

Grace in the Arts:

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON: SO NEAR, YET SO FAR

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I. Introduction

The only occasion as a child when I nearly stayed up all night long was when I had gotten behind on the deadline for my elementary school book report. Thankfully, the book I had chosen was riveting, adventure-filled, and unforgettable. It was Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. To this day the tap-tap-tapping of Blind Pew's cane, as he approached the lonely-located Admiral Benbow Inn, is etched on my mind.

Many seminary graduates who have received a traditional evangelical education are familiar with the name of Alexander Whyte, the Scot who wrote two volumes on Bible Characters. Whyte had been introduced to Robert Louis Stevenson's books by a man named Patrick Campbell. Campbell was present one evening when young Alexander Whyte was introduced to the father and mother of Stevenson. "I can never forget the astonishment of the father when he heard the unstinted praises of his son from [this] serious-minded young clergyman," said Campbell.¹

Was the famed Stevenson a Christian? How did the Bible influence his writings? These and related spiritual issues will be surveyed in this article.

II. Literary Laurels

One measure of greatness is the appraisal given by contemporaries in one's own field of specialization. If that is the case, then the tributes paid

¹Patrick W. Campbell in *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson* ed. by Rosaline Masson (Edinburgh: W. and R. Chambers, Limited, 1922), 15.

to RLS by the literary lights of that time speak for themselves. Edmond Gosse called him “the most beloved of all the authors of our time”² Sir James Barrie (author of *Peter Pan*) claimed that the initials “‘R.L.S.’ were the best-loved initials in the English language.”³

Though the two authors never met, Rudyard Kipling thought of Robert Louis Stevenson as “his idol.”⁴ His friend and faithful correspondent, Henry James, called RLS “the only man in England who can write a decent English sentence.”⁵ Jack London wrote, “His *Treasure Island* will be a classic to go down with [DeFoe’s] *Robinson Crusoe*, [Lewis Carroll’s] *Through the Looking Glass* and *The Jungle Book* [of Kipling].”⁶ The inventor of Sherlock Holmes, A. Conan Doyle, wrote to RLS of “all the pleasure you have given me during my lifetime—more than any other living man has done.”⁷ British Prime Minister W. E. Gladstone stayed up all night reading *Treasure Island*.

Stevenson (1850-1894) wrote four plays, books of essays, short stories, poetry (including poems for children), five travelogues, and a biography, but he is best remembered for his adventure yarns such as *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*. In his forty-four years of life he authored more than thirty books.

²Ibid., 73.

³James P. Wood, *The Lantern Bearer: A Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York: Pantheon, 1965), 171.

⁴Lord Birkenhead, *Rudyard Kipling* (New York: Random House, 1978), 130.

⁵Frank Wadsworth in *The World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago, IL: World Book Inc., 1988), vol. XVIII, 705.

⁶Frank McLynn, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1993), 203.

⁷Ibid., 472.

⁸G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1928), 46.

III. A Brief Biography from a Spiritual Standpoint

G. K. Chesterton noted that “Stevenson was born of a Puritan tradition, in a Presbyterian country where still rolled the echoes...of the theological thunders of [John] Knox.”⁸ Calvinism, Catechism, Covenanters, and “Cummy” (RLS’s nursemaid Alise Cunningham)—these are the most formidable factors of formation in the little Robert Louis (or “Smout” as he was affectionately called. It meant “small fry”). RLS’s maternal grandfather—the boy’s namesake—was a Church of Scotland minister whose parish was a few miles from Edinburgh. RLS’s favorite childhood game was to pretend that he was a church minister and to preach from a makeshift pulpit.

At age 3 RLS asked, “Why has God got a hell?” At age 3 he also commented to his mother, “I have drawed a man’s body; shall I do his soul now?” At age 6 he dictated to his mother a history of Moses (complete with drawings of Israelites carrying portmanteaus across the Red Sea and smoking cigars!)⁹ Obviously this was a theologically precocious child.

Stevenson’s father, Thomas, was a staunch Calvinist. In one photograph he looks like Gregory Peck’s version of Captain Ahab in the movie rendition of *Moby Dick*. While Thomas loved his only son in his own way, RLS never fully came to terms with his heavenly Father as mirrored for him by his human father. Even in his last book *The Weir of Hermiston* (unfinished at the time of his death) Stevenson was still struggling with his father concept. In *The Weir of Hermiston* RLS depicted an upright-uptight Calvinist father who is a judge to whom the son cannot emotionally relate. Father and son in the story have an irreparable falling out, as did the author and his father (over the same issue RLS did with Thomas).

⁹Jenny Calder, *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Life Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 32-33.

¹⁰Hunter Davies, *The Teller of Tales* (New York: Interlink Books, 1996), 7.

¹¹Robert Louis Stevenson, *Memories and Portraits* (London: Chatto and Windis,

Perhaps even more determinative for Stevenson's spiritual situation—for good or the reverse—over the years was the influence of his nursemaid “Cummy.” Hunter Davies reported, “Cummy had read him the Bible, from start to finish, three times before he himself could read.”¹⁰ Obviously, *Smout* had a phenomenal introductory biblical literacy. RLS himself later owned, “About the very cradle of the Scot there goes a hum of metaphysical divinity.”¹¹

RLS's later-in-life friend (and posthumous critic), W. E. Henley (who wrote the poem “Invictus”), epitomized Stevenson in his immortal pen portrait as possessing:

“A deal of Ariel, just a streak of Puck,
...and something of the Shorter Catechist!”¹²

After Henley captured the sprightliness and impishness of RLS (J. Addington Symonds called him “Sprite”) by conscripting two character-names from Shakespeare (“Ariel” and “Puck”), the poet Henley immortalized RLS's Presbyterian-Calvinist component by calling him “the Shorter Catechist.” Young RLS was drilled on his Scottish Presbyterian catechism.

Despite early, heavy theological training, however, RLS evidently ended his life merely as a vague theist. Why? In addition to the too-harsh father figure, which was a turn-off for him, Cummy overdosed the small child on the subject of hell. This imbalanced presentation promoted a dim-and-grim atmosphere for a small child. Cummy was more of a fundamentalist than his parents were, for she taught him that playing cards and theater

1887), 15.

¹²Irving S. Saposnik, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974), 18.

¹³Davies, *The Teller of Tales*, 8.

¹⁴Doris Dalgleish, *The Presbyterian Pirate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 190.

going (which his Calvinist parents did) were sins.

A child's terror of hell is revealed in RLS's following quotation: "I would lie awake to weep for Jesus, but I would fear to trust myself to slumber lest I was not accepted and should slip, ere I awoke, into eternal ruin."¹³ This quotation seems to me eminently sad, for it apparently illustrated defective teaching on the part of Cummy and RLS's contemporary church scene. One wants to ask: has this small child not been taught about the overarching love and mercy of God in Christ? Has he been helped to understand there is assurance to be found in Acts 16:31? In short, was the Church of Scotland at that time and place, as well as his nursemaid, clear in its preaching on the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ? At any rate, it was the dour and melancholy spiritual mood which hung over RLS's childhood and gave him problems to the end of his life. The poet Keats, upon touring Scotland, remarked, "The kirkmen [= churchmen] have done Scotland harm. They have banished...love and laughing."¹⁴ Or as the adult RLS put it, "One thing is not to be learned in Scotland, and that is the way to be happy."¹⁵

The child of this Calvinist context actually did little in the way of formal schooling. Eventually he attended the University of Edinburgh. Interestingly (compared to our times) in order to get a college degree in law, RLS had to pass an exam on Ethics and Metaphysics.

The young Stevenson was frequently truant from university classes and loved to prowl the Edinburgh streets at night. There seems little doubt that he visited prostitutes, and RLS biographers frequently posit a romantic relationship with one particular prostitute, Kate Drummand. (Later RLS would name his most famous fictional heroine Catriona Drummond—in *Catriona*.)

During his university years RLS read David Hume (*On Miracles*),

¹³Ibid.

¹⁶McLynn, *Stevenson*, 169.

¹⁷*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* ed. By Sidney Colvin (New York: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1969), vol. I, 61-62.

Herbert Spencer, Spinoza, and Charles Darwin (among other naturalists). After RLS's rift with his father, Thomas wrote to Sidney Colvin, "I lay all this [infidelity] at the door of Herbert Spencer. Upsetting a man's faith is a very serious matter."¹⁶

Unfortunately, there is a tremendous amount of wished-for information concerning RLS that floats in the realm of ambiguity. The nature of RLS's unbelief and beliefs isn't always made as explicit as a modern analyst would wish.

Stevenson entered into a spiritual crisis in 1872-1874, which was a turning point for his life. In 1872 RLS presented a paper to the college's Speculative Society on "2 Questions on the relationship between Christ's Teaching and Modern Christianity." His Cambridge-educated cousin, Bob (later Professor of Fine Arts at University of Liverpool), had founded the L. J. R. (Liberty, Justice, and Reverence) Club, which advocated atheism and had as a constitutional rule that members should disregard all they had been taught by their parents. When RLS's father came across this document, the volcano erupted.

Thomas Stevenson was an avid reader of theology and had even authored a booklet on the defense of Christianity (*Christianity Confirmed*). RLS dubbed him "the family theologian." Undoubtedly the son had his father in mind under the guise of the too-strict biblicist father in his play *Admiral Guinea*. (Thomas read his son's play and accused it of vulgarity.)

In January of 1873 the explosion came. When Thomas Stevenson came across the pro-atheist, anti-parent document of the L. J. R. Club, he grilled his son on his current beliefs. In a February 2, 1873 letter to Charles Baxter, RLS pinpointed the fallout: "The thunderbolt has fallen with a vengeance now. On Friday evening...my father put me one or two questions as to [my] beliefs, which I candidly answered."¹⁷ RLS continued: "I am not (as they call me) a careless infidel," and "I do not think I am thus

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Dalglish, *The Presbyterian Pirate*, 94-95.

justly to be called ‘horrible atheist.’”¹⁸ So the twenty-three-year-old RLS sported himself as a youthful atheist, which created no end of emotional havoc for him on the home front (for several years). His father would even pray for him—in his presence—out loud at family devotions.

Other key players in the drama of RLS’s life soon walked onto the stage. Fleeming Jenkin was professor of engineering at the University of Edinburgh. Doris Dalgleish calls Jenkin a “virtuous Victorian agnostic,” yet he and RLS had many discussions about Christ, Darwin, etc.¹⁹

The young RLS fell in love with Fanny Sitwell, who was twelve years older than he was, and separated from her clergyman husband. Fanny Sitwell would later marry RLS’s longest-term supporter and his John the Baptist (or herald)—Sidney Colvin (who was Professor of Fine Arts at Cambridge University and then Curator of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum).

The father of writer Virginia Woolf, Leslie Stephen, introduced RLS to W. E. Henley (who wrote, “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul”). Though Henley’s life was saved (from death by tuberculosis of the bones) by Dr. Joseph Lister, he had to have his left foot amputated (and so became RLS’s prototype for the pirate John Silver in *Treasure Island*).

RLS passed his University of Edinburgh law exams on July 14, 1875—and never ever practiced law! In a French art colony he fell in love with Fanny Osborne, a woman then separated from her American husband. He was 30 and she was 41. Though her father had been a committed (U. S.) Presbyterian and she had been baptized by the famous Henry Ward Beecher, Fanny Osborne was a dabbler in the occult.²⁰ Her daughter-in-law called her “clairvoyant.”²¹ She was a chain smoker, as was RLS (who

²⁰McLynn, *Stevenson*, 29, 108, 195.

²¹*Ibid.*, 120-121.

²²Margaret Mackay, *The Violent Friend: The Story of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1968).

had weak lungs and, as time went on, recurring hemorrhages). Eventually, Fanny drove a wedge between RLS (who soon became her husband) and virtually all of his long-time friends. Margaret Mackay's biography of Fanny is entitled *The Violent Friend: The Story of Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson*.²²

Soon RLS traveled some 6,000 miles to California to marry Fanny Osborne. The trans-Atlantic and cross-country trip nearly killed him. RLS became a world traveler, living in England, Switzerland, and New York state. Eventually he and his family yachted across the ocean to the South Sea Islands, where he visited at least thirty-five of them, including a Hawaiian leper colony.

On Samoa RLS built a \$20,000 house called Vailima (meaning "five rivers [or streams]") several miles from the port town of Apia. RLS owned 314 acres and at one time had nineteen servants.²³ He was well loved by the South Sea islanders, who built a road up to his house. It was called "The Road to a Loving Heart." The natives called him Tusitala (the Storyteller).

When RLS died in Samoa at age 44, had he begun a spiritual safari back to his religious roots? Certainly most biographers agree that his overarchingly optimistic outlook began to take on a more somber slant toward the end of his life. (Of course, RLS was plagued by increasing financial strain, a wife who experienced temporary insanity for over a year, a stepson who was increasingly revealed to be a lazy leech, as well as political turmoil and battles on the islands.)

While RLS lived on the Samoan Islands, he knew at least five Christian missionaries—W. E. Clarke, S. J. Whitmee, Arthur Claxton (who were all from the Anglican's London Missionary Society), James Chalmers, and Dr. Brown of the Wesleyan Mission. By his initial expectations RLS was ready to write off Christian missions as having a dire effect on islanders.

²³McLynn, *Stevenson*, 370, 396, 399.

²⁴John Kelman, *The Faith of Robert Louis Stevenson* (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1907), 201.

²⁵*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, III, 262.

²⁶Kelman, *The Faith of Stevenson*, 201.

However, personal experience changed his mind. RLS recorded: “Those who have a taste for hearing missions, Protestant or Catholic, decried, must seek their pleasure somewhere else than in my pages. Whether Catholic or Protestant...with all their deficiency...the missionaries are the best and the most useful whites in the Pacific.”²⁴ Of the missionary James Chalmers (author of *Pioneering in New Guinea*) RLS said, “a man that took me fairly by storm for the most attractive, simple, brave and interesting man in the whole Pacific.”²⁵

RLS had similar praise for “the excellent” Reverend W. E. Clarke. He called him “a man I esteem and like to the soles of his boots; I prefer him to any one in Samoa, and to most people in the world.”²⁶ It was Clarke who would officiate later at Stevenson’s burial service.

I came across a source concerning RLS’s spiritual state that I have not seen referred to in any of the critical RLS biographies—due to its out-of-the-way accessibility to secular historians. In a 1939 article in *The Sunday School Times* the anonymous writer refers to a prior article in a 1923 *Atlantic Monthly* magazine by the Samoan missionary S. J. Whitmee, Stevenson’s Samoan interpreter. In this rare article Whitmee told of his conversations with the famed author during the last years of his life. Whitmee recorded concerning RLS: “He was nearly all the time I knew him, reading the Old Testament prophetic Scriptures.”²⁷

RLS published two books that had a specifically spiritual orientation—*Lay Morals* and (the posthumous) *Vailima Prayers*. However, neither reads like an evangelical treatise. For a while in Samoa RLS held family prayers (including a Bible chapter being read, a hymn sung, and the Lord’s Prayer recited), and he also even briefly taught Sunday school. (Some observers thought RLS did this simply to mollify his orthodox Presbyterian mother

²⁷“R. L. Stevenson and Bible Prophecy,” *The Sunday School Times* (November 18, 1939), 817.

²⁸Stevenson, *Memories and Portraits*, 85.

²⁹B. Allan Benthous, ed., *The Black Arrow* (New York: Airmont Books, 1963), 7.

who lived with them then.) While we will explore later whether RLS ever really returned to his roots, at least he had ventured beyond his days as a youthful atheist.

IV. The Bible and His Books

A. Biblical Allusions in RLS's Writings

RLS wrote of another individual that “all day long [he] had dreamed of the Hebrew stories, and his head had been full of Hebrew poetry and Gospel ethics...so that he rarely spoke without some antique idiom or Scripture mannerism.”²⁸ What Stevenson opined of another was inimitably true of himself. RLS could reel off scriptural hymns he had learned as a child, and his books are pimentoed with phrases, ideas, and allusions to the Bible. As in the novels of the agnostic Thomas Hardy, one can find hundreds of biblical references in RLS's volumes. (One thinks of how the pirate in *Treasure Island* blanches when John Silver reprimands him for using a page torn from the Bible as the backdrop for the black spot (or death warrant!).)

As a sampler of such biblical allusions, consider the four collected volumes of RLS's letters. In them Stevenson mentions “Tophet” (I, 31), “Babylon the Great” (I, 269), “Dagon” (II, 171), “Jordan” (as a reference to death; II, 333), “the linen ephod” (III, 304), “fought with wild beasts” (IV, 22), etc. An entire book could be written on biblical allusions in RLS's writings.

²⁸Richard Burton, *Masters of the English Novel* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1909), 301.

³¹Thomas Bodley Scott, *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Rosaline Masson, 213.

Out of the thirty-plus books RLS wrote, here are a few examples (book by book) from the elaborate mosaic of his biblical allusions: (1) “since Noah put out to sea” (*Treasure Island*); (2) “the wind bloweth where it listeth” (*Kidnapped*); (3) “the Babylonian finger on the wall” (*Dr. Jeekyll and Mr. Hyde*); (4) “as if a man had risen from the dead” (*The Body Snatchers*); (5) “a sin without pardon” (*A Child’s Garden of Verses*); (6) “like Samson, careless in his days of strength” (*Memories and Portraits*); (7) “the arrow that flieth by day” (*The Black Arrow*); (8) “salt of the earth” (*The Master of Ballantrae*); (9) “I have entertained an angel unawares” (*Prince Otto*); (10) “nothing new under the sun, as Solomon says” (*Lay Morals and Other Papers*); (11) “be all things to all men” (*Familiar Studies of Men and Books*); (12) “like unbidden angels” (*Underwoods*); (13) “as Jacob served Laban” (*New Arabian Nights*); (14) “Caleb and Joshua brought back from Palestine a formidable bunch of grapes” (*An Inland Voyage*); (15) “Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate” (*The Amateur Emigrant*); (16) “Belial” (*The Wrong Box*); (17) “Out Herods Herod” (*Virginibus Puerisque and Other Papers*); (18) “the New Jerusalem” (*The Wrecker*); (19) “drove . . . like Jehu, furiously” (*Memoirs of Fleeming Jenkin*); (20) “like Lot’s wife” (*Catriona*); (21) “into the den of lions” (*St. Ives*); and (22) “like the hills of Naphtali” (*Weir of Hermiston*). One wants to ask: is the average evangelical seminary graduate of today as versed in biblical literacy as was the theist Robert Louis Stevenson?

In the case of one novel (*The Master of Ballantrae*) the plot revolves around a biblical theme—the Jacob-Esau conflict. In the book one brother asks: “Would you trip up my heels—Jacob?” Later we hear: “Ah! Jacob,” says the Master; “So here is Esau back.” Four other times this same fictional treatment refers to “Jacob.”

B. Stevenson’s Book That Sparked Sermons

³²Robert Kiely, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Fiction of Adventure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 66.

One critic summarized: “In four years, between 1883 and 1887, [RLS] wrote his four longest and greatest novels: *Treasure Island* (1883), *The Black Arrow* (1884), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and *Kidnapped* (1886). The first draft of *Jekyll and Hyde* was written in the space of three days.”²⁹ Even more than Dostoevsky’s *The Double*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is the classic literary commentary on the struggle narrated in Romans 7:13-24.

Stevenson had written a play called *Deacon Brodie* about a respectable citizen of Edinburgh who turned burglar by night. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is an amplified version of this theme. For it RLS drew upon a previous work by James Hogg, entitled *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Richard Burton calls RLS’s blockbuster book, which has been made into at least eleven movie versions over the years, “a spiritual allegory.”³⁰ Dr. Thomas Bodley Scott observed that the *Jekyll-and-Hyde* piece “formed the text of an eloquent sermon in St. Paul’s Cathedral [in London] directly after [its writing].”³¹

The internal tug of war in Romans 7 emerges in the psychological battle, which eventually submerges Dr. Henry Jekyll, who is regarded as the kind, respectable physician. Jekyll wants to isolate these unpleasant urges by creating a chemical concoction that can separate off his evil tendencies. He speaks of it (in the language of Romans 7) as a “war among my members” or in theological jargon as “my two natures.” Eventually, however, Jekyll no longer needs to imbibe the chemical beaker in order to witness himself being transformed into the deformed Mr. Hyde. However one interprets Romans 7, the *Jekyll-Hyde* split comes in handy illustration-wise for homiletical purposes.

V. A Theist’s Theology

A. Stevenson’s Theology

²⁹Stevenson, *Memories and Portraits*, 153-154.

³⁴“Fables” *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson in One Volume* (New York:

Robert Kiely wrote that RLS “has been called a Christian theologian [by some and] an atheist [by others].”³² RLS once remarked that you can’t keep Scotchmen from carrying on “theological discussion.”³³ In his “Fables” RLS referred to what “mayn’t be sound theology.”³⁴ The question is: was Stevenson’s a “sound theology”?

There are two problems that confront the interpreter of a novelist such as Stevenson. The first is the ambiguity residing in his amplitude of letters. For instance, one could wish for considerably greater detail about the nature of the theological argument between Thomas and Robert Louis Stevenson.

Second, while one can almost quarry enough material in the way of orthodox theological headings to set up the outline for a systematic theology from RLS’s novels, that does not solve our problem of understanding. The reason for the mist is that Stevenson is speaking through the teeth of his fictional characters, and they can say whatever they wish to say—without their views necessarily representing those of the author. For example, *The Black Arrow* (set in England’s time of the War of the Roses) is highly tinctured with Roman Catholicism. Such phrases occur in *The Black Arrow* as “the saints help [us]...and the Blessed Maid protect his words,” “St. Michael,” “Ave Maria!...Saints be our shield!” “By the mass” (which occurs more than twenty-five times), “his breviary,” “By the sacristy of St. John’s,” “I vow a candle to St. Mary of Shoreby,” “a huge rosary of wood,” “on the steps of the high altar a priest in pontifical

Walter J. Black, Inc., 1936), 526.

³⁵Robert Louis Stevenson, *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909), 238-39.

³⁶*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, I, 12.

vestments celebrated mass,” etc. RLS has strung Roman Catholic phrases together like beads, but they do not represent his own personal religious views. Therefore, quotation from his fiction requires caution concerning the conclusions we draw.

In his biographical *Memoir of Fleeming Jenkin* (his friend) RLS quotes Jenkin as believing: “All dogma is to me mere form...; dogmas are mere blind struggles to express the inexpressible. I cannot conceive that any single proposition whatever is true in the scientific sense; and yet all the while I think the religious view of the world is the most true view.”³⁵ Judging by everything RLS penned on the subject, we may assume that his friend’s view is his own. RLS’s other closest friend, Sidney Colvin, affirmed that RLS viewed creeds as human cravings for the ultimate mystery “rather than cling to any one of them as a revelation of ultimate truth.”³⁶ Later RLS wrote to “beware of creeds and anti-creeds.”³⁷

B. The Bookman and the Book of Books

S. J. Whitmee, Samoan missionary who talked extensively with Stevenson in later years, claimed concerning RLS: “Of the fact of Divine Inspiration he had no doubt.”³⁸ However, most biographers would doubt Whitmee’s dogmatic assertion as to RLS having “no doubt.” Unless RLS had altered his views in his last years, earlier statements argue to the contrary. Earlier, RLS had written, “All that we know to guide us in this changing labyrinth is our soul with its fixed design of righteousness, and a few old precepts which commend themselves to that.”³⁹ Frankly, this

³⁷*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, II, 367.

³⁸“R. L. Stevenson and Bible Prophecy,” *The Sunday School Times*, 818.

³⁹Robert Louis Stevenson, *Lay Morals and Other Papers* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1923), 43.

⁴⁰Burton, *Masters of the English Novel*, 311.

statement does not sound like an utterance from anyone who holds to any kind of plenary inspiration of Scripture. My suspicion is that Whitmee heard a great deal of what he wanted to hear. (Why is it Christians are so anxious to label Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Darwin, Lincoln, Dickens, and John Updike as Christians?) By contrast with RLS, his father was known as a strong supporter of the traditional understanding of plenary inspiration.

C. Calvinism

Richard Burton claimed of RLS, “he was a modernized Calvinist.”⁴⁰ When RLS was about eighteen years old, William Poustie’s parents boarded him for the summer. They discussed “the doctrine of election and kindred subjects. His host and hostess were prominent members of a Church that based its belief on ‘Whosoever will’ of Revelation, rather than the teaching of the [Westminster] Shorter Catechism, which says, ‘Out of His mere good pleasure He elected some to everlasting life.’ Stevenson seemed to have favored the lady’s views on this matter, for he left to us his own testimony, which is that ‘The saints are the sinners who keep on trying.’”⁴¹ (I’m not sure that either a Calvinist or an Arminian would be happy with RLS’s definition.)

Nevertheless, RLS was writing in 1883 (at age 23): “we are not here to make, but to tread predestined pathways” as he speaks of “the creature judged. . . by his Creator.”⁴²

Frank McLynn has written a recent and most exhaustive biography

⁴¹William Poustie, *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Rosaline Mason, 38.

⁴²*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, II, 176.

⁴³McLynn, *Stevenson*, 267.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 479.

⁴⁵Robert Louis Stevenson, *Virginibus Puerisque and Other Papers* (New York:

of RLS. McLynn is inclined to attribute the passivity he sees in David Balfour to the “hand of Calvinism and the doctrine of predestination.”⁴³ Similarly, McLynn analyzes RLS’s last two (unfinished) novels “as a coming to terms with Calvinism.”⁴⁴ In *Virginibus Puerisque* RLS referred to “Calvin...putting everybody exactly right in his *Institutes*.”⁴⁵

In the play *Admiral Guinea*, the chief character (using the language of 2 Pet 1:10) states, “I have made my election sure; my sins I have cast... out.”⁴⁶ In the introduction to *Catriona* we hear of “some seed of the elect.” Unquestionably RLS could not erase the heritage of his early Calvinistic church.

D. Sin and the Devil

One character in *Catriona* (or David Balfour) speaks of “‘the guilt of Adam’s sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of my whole nature’ so much I must answer for, and I hope I’ve been taught where to look for help.”⁴⁷ Are we reading Calvin, Warfield, or Berkhof here? No, this heavy theological jargon is found in the romantic fiction of Robert Louis Stevenson!

Psychiatrist Karl Meninger’s book title asked, *Whatever Became of Sin?* The answer to Meninger’s diagnostic question is that the idea of sin was certainly alive and well in the pages of RLS fiction. *The Weir of Hermiston* refers to the “old Adam.” Once in his Letters RLS dropped an aside that “I’m a sinner.”⁴⁸ Later (in 1883) RLS commented: “I am a great sinner.”⁴⁹ In his letters of 1890 he decried: “we are the most miserable sinners in the world.”⁵⁰ Back in November of 1873 RLS had spoken of “my low and lost estate, as the Shorter Catechism puts it somewhere.”⁵¹ Assuredly,

Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 883.

⁴⁶W. E. Henley and Robert Louis Stevenson, *Three Plays* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 377.

⁴⁷Robert Louis Stevenson, *David Balfour* (New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909), 33.

these are the echoes of Calvinism.

However, the following RLS quotation from early in 1878 bears on his views both about sin and about Scripture (in regard to what Rev. S. J. Whitmee claimed for RLS's believing in "Divine Inspiration" of Scripture): "There is more sense in that Greek myth of Pan than in any other that I recollect except the luminous Hebrew one of the Fall...All religions are no more than representations of life."⁵² Obviously Stevenson categorized Genesis 3 as falling within the realm of the genre of myth.

"Thrawn Janet" is a Stevenson story in which a country parson meets the devil. This was "Satan's first entry on the scene of Stevenson's writing" for "there were aspects of humanity that somehow only the existence of the devil could explain," which were implanted in RLS's mind from childhood.⁵³ There are also clear references to the devil in *The Black Arrow* and *The Master of Ballantrae*.

E. Salvation

When it comes to the subject and terminology of salvation, material is not lacking within the Stevenson corpus. The problem is that we have to ask: Is he speaking puckishly (tongue in cheek), pictorially (using similes), or in plain prose? Or, does a Stevenson literary character speak for Stevenson himself?

Even the occult-dabbling Fanny Osborne Stevenson can write of "salvation in the true Jesus."⁵⁴ Furthermore, RLS can speak of a reader who

⁴⁸*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, II, 88.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 189.

⁵⁰*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, III, 211.

⁵¹*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, I, 101.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 258.

⁵³Calder, *Stevenson*, 165.

⁵⁴*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, III, 125.

⁵⁵Robert Louis Stevenson, *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), 87.

“is on the way to what is called in theology a saving faith.”⁵⁵ One might expect from such introductory language that some clear-cut formulation of the biblical doctrine of salvation might be forthcoming in RLS, but alas!

Clearly RLS understood where the true source of salvation was to be found. In his play *Admiral Guinea* RLS has John Gaunt (notice the character’s symbolic last name), who had been a slave trader like John Newton was, issue the utterance: “Salvation, Christopher French, is from above.”⁵⁶ Here, Gaunt is in unanimous agreement with the Greek *anōthen* (“from above”) in John 3:3. Furthermore, in his poem on “Death” RLS averred that “He pardons sinners, cleanses the defiled.”⁵⁷ Also, one of the characters in *Prince Otto* indicates that there is no self-salvation when he says, “as for eternity, it’s a comfortable thought that we have other merits than our own.”⁵⁸

RLS also was aware that salvation was conditioned upon a response. He wrote that “to appreciate [Walt Whitman’s] works is not a condition necessary to salvation.”⁵⁹ That proposition urges the reader to the implied question: What then is the condition or conditions to salvation? It is at this point that we could wish for a crystal-clear answer from Stevenson.

The following RLS quotation (in a letter of December 26, 1880) is worth quoting at length because of its revealing quality:

The assurance you [mother] speak of is what we all ought to have... That people do not have it more than they do is, I believe, because persons speak...in large-drawn theological similitudes, and won’t say what they mean about...God. I wonder if you or my father ever

⁵⁶Henley and Stevenson, *Three Plays*, 340.

⁵⁷McLynn, *Stevenson*, 506.

⁵⁸Robert Louis Stevenson, *Prince Otto* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1923), 32.

⁵⁹Stevenson, *Familiar Studies*, 79.

⁶⁰*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, II, 24-26.

⁶¹Henley and Stevenson, *Three Plays*, 350.

thought of the obscurities that lie upon human duty from the negative form in which the Ten Commandments are stated, or how Christ was so continually substituting affirmations. The faithful design to do right is accepted by God; that seems to me to be the Gospel, and that was how Christ delivered us from the Law. [It is] by faith and perseverance...that we are to run the race. Faith is not to believe the Bible, but to believe in God; if you believe in God, where is there any more room for terror?"⁶⁰

Does RLS mean that "the faithful design to do right" *brings* acceptance with God? He continues by saying (disturbingly) that "the faithful design to do right...seems to me to be the Gospel." This seems to be too great a stretch from John 3:16; Acts 16:31; and 1 Cor 15:2-4.

Also to RLS's statement that assurance lies in simply believing in God, we would want to ask: Is that adequate in light of John 14:1 ("believe also in *Me*")? If confined to the preceding RLS quotation, we would have to conclude that for RLS the "Gospel" is "to believe in God" with "the faithful design to do right." This places one within the parameters of theism, but is insufficient as a formulation of the Christian gospel.

There are other statements in his collaborated drama *Admiral Guinea* that relate to the question of salvation's condition(s). "Admiral Guinea's" (a pseudonym) spiritual advice to a salvation seeker is "repent. Pray for a new heart; flush out your sins with tears; flee while you may from the

⁶²*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, IV, 323.

⁶³*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, III, 315.

⁶⁴*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, I, 174.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 301.

⁶⁶Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Two Major Novels* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), 264.

⁶⁷*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, IV, 174.

terrors of the wrath to come.”⁶¹ Those who subscribe to the doctrinal position of this journal would say that the “Admiral” has failed to make clear *the single* stipulation to salvation, which is articulated in Acts 16:31 (“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved”). In fact, we might be prone to quote Augustus Toplady’s lines (from “Rock of Ages”) to Guinea:

“Could my tears forever flow...
 These for sin could not atone.
 Thou must save, and Thou alone...”

In yet another context RLS gives advice that seems to run counter to the genuine nature of salvation. To Adelaide Boodle, who is “going into [foreign] mission work,” RLS advises her never to “believe in thaumaturgic conversions. They may do very well for St. Paul, but not for islanders.”⁶² If by “thaumaturgic conversions” RLS means wonderfully sudden or instantaneous conversions, then this seems to present problems for the New Testament paradigm. Admittedly, there may be many true believers who cannot necessarily pinpoint an exact moment of their conversion, but surely there must be some turning point when one passes out of eternal death and into eternal life (John 5:24).

RLS was well acquainted with New Testament soteriological vocabulary. In his Samoan experience he spoke of “an expression of my *unregenerate* sentiments.”⁶³ He used the language of John 3 figuratively when (in August of 1874) he said, “it is as though I were *born again*.”⁶⁴ In December of 1879 he wrote: “I have that peculiar and delicious sense of being *born again* in an unexpurgated version which belongs to convalescence [from sickness].”⁶⁵ In the last two passages RLS seems to be merely borrowing the biblical expression in a metaphorical sense rather than making a

⁶⁸*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, I, 300.

⁶⁹Saposnik, *Stevenson*, 79.

salvational declaration of Christianity.

Naturally his characters also know New Testament language. In RLS's very last book he refers to an in-church worship experience where the preacher "continued to expound *justification by faith*."⁶⁶ He also commented that his book *The Ebb Tide* "ends with a *conversion*."⁶⁷ In yet other testimonial phraseology RLS speaks of one who "in the words of my Plymouth Brother... *knows the Lord*."⁶⁸ Thus, Stevenson has certainly rung the changes on the New Testament language of salvation. Indeed, if one restricted himself to an arbitrary selection of passages in RLS, one could very easily conclude that the famous author was a Christian.

Contradicting the surface appearance of the preceding biblical language RLS used, Irving Saposnik wrote that RLS's story "Markheim" is "a glaring example of the doubts that Stevenson had about the possibility of salvation; for in 'A Christmas Sermon' he writes of the necessity to persevere despite uncertainties he could never deny."⁶⁹ Frank McLynn stated RLS's situation much more bleakly: "here is Stevenson at 36, the same age as Markheim, stating clearly that he does not believe in salvation, that all is hopeless, and yet he will endure stoically and even cheerfully."⁷⁰

RLS wrote several works from a Roman Catholic perspective—*The Black Arrow* and "Olalla." In "Olalla" a Catholic says: "The Padre says you are no Christian... behold the face of the Man of Sorrows. He was the inheritor of sin; we must all bear and expiate a past which was not ours; there is in all of us... a sparkle of the divine."⁷¹ The words "we must... expiate" are, of course, troubling to a Protestant for they contradict the New Testament doctrine of salvation by grace.

Another disturbing statement occurs in *St. Ives*. The hero is "of the Catholic religion." He claims that "my Church is the best... but... I belong to it because it was the faith of my house. If it is a question of going to hell, go to hell like a gentleman with your ancestors."⁷² This statement

⁷⁰McLynn, *Stevenson*, 247.

⁷¹*The Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*, 823.

⁷²Robert Louis Stevenson, *St. Ives* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897),

sounds like “My country [or family or church]—right or wrong—but my country!” Obviously Protestants as well as Catholics can be guilty of this tragic mindset.

Yet a third (ambiguous but) disturbing statement is made by RLS after his visit to the Roman Catholic leper colony on Molokai: “my sympathies flew never with so much difficulty as towards Catholic virtues. The passbook kept with heaven stirs me to anger and laughter. One of the [Catholic] sisters calls the place ‘the ticket office to heaven.’”⁷³ RLS greatly admired the work done at the leper colony and he despised much of the anti-Catholic sentiment inculcated by Protestants among whom he had grown up. Nevertheless, an important question must be asked about the meaning of “the ticket office to heaven.” Did the Roman Catholic mean that (1) death was the only way out of the colony for its inhabitants, or that (2) those who serve humanity have an automatic ticket to heaven? The latter notion is contrabiblical.

In RLS’s *Travels on a Donkey in the Cevennes* a Roman Catholic Trappist monk quizzed him as to whether he were a Christian or not. Stevenson replied that he was not a believer “or not after his [Catholic] way.” The real question was: Was Stevenson a Christian—period?

F. Heaven and Hell

To Edmond Gosse RLS wrote in 1886, “Yes, if I could believe in the immortality business, the world would indeed be too good to be true; but. . .

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⁷³*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, III, 152.

⁷⁴*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* II, 314-315.

⁷⁵Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (Reading, PA: Spencer Press, 1936), 210.

⁷⁶*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* III, 142.

⁷⁷McLynn, *Stevenson*, 477.

the sods cover us, and the worm that never dies, the conscience, sleeps well at last.” Man “can tell himself this fairy tale of an eternal tea-party; and enjoy the notion...that his friends will yet meet him. But the truth is, we must fight on until we die, and...resumption into—what? God, let us say—when all these desperate tricks will lie spellbound at last.”⁷⁴ Certainly in the previous statement RLS was leaning heavily away from believing in immortality. But was this simply a bad and passing phase? Or was this his final conviction on the subject?

In this waffling the author assuredly contradicts his own boy character (in *Treasure Island*), Jim Hawkins. The pirate Israel Hands asks Jim, “Do you take it as a dead man is dead for good, or do he come alive again?” Hawkins answers the pirate biblically: “You can kill the body, Mr. Hands, but not the spirit.”⁷⁵

Concerning the treacherous character for whom *The Master of Ballantrae* is named, Stevenson himself remarked concerning the master’s decease: “his soul, if there is any hell to go to, [has] gone to hell.”⁷⁶ As we have seen, hell was ultra-real for the child RLS.

It is the conclusion of the major recent biographer Frank McLynn that Stevenson “did not believe in hell—not a lake of fire, anyway, nor in a remorseless, unpleasurable God—and had a most ambivalent attitude to Christianity; if anything he inclined towards Catholicism for its emotional appeal.”⁷⁷

RLS frequently referred to Hades or hell in some less-than-literal form, saying in 1885 (for instance) he “is sure he will go to hell (if there be such an excellent institution) for the luxury” in which he lives.⁷⁸

⁷⁴*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, II, 292.

⁷⁹R. A. Robertson in *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Rosaline Mason, 218.

⁸⁰Dalgleish, *The Presbyterian Pirate*, 176.

⁸¹Campbell in *I Can Remember Stevenson*, 16-17.

There was none of the prose “if’fing” when RLS wrote the bereaved Robertsons concerning his deceased godson—that “into that zone of quiet the child has gone very straight,” or that he had “gone straight home” through “the door where the eternal dwell.”⁷⁹ Of course “the zone of quiet” need not be the same as the biblical home of believers—although “the eternal” comes closer to New Testament language. In his letters RLS refers figuratively or wistfully to heaven or the New Jerusalem.

VI. Conclusion

God’s “desire [is] that no one should perish” (according to Richard Weymouth’s translation of 2 Pet 3:9). Surely God’s desire should be every Christian’s desire as well. At the same time, the overall context of 2 Peter makes it abundantly clear that unbelievers will perish.

Because Robert Louis Stevenson was virtually nursed on the Scriptures in Calvinist country, one could easily count a thousand biblical allusions in his extant letters and fiction. When there is such a preponderance of biblical reference in an author’s writing, it is easy for a surface reader to conclude that such an author is a Christian.

However, other considerations seem to weight the scales against the conclusion that RLS was a true believer. First, autobiographically retrospective statements about his childhood acquaint us with his fear of hell, but there seem to be no quotable statements otherwise about any clear assurance of eternal life. Secondly, it is difficult to cite incontrovertible evidence from his fictional characters that RLS understands the way to receive eternal life. In fact, there are numerous murky statements to the contrary. Thirdly, RLS remains iffy on questions of immortality, heaven,

⁸²Ibid., 214.

⁸³*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, I, 163.

and hell. Fourthly, most of his astute biographers, such as McLynn, (while granting his ineradicable Calvinistic conscience) do not conclude that the final Stevenson was unquestionably a Christian.

If RLS was not a Christian, what then was he? It seems best to me to categorize RLS as a religious liberal and theist. Doris Dalgleish claimed that “to the end of his life his theology remained what we now call Barthian.”⁸⁰ Unfortunately, there remains a good deal of ambiguity about RLS’s explicit doctrinal beliefs (for example, did he believe in the deity of Christ? In His bodily resurrection?).

In the second issue of the *Edinburgh University Magazine* (February, 1871) one of RLS’s group wrote,

“Not from Jerusalem alone to Heaven the path ascends; By many
devious ways unknown to unimagined ends...”⁸¹

One might gather from this assertion of religious pluralism that this was Stevenson’s position by the statement of another contemporary, Dr. Thomas Bodley Scott, who knew RLS and spoke of his “kindly universalism.”⁸² It is obvious from his *Vailima Prayers* that RLS did believe in praying to a personal God. Even after his youthful atheism of 1873, he remarked (in 1874), “I have faith after all; I believe, I hope, I will not have it reft from me; there is something behind it all, bitter and terrible as it seems.”⁸³ However, this vague belief in believing (in what?) is many miles removed from 1 John 5:1 (“Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God”). Why grasp at a straw in the wind when one can

⁸⁴Stevenson, *St. Ives*, 289.

⁸⁵Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb Tide* (Cambridge: Stone and Kimball, 1904), 204.

be anchored to the Rock of Ages?

In *St. Ives*, one of RLS's two unfinished novels at his death, he referred to "‘Just as I am, without one plea,’ a citation from one of the lady's favorite hymns."⁸⁴ Obviously Stevenson must've been acquainted with the lines of the famous evangelistic hymn, written sixteen years before his birth. Let us hope that somewhere in his praying childhood RLS came, just as he was, to Christ in faith for eternal life, whispering, "O Lamb of God, I come."

Robert Louis Stevenson co-authored one book (*The Ebb Tide*) with his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne. Presumably, then, the idea for this book sprang from Osbourne, with RLS lending his name, fame, and literary flourishes to it. Though Osbourne is known to have been definitely more irreligious than Stevenson, the book ends with what most people would call a conversion.

The Ebb Tide has four main characters who end up together almost alone on an island. Captain Davis, who had wanted to murder the somewhat cold-blooded "Christian," Attwater (for his pearls), eventually is transformed. Herrick, the gentleman and intellectual unbeliever, comes upon Davis in prayer at the end of the book. To Herrick, Davis announces, "I found peace here, peace in believing." (The readers of this journal would like to know more specifically what Davis had believed.) Davis then pleads with Herrick to "be one of us." He urges: "Why not come to Jesus right away, and let's meet in yon beautiful land [that is, heaven]? ... Just say 'Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief!' and He'll fold you in His arms. You see, I know; I've been a sinner myself."⁸⁵ The next words in the book are "The End."

Given the constraints of literature, the preceding description would seem to qualify as a legitimate account of a conversion experience. The Gospel of John employs the verb "comes" as a synonym for saving faith (see the parallelism in John 6:35). Captain Davis's invitation to "come to

Jesus” can certainly be construed as believing in Jesus, since he has just used the term “believing.” He was “a sinner,” but he has believed in Jesus and now he has “peace in believing” and a hope of heaven. Surely that is salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

Did Stevenson (under the literary guise of the intellectual gentleman, Herrick) ever do what his character Davis urged Herrick to do? It is our hope that he did. It is our plea to others (with RLS’s fictional Captain Davis) to “come to Jesus right away” and find “peace in believing.”

