of the kind popular later in the nineteenth century, but of a case of conscience: Mr. Hale cannot accept that the Church of England has any right to compel men's beliefs. His position is akin to that of the Dissenters of the seventeenth century. (438n).

Thus, Hale's position in leaving the church is one of a moral martyr, suffering "for conscience' sake" (35), rather than a strictly religious martyr.

In characterizing Bessy, the narrator departs from issues of conscience and institutions and focuses again on this character's un-Anglican (if Margaret can be a standard) interpretation of scripture. Rather than turning to the Bible as Margaret does for comfort and instruction from Jesus' example, Bessy loves scripture for its appeal to her vivid imagination; it is for her a storybook into which she escapes mentally while she yet lives and into which she hopes to retreat physically after death. Bessy derives a different kind of comfort from Revelations than does Margaret from her favorite chapters. She asks Margaret to read; "I want some thoughts of the world that's far away to take the weary taste of it out o' my mouth. Read me—not a sermon chapter, but a story chapter; they've pictures in them, which I see when my eyes are shut" (201). Revelations provides the starkest contrast from Bessy's life, and "Many's the time," she says, "I've repeated the verses in the seventh chapter to myself, just for the sound. It's as good as an organ, and as different from every day, too. No, I cannot give up Revelations. It gives me more comfort than any other book i' the Bible" (138). She derives comfort and instruction from the artistic elements of the Bible, emphasizing that art and moral or theological instruction complement each other, as they do in Gaskell's text, as well. Bessy longs "to get away to the land o' Beulah,"⁷⁹ and her discourse continually emphasizes the disparity between her life in London and the city to which she hopes to go (89); "it's not for me to get sick and

tired o' strikes. This is the last I'll see. Before it's ended I shall be in the Great City—the Holy Jerusalem," she says, and her father responds, "Hoo's so full of th' life to come, hoo cannot think of th' present" (132). In the eyes of both her father, the atheist, and Margaret, the Anglican, Bessy's use of scripture resembles that of Jane Wilson (Mary Barton) and even Mary Barton when they look only to the world hereafter for peace.

As already indicated, Higgins' religious beliefs contrast strikingly with his daughter's. Although he would at times like to believe in a God—"I could wish there were a God, if it were only to ask Him to bless thee" (92), he says in gratitude to Margaret—he cannot. Arguing, furthermore, that religion is not relevant to political economy, Higgins says to Mr. Hale:

what I mean by belief just now, is a-thinking on sayings and maxims and promises made by folk yo' never saw, about the things and the life yo' never saw, nor no one else. Now, yo' say these are true things, and true sayings, and a true life. I just say, where's the proof? There's many and many a one wiser, and scores better learned than I am around me. . . . Well, I sees these people. . . . They don't believe i' the Bible,—not they. They may say they do, for form's sake; but Lord, sir, d'ye think their first cry i' th' morning is 'What shall I do to get hold on eternal life?' or 'What shall I do to fill my purse this blessed day? Where shall I go? What bargains shall I strike?' The purse and the gold and the notes is real things; things as can be felt and touched; them's realities; and eternal life is all a talk. (226)

Unlike Margaret, willing to take responsibility for her lie, Higgins attributes his sin to external conditions: "If I'm going wrong when I think I'm going right, it's their sin, who ha' left me where I am, in my ignorance" (155). Nevertheless, Higgins demonstrates a familiarity with the Bible in his occasional framing of his experience in a scriptural context. For instance, in describing Boucher's relationship to the Union, Higgins calls him a Judas to Mr. Hale; "There he went, ossing to promise aught, and pledge himsel' to aught—to tell a' he know'd on our proceedings, the good-for-nothing Judas!" (293). Higgins is also framed by the narrator as a good Samaritan, fulfilling Jesus' injunction to "love thy neighbour as thyself"⁸⁰ and furthermore to "Love your enemies, bless them that curse

you."⁸¹ Even though he has been angry with the Bouchers for their indiscretion, he gives what he has to Boucher as a brother; "all folks isn't wise, yet God lets 'em live—ay, an' gives 'em some one to love, and be loved by, just as good as Solomon," he reasons (156). Higgins' atheism is a conservative one, and fickle, as well, induced not so much by a philosophical impossibility of God, but by having witnessed the needs of humanity, God's creation, going unmet.

Another kind of religious belief, though not a specific category or denomination, is brought into the narrative by the Thorntons, particularly by Mrs. Thornton and her son, whose shared faith is discussed and practiced privately. In contrast to the Hale household, Mrs. Thornton has only one book in sight: "There was not a book about in the room, with the exception of Matthew Henry's Bible Commentaries, six volumes of which lay in the centre of the massive side-board" (76).⁸² The most public service they attend is Mrs. Thornton's reading from the Bible to her household for evening prayers (145). Both Thorntons are occasionally scriptural in their dialogues, but their choice and use of scripture seems to be influenced highly by their relationship as mother and son. In this understanding of God heightened by her position as mother, Mrs. Thornton is comparable to Gaskell's Ruth; she echoes the Biblical Ruth, as well, in saying to her son during the riot, "Where you are, there I stay" (175). Continuing in this vein, Mrs. Thornton says that "Mother's love is given by God, John. It holds fast for ever and ever," but she denies that a girl's love is God-given as well (211). The relationship is reciprocal, as John Thornton appears to have been very influenced by the early religious lessons of his mother. With his business going under, he reflects (through the narrator), "That was the idea of merchant-life with which Mr. Thornton had started. 'Her merchants be like princes,'⁸³ said his mother, reading the text aloud, as if it were a trumpet-call to invite her boy to the struggle" (419). At this difficult time, Thornton begs his mother to support him religiously as she did when he was a child; "If you would say the old good words, it would make me feel

something of the pious simplicity of my childhood. I say them to myself, but they would come differently from you" (425). The mother and son are for each other church, minister, parish.

A final denomination of sorts that stands in opposition to the fervent faiths of the Hales, the imaginative visions of Bessy, and the absence of religious faith in her father is that upheld by the Shaws. Both Mrs. Shaw and Edith illustrate their lack of religious depth by their complete incapacity to empathize with the Hales in their religious struggles. Proving her dull perception, Mrs. Shaw considers her brother-in-law, Mr. Hale, to be "one of the most delightful preachers she had ever heard, and a perfect model of a parish priest" (15). Indeed, on one hand he is a model priest—he sincerely cares for his parish, and he is devout in his faith. But Mrs. Shaw has no insight whatsoever into his struggles of conscience in relation to his position, and the narrator undercuts any judgment she would make by revealing that Mrs. Shaw "had forgotten all grievances except that of the unhappiness arising from disparity of age in married life" (15).

Edith makes equally glib remarks about the religious sphere. She, for instance, uses scripture to justify the maintenance of her paper-doll appearance: she "dimpled and blushed most becomingly when introduced to Mr. Bell, conscious that she had her reputation as a beauty to keep up, and that it would not do to have a Mordecai refusing to worship and admire" (378-79). Especially with the allusions made in relation to Margaret as a Vashti figure, this reference to Esther's story (Mordecai is Esther's Jewish father who is loyal to the king but refuses to bow down to his assistant, Haman) aligns Edith's motives with those of king Ahasuerus and Haman the persecuter, making them at the same time antithetical to Vashti's and, implicitly, to Margaret's. Edith also makes a flighty reference to martyrdom in her letter to Margaret; "Did somebody burn his hand for having said or done something he was sorry for? Well, I can't burn mine, because it would hurt me, and the scar would be ugly" (234). As Easson's note explains, the martyr Edith refers

to is "Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), who having acknowledged the supremacy of the Pope and the truth of Catholic doctrines after the accession of Mary I, held his hand in the flames when he was burned so that the sinning part of him should suffer first" (443n). By this comment, Edith not only belittles the social ostracization and mental pain that Hale suffers as a kind of martyr, but she demonstrates an attitude of indifference for all serious, religious issues. In terms of religion, Margaret has more in common with Higgins, the Atheist, than with her cousin, a formulaic Anglican.

Having presented an extensive variety of religious practices all within a Christian sphere (even Higgins reacts within this sphere in opposing Christianity), Gaskell brings these denominations together in direct confrontation through her character relationships. And instead of espousing one particular set of beliefs and supporting it through these confrontations, Gaskell emphasizes the intolerance accompanying these religious differences as the cause of rifts in families and among friends. For instance, the essence of Christ-like ministry in the relationship between the Hales and the Higginses is stymied by the characters' theological differences. Hearing Bessy wish for death and the afterlife—"They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat"⁸⁴—Margaret admonishes her—"don't be impatient with your life, whatever it is—or may have been. Remember who gave it you, and made it what it is!"—and she is in turn angrily admonished by Higgins—"I'll not have my wench preached to. She's bad enough as it is, with her dreams and her methodee fancies, and her visions of cities with goulden gates and precious stones" (90). At one point, Bessy herself speaks out to Margaret in anger and frustration; Margaret assures her, "God can give you more perfect rest than even idleness on earth, or the dead sleep of the grave can do," but Bessy responds, "But yo' see, though I don't believe [father] a bit by day, yet by night—when I'm in a fever, half-asleep and half-awake—it comes back upon me. . . . I think if this life is th' end, and that there's no God to wipe away all tears from all eyes—yo' wench, yo'!

. . I could go mad, and kill yo', I could" (101).

Less overtly, Margaret's hasty rejection of Bessy's personal involvement in prophecy also creates a slight dissonance between the friends. Teaching Bessy that her life has had its share of trials, Margaret concludes with, "Do I not know anxiety, though I go about well-dressed, and have food enough? Oh, Bessy, God is just, and our lots are well portioned out by Him, although none but He knows the bitterness of our souls" (137). Bessy apologizes, saying she has sometimes believed "I was one of those doomed to die by the falling of a star from heaven. . . . One can bear pain and sorrow better if one thinks it has been prophesied long before for one: somehow, then it seems as if my pain was needed for the fulfilment; otherways it seems all sent for nothing" (137). Margaret, unable to identify with either Bessy's desperate need for comfort or that which she derives from the Bible, gives an ambiguous answer: "Don't dwell so much on the prophecies, but read the clearer parts of the Bible" (137). Margaret also feels very uncomfortable with Bessy's confession of direct prophecy: "I ha' dreamt of yo', long afore ever I seed yo'" (149). As if threatened by the dream, Margaret quickly rejects it as "but a dream . . . quite a fancy" (149). While Margaret's calm and reasonable trust in God's goodness and reliance on the gospel emphasizes, by contrast, the ornamented and feverish nature of Bessy's faith, Bessy's sincere and vivid faith in God in spite of her nearly hopeless condition, coupled with her willingness to confront the parts of the Bible unpalatable to Margaret, makes the latter's religiosity seem timid, as if watered down.

Religious differences cause personal divisions within Margaret's own family, as well. Hale's dissent fractures family relationships. Upon leaving Helstone, the Hales enter a callous, if not malicious, world. Even their relatives do not want to have anything to do with them in a time of need, and they are consequently left as friendless as Job; "London life is too whirling and full to admit of even an hour of that deep silence of feeling which the friends of Job showed, when 'they sat with him on the ground seven days and

seven nights, and none spake a word unto him; for they saw that his grief was very great'⁸⁵" (57). But even members of the immediate household become isolated from one another because of religious differences. Dixon offends Margaret with her unthinking comments about Dissenters:

And master thinking of turning Dissenter at his time of life, when, if it is not to be said he's done well in the Church, he's not done badly after all. I had a cousin, miss, who turned Methodist preacher after he was fifty years of age, and a tailor all his life; but then he had never been able to make a pair of trousers to fit, for as long as he had been in the trade, so it was no wonder; but for master! as I said to missus, 'What would poor Sir John have said?' (48).

More significantly, Hale's decision causes schisms between himself and his own wife and daughter. With a frame of mind not entirely dissimilar from that of her sister Mrs. Shaw, Mrs. Hale shows no comprehension of her husband's struggle, and she equates leaving the church with leaving society; "He has doubts, you say, and gives up his living, and all without consulting me. I dare say, if he had told me his doubts at the first I could have nipped them in the bud. . . .of course, if your father leaves the Church, we shall not be admitted into society anywhere. It will be such a disgrace to us!" (45). At the same time, her criticism of her husband's secrecy is just, at least in the eyes of Margaret, who holds it against him. Furthermore, Margaret, though perhaps closer to understanding Hale's decision, cannot support it. Mr. Hale closes a painful interview with his daughter saying, "The blessing of God be upon thee, my child!" to which she responds, "And may He restore you to His Church." Setting them at odds, "she heard him murmur to himself, 'The martyrs and confessors had even more pain to bear—I will not shrink'" (40). The rift between herself and her father proves to be a permanent one, as she more carefully censors her comments from then on. Margaret shares the secret of her lie with no one; "Formerly Margaret would have come to him [her father] as priest as well as father, to tell him of her temptation and her sin; but latterly they had not spoken much on such subjects; and she knew not how, in his change of opinions, he would reply if the depth of her soul called

unto his" (286-87).

Having erected schisms between her characters at least in part to critique intolerance stemming from denominational idiosyncrasies, Gaskell portrays resolutions to these rifts—resolutions that often produce additional unity among classes and between laborers and employers, and that usually also involve an alteration or a greater leniency in a character's religious doctrine. Through these resolutions Gaskell concludes her critical scriptural analysis with the suggestion of an alternative, as she has done in the two earlier novels. In Mary Barton she prioritized Christian acts over words; in Ruth she spoke for tolerance and forgiveness; in North and South she combines these recommendations to promote a kind of communal, active, non-denominational Christianity. The healing of these rifts among characters occurs in both the public and private realms, private resolutions spurring on public ones, and *vice versa*. The more characters interact, the more denominational differences—in most cases barriers—fade into a recognition of common humanity.

On a personal level, Bessy and Margaret come to understand each other and accept the practices which they initially opposed. Bessy accepts Margaret's relative wealth and position, and insists that she would cross that gulf so prominent in Mary Barton: "Some's pre-elected to sumptuous feasts, and purple and fine linen,—may be yo're one on 'em," Bessy says, "Others toil and moil all their lives long—and the very dogs are not pitiful in our days, as they were in the days of Lazarus.⁸⁶ But if yo' ask me to cool yo'r tongue wi' th' tip of my finger, I'll come across the great gulf to yo' just for th' thought o' what yo've been to me here" (150). In grateful response, Margaret imitates, rather than reads about, Jesus in cooling Bessy's forehead and rubbing her feet (150). Having admonished Bessy numerous times for her wish for death, Margaret finally empathizes with her friend after she is dead: "The slow tears gathered into Margaret's eyes, but a deep calm entered into her soul. And that was death! It looked more peaceful than life. All beautiful scriptures came into her mind. 'They rest from their labours.'⁸⁷ 'The weary are at rest.'⁸⁸ 'He

giveth His beloved sleep'⁸⁹" (218). For the first time, Margaret is comforted by Bessy's favorite texts; the friends who were divided (in part) because of their judgments of one another's religious beliefs are now unified through a single blending of beliefs. Margaret also progresses toward reconciliation with her father by checking her own proud righteousness. While Margaret looks out her window in Helstone, unable to sleep, her father enters, and they pray together: "God was there, close around them, hearing her father's whispered words. Her father might be a heretic; but had not she, in her despairing doubts not five minutes before, shown herself a far more utter sceptic?" (43). She can understand his views only by first recognizing an inconsistency in her own and refusing to judge her father on such a basis.

Margaret's father also improves his relations with other characters by altering his religious opinions and practices. Mr. Hale tries to comfort the Boucher's widow with scripture and hopeful words. He says, "Who has promised to be a father to the fatherless?" (298); Hale refers to God, but actually it is Higgins the atheist who proves to be this father-figure. Addressing the Bouchers' needs on a more immediate level, physical rather than spiritual, "Margaret was more successful than Mr. Hale in her efforts. . . . her father set too high a standard, and too abstract a view, before the indolent invalid. . . . she [Mrs. Boucher] could not enter into the enduring mercy of the God who had not specially interposed to prevent the water from drowning her prostrate husband" (301). Hale's further involvement with Higgins, however, teaches him how better to practice the practical Christianity of his daughter. And he proves first in recognizing the common Christianity in Higgins' opinions and actions, if not in his professed religious views. During their interview with Higgins, Hale whispers to Margaret, "He's not an infidel, Margaret; how could you say so?" (228). Margaret, too, finally witnesses Higgins' brand of Christianity and respects it as such. She even gives her father's Bible to Higgins: "Here is his bible. I have kept it for you. I can ill spare it; but I know he would have liked you to have it. I'm

sure you'll care for it, and study what is in it, for his sake" (371). Margaret and Hale also come to recognize the validity of Thornton's private practice. While speaking with Hale after the burial of his wife, "Mr. Thornton said very little; but every sentence he uttered added to Mr. Hale's reliance and regard for him. . . Man of action as he was, busy in the world's great battle, there was a deeper religion binding him to God in his heart, in spite of his strong wilfulness, through all his mistakes, than Mr. Hale had ever dreamed" (276).

Ironically, the changes in perception needed to effect these private reconciliations result from physical and mental emergence out of the private realm into the public, for the Hales, out of Helstone and into Milton. In leaving her haven-like home and its complementary provincial beliefs and prejudices, Margaret experiences a kind of fall from the Eden of Helstone into the far-from-placid world of the city. In discussing Henry Lennox's proposal scene, Barbara Harman likens Helstone to an Eden of youth and innocence to which Margaret clutches almost inappropriately: "If home excludes the disorder and chaos of the fallen world and the class strife and coarse commercialism of the marketplace, it also, quite simply, excludes sexuality. . . . The penetration into Eden of sexual love and religious dissent . . . puts an end to Margaret's vision of home as paradise."⁹⁰ Like Ruth's actual fall, Margaret's symbolic and circumstantial fall is a fortunate one, and, in this case, teaches her to be suspicious about seeming pockets of Eden that would provide escapes from maturity and from the work needed to be done in this wholly fallen but not irredeemable world.

Harman argues that this fall takes place when Margaret throws her body in front of Thornton to protect him from the rioters. Those around Margaret interpret this public act as one spurred on by romantic interest, thus attributing to it the same motive that Thornton attributes to the covert secrecy of Margaret's private act, when she put Frederick on a train to London. Harman indicates:

when Gaskell equates secrecy with publicity she confirms what Victorians

always seem to fear—that the private/public distinction is insupportable and cannot be maintained. . . . But while Gaskell's repeated identification of private with public and political with intimate life seems to confirm the very fear that led Victorians strictly to separate the two and to punish transgressions between them, Gaskell's own response to the erosion of distinctions is not punitive but celebratory.⁹¹

This instance of a fortunate breakdown of the public/private dichotomy facilitates that same breakdown in the religious sphere, where incongruity between a character's (particularly in Thornton's case) private ethical and religious code versus action taken in public has established wide social schisms. Gallagher points to Margaret as a character who, by bringing "a single standard of behavior to both private relations and the relations between the classes,"⁹² manages to influence Thornton into recognizing the importance of social "integration" of the "private and public spheres."⁹³ According to Gaskell, then, the retreat to one's own private Eden away from unwieldy public life is no longer a viable option, and it proves in her novel to be a selfish, defeating act rather than a pious one.

The accretive blending of denominations that occurs on the personal level as characters unlikely to interact are brought together by the Hales' move to Milton facilitates a similar merging of sympathies and beliefs among those representing the public interest. As the distinctions blur between public and private realms and between denominations, a distinction between the religious and the secular realms becomes difficult to make, as well. Following the strike, the opposing energies in the secular realm, particularly as they involve Higgins and Thornton, reach a stalemate. Furthermore, the application of merely secular fact and theory to secular problems yields no progressive return and only deepens the rift between the laborers and the masters. Thornton justifies his refusal to accept responsibility for workers' lives outside of work by insisting that the workers would see his extra involvement as tampering with their rights. But he is confronted by Margaret: "I beg your pardon, but is not that because there has been none of the equality of friendship between the adviser and advised classes? Because every man has had to stand in an unchristian and isolated position, apart from and jealous of his brother-man: constantly

afraid of his rights being trenched upon?" (121-22). Thornton abruptly responds, "I only state the fact" (122), thus ending the conversation.

To Higgins on the other side of the dispute these facts seem entirely irrelevant. Having tried to read the book once given him by Hamper, an overlooker, Higgins says, "So I took th' book and tugged at it; but, Lord bles yo', it went on about capital and labour, and labour and captital, till it fair sent me off to asleep. I ne'er could rightly fix i' my mind which was which; and it spoke on 'em as if they was vartues or vices; and what I wanted for to know were the rights o' men, whether they were rich or poor—so be they only were men" (229). Higgins even denies the factuality of fact; Hale argues that the book probably told the truth, but Higgins responds, "it might, or it might not. There's two opinions go to settling that point. But suppose it was truth double strong, it were no truth to me if I couldna take it in" (230). The gulf between Thornton and Higgins, masters and workers, is continually reinforced by the disparity of their class, education, and religious beliefs, and they recognize no common truth that could bridge the gap.

Margaret, however, now thoroughly immersed in the public sphere, continues to argue the relevance of Christianity in politics and economics: "When I see men violent and obstinate in pursuit of their rights, I may safely infer that the master is the same; that he is a little ignorant of that spirit which suffereth long, and is kind, and seeketh not her own" (123), she says, alluding to the chapter in Corinthians on love and charity.⁹⁴ And in insisting on the importance of morality in business, Margaret speaks to Mr. Thornton, not as an Anglican, but as a generic Christian: "I do not think that I have any occasion to consider your special religious opinions in the affair. All I meant to say is, that there is no human law to prevent the employers from utterly wasting or throwing away all their money, if they choose; but that there are passages in the Bible which would rather imply—to me at least—that they neglected their duty as stewards if they did so" (118). While neither Thornton nor Higgins adopts her particular views, they gradually follow her

example in mingling the religious with the secular, and through her, a private and public reconciliation is reached between the two men and the classes of which they are members.

Higgins begins this mingling during his conversation with Margaret and Mr. Hale when he speaks of the labor union in very traditional religious terms:

it's th' masters as has made us sin, if th' Union is a sin. Not this generation maybe, but their fathers. Their fathers ground our fathers to the very dust; ground us to powder! Parson! I reckon, I've heerd my mother read out a text, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes and th' children's teeth are set on edge.'⁹⁵. . . In those days of sore oppression th' Unions began; it were a necessity. It's a necessity now, according to me. . . . Our only chance is binding men together in one common interest; and if some are cowards and some are fools, they mun come along and join the great march, whose only strength is in numbers. (233)

And devout, scriptural Hale admits, "your Union in itself would be beautiful, glorious,—it would be Christianity itself—if it were but for an end which affected the good of all, instead of that of merely one class as opposed to another" (233). Higgins frames himself and Thornton as martyrs, when he agrees to ask the latter for work: "Dunna yo' think that he'll do it. That man has it in him to be burnt at the stake afore he'll give in. I do it for yo'r sake, Miss Hale, and it's first time in my life as e'er I give way to a woman" (308). The reconciliation on both sides requires a martyr-like sacrifice, and each man must give up a martyr-like stubbornness and pride that resists resolution. They have both acted like martyrs in upholding their side's interests—Higgins has lost his job for the sake of the union and Thornton has put himself and his family in actual danger by refusing to compromise; they reach a resolution, however, by directing the same fervor for a common cause. Representatives of both sides finally emerge from their narrow barracks of one-sided doctrines, theories, and class-values and find a common interest in their shared humanity.

The conversation among Higgins, Hale, and Margaret about the strike reveals this need for the recognition of humanity on both sides; "The workmen's calculations were based (like too many of the masters') on false premises. They reckoned on their fellow-

men as if they possessed the calculable powers of machines, no more, no less; no allowance for human passions getting the better of reason, as in the case of Boucher and the rioters" (228). The three conclude the discussion with prayer; "Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm" (233). This unorthodox amalgamation of religious, social and political doctrine, of public and private affairs, finally results in a reconciliation of public political differences in a religious context, mirroring the resolution of private religious differences in a secular context. The narrative reveals Christianity as the common foundation for religious denominations as well as for the Union. Higgins becomes as much a martyr as Hale. Finally, true Christianity, as defined by the narrative, is found not in one particular church or another, not in the union, and not in the exclusive privacy of a home, but in the breakdown of these divisions and in the recognition of common, unclassified humanity shared by all.

This final critique of community divisions which issue from both denominational differences and from the more pervasive segregation of the secular from the religious completes Gaskell's religious vision as it has evolved through these three novels. In each novel, resolutions result from a stronger sense of community created by the breakdown of social stratification that has been previously, and perversely, enforced by an appeal to scripture on the part of those in power. In the reconciliations achieved between Higgins and Thornton and between Margaret and Thornton are the combined elements of the class resolution in Mary Barton and the moral reconciliation in Ruth. Implicit in Thornton's efforts to provide food for his workers and to dine with them is the sacrament of the Eucharist. The sacrament of marriage complements the business arrangement between Thornton and Margaret. The sacred is as immanent in Gaskell's characters' ordinary lives as it is in her fiction. Through her revision of scripture, Gaskell levels her society and fully integrates that which has been divided by social and moral self-righteousness.

Notes

¹ Elizabeth Helsinger, Robin Sheets, and William Veeder, The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883. Vol. 2: Social Issues (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983) 165.

² Helsinger, Sheets, Veeder 167.

³ Helsinger, Sheets, Veeder 194.

⁴ Helsinger, Sheets, Veeder 180.

⁵ Helsinger, Sheets, Veeder 183.

⁶ Shirley Foster, Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom and the Individual (London: Croom Helm, 1985) 153.

⁷ Foster 137.

⁸ Missy Kubitschek, "Defying the Old Limits of Possibility: Unconventional Aspects of Two Gaskell Novels," The University of Mississippi Studies in English 4 (1983): 101.

⁹ Barbara Weiss, "Elizabeth Gaskell: The Telling of Feminine Tales," Studies in the Novel 16.3 (1984): 278.

¹⁰ Angus Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979): 6.

¹¹ Easson 12.

¹² Elizabeth Gaskell, "Lizzie Leigh," Four Short Stories (London: Pandora Press, 1983) 48.

¹³ Margaret Homans, Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1986) 227.

¹⁴ Homans 228.

¹⁵ Weiss 276.

¹⁶ Catherine Gallagher, "Causality versus Conscience: The Problem of Form in Mary Barton," The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867 (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985) 68.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Barton (New York: Penquin Books, 1970) 134. All further references to this text will be documented parenthetically in the text.

¹⁸ Psalm 103: 15.

[Notes to pages 6-16]

¹⁹ Psalm 103: 17.

²⁰ Haman's story is related in the book of Esther, chapters 3-8. Appointed by the king to be his high assistant, Haman grows angry at Mordecai, a Jew loyal to the king who refuses to bow down in deferment to Haman. Haman convinces the king to issue a proclamation of death to the Jews. Queen Esther, who, unknown to the king, is a surrogate daughter to Mordecai and a Jew herself, risks her life in reversing the proclamation, a deed that results in the speedy execution of Haman, an equally rapid elevation of Mordecai, and the liberation of the Jews.

²¹ The story of the woman who touched the "hem of [Jesus'] garment" to be made whole is related in the ninth chapter of Matthew, vs. 20-22. Also, in chapter 14, vs. 36, Matthew relates that a large group of diseased people in Gennesaret "besought him that they might only touch the hem of his garment: and as many as touched were made perfectly whole."

²² Upon sending them out to preach, Jesus gave his disciples the injunction, "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matt. 10: 16).

²³ Judges 16: 1-22.

²⁴ More specifically, see Matthew 9: 9-13 where the pharisees object to Jesus' sitting to eat with publicans and sinners.

²⁵ Ruth 1: 1-18.

²⁶ Luke 10: 34.

²⁷ Matthew 26: 39.

²⁸ Matthew 8: 11-12. Gill's assertion that this scene is the one to which Gaskell alludes must be qualified by the fact that "casting into darkness" and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" occur frequently in the New Testament: e.g. Matthew 13: 42, 50; 22: 13; 24: 51; 25: 30; 26: 75 and Luke 13: 28.

²⁹ Stephen Gill, Ed., Mary Barton by Elizabeth Gaskell (New York: Penquin Books, 1970) 480 n43.

³⁰ Patricia Beer, Reader, I Married Him (London: Macmillan Press, 1974) 137.

³¹ Beer 135.

³² The inscription comes from the ninth verse in Psalm 103, a psalm that particularly emphasizes God's mercy: "The Lord executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed" (v. 6); "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy" (v. 8).

³³ Romans 2: 14-15.

³⁴ Romans 2: 1.

³⁵ Luke 23: 34.

[Notes to pages 17-32]

³⁶ Genesis 4: 9.

³⁷ Matthew 18: 3.

³⁸ Job 3: 17.

³⁹ Matthew 18: 1.

⁴⁰ Acts 3: 1-10.

⁴¹ Easson documents in Elizabeth Gaskell that "Thomas Wright (1789-1876), was in spite as a one-man voluntary prisoners'-aid society. . . . he visited prison, found jobs for prisoners being released, and engaged the interest of many people, including Gaskell" (39). Others besides Gaskell saw this philanthropist as a religious figure; in a letter written in 1850, Gaskell refers to a painting by G. F. Watts of the Good Samaritan that was "inspired by the record of Mr. Wright's . . . good deeds." [Reprinted in Mrs. Gaskell and Her Friends, Ed. Elizabeth Haldane (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970) 236.]

⁴² Matthew 25: 31-40.

⁴³ Luke 16: 25-6.

⁴⁴ I Kings 12: 4.

⁴⁵ I Kings 12: 14.

⁴⁶ Revelation 6: 8.

⁴⁷ Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell 113.

⁴⁸ Beer 130.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell, Ruth (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987) 46. All further references to this text will be documented parenthetically in the text.

⁵⁰ Mark 5: 7.

⁵¹ Romans 3: 9.

⁵² Psalm 148: 7-8.

⁵³ Elisabeth Jay, The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) 58.

⁵⁴ Helsinger, Veeder, and Sheets cite examples of Paul arguing on both sides of the controversies over woman's portrayal in the creation story, her culpability in original sin, and women's right to public ministry. Paul supports "traditional interpretations of the creation story" in I Cor. 11: 8-9 and I Tim. 2: 12-15, but he speaks for equality in I Cor. 11: 11-12 (168), and "Paul's epistle to the Romans establishes unequivocally that Adam was responsible for sin" (171). On the issue of female ministry, "St. Paul is again at the center of the controversy because he once again speaks on both sides of the question. I

[Notes to pages 32-38]

Cor. 14: 34-35 is supported by I Tim. 2: 12. . . . But the very Corinthian epistle which apparently forbids female preaching also seems to recognize it" (175). [The authors' argument must be qualified by the fact that modern Bible scholarship asserts that Paul did not write Timothy.]

⁵⁵ II Samuel 21.

⁵⁶ Luke 15: 13.

⁵⁷ Luke 15: 20.

⁵⁸ Ruth 1: 16.

⁵⁹ Ruth 1: 14.

⁶⁰ Sally Mitchell, The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading, 1835-1880 (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981) 40.

⁶¹ Matthew 1: 21.

⁶² Proverbs 31: 10.

⁶³ Proverbs 31: 28.

⁶⁴ Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell 124.

⁶⁵ George Watt, The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984) 39.

⁶⁶ Kubitschek 102.

⁶⁷ Luke 16: 26.

⁶⁸ Easson, "Mr. Hale's Doubts" 38.

⁶⁹ Easson, "Mr. Hale's Doubts" 39.

⁷⁰ Ruth 1: 16.

⁷¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973) 17. All further references to this text will be documented parenthetically.

⁷² Luke 15: 16-32.

⁷³ Queen Vashti's story is related in the first chapter of Esther. She is wife to King Ahasuerus before being replaced by Esther, the Jewish virgin. Disobeying the dictate of her drunken husband, Vashti refuses to appear before him and "to shew the people and the princes her beauty" (vs. 11). As a result, the king annuls their marriage and gives "her royal estate to another" (vs. 19).

⁷⁴ With this reference taken in the context of the other three, Gaskell continues her re-reading of the Bible. Margaret becomes only more secure in her position as heroine

[Notes to pages 38-53]

when she returns to the company of flighty, fickle Edith. Invested as he is in Edith's appearance, Lennox is a strong encourager of those qualities in Edith that sour in comparison to Margaret's independent capability, humane sensitivity, and social purposefulness. Both he and King Ahasuerus are implicated by Gaskell's allusion as overbearing husbands who would have dolls for wives.

⁷⁵ Margaret alludes to a conversation between Elisha and Hazael, servant to Banhadad, king of Syria, that is related in II Kings 8. Banhadad has sent Hazael to ask Elisha if he will ever recover from his disease. Elisha says yes, but he predicts that Banhadad will later commit horrible deeds against the children of Israel. The servant Hazael replies incredulously, "But what, is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?" (vs. 13).

⁷⁶ Genesis 30: 1.

⁷⁷ Kubitschek 103.

⁷⁸ Easson, "Mr. Hale's Doubts" 34.

⁷⁹ Isaiah 62: 4.

⁸⁰ Matthew 22: 39.

⁸¹ Matthew 5: 44.

⁸² Easson explains in his note that this commentary was by "Henry (1662-1714), non-conformist divine and commentator, whose Exposition of the Old and New Testament appeared 1708-10 (5 vols.) and was often reprinted" (439).

⁸³ Isaiah 23: 8.

⁸⁴ Bessy is referring to Isaiah 49: 10.

⁸⁵ Job 2: 13.

⁸⁶ Luke 16: 21.

⁸⁷ Revelation 14: 13.

⁸⁸ Isaiah 28: 12.

⁸⁹ Psalm 127: 2.

⁹⁰ Barbara Harman, "In Promiscuous Company: Female Public Appearance in Elizabeth Gaskell's North and South," Victorian Studies 31.3 (Spring 1988): 363.

⁹¹ Harman 372.

⁹² Gallagher 168.

⁹³ Gallagher 168.

⁹⁴ I Corinthians 13: 4-5.

⁹⁵ Ezekiel 18: 20.

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