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The Greatest Metaphor Ever Mixed: Gold in the British Bible, 1750–1850

Timothy Alborn

During most of the century between 1750 and 1850, Great Britain was the only major country in the world to adopt gold as the sole basis of its currency, in the process absorbing much of the world's supply of that metal into its cupboards and coffers. During the same period, as Linda Colley and others have argued, Britons “forged a nation” through an assertive embrace of Protestantism, commercial ascendance, and imperial dominion, a loosely knit ideology that sustained them through a succession of military victories over France.¹ Gold occupied a central position in all these components of national identity, in Protestantism as much as in political economy. In their severest sufferings Britons found solace by comparing their pain to that of gold refined by God, and they looked forward to the day when they would see their reflected glory shining from the gold under their feet in heaven. And the gold standard, as Alexander Dick has recently argued, offered Britons a “regulative ideal” that connected their religious beliefs to “economic policies . . . political debates, and aesthetic productions.”²

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¹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, eds., *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland c. 1650–c. 1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Emma Major, *Madam Britannia: Women, Church, and Nation, 1712–1812* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

² Alexander Dick, *Romanticism and the Gold Standard: Money, Literature, and Economic Debate in Britain 1790–1830* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3.

This gilded link between religion and economics reinforced strenuous efforts by Britons to differentiate themselves from Catholics and non-Christians over the course of the century after 1750. Classical political economy, as originally articulated by Adam Smith and Christianized in the 1820s by Thomas Chalmers and Edward Copleston, assisted in this process by inserting gold into a just-so story tending toward civilization.³ Smith imagined a progression from gold originally being valued as “frivolous ornaments of dress and furniture,” then successively as a signifier of status and a facilitator of trade, before finally reaching its apotheosis as the basis for Britain’s credit economy.⁴ This new way of thinking about gold was part of the more general “detoxification” of money that Deborah Valenze has described taking place in eighteenth-century Britain, which transformed it from an inarguable root of evil to a potentially redemptive substance—a process that culminated in the legal adoption of gold in 1819 as the primary basis for British currency.⁵

To the large extent that the sacralization of the gold standard reinforced Britishness after 1750, it did so by means of abstract rather than tangible applications of the metal. The gold standard was itself an abstraction, the workings of which concealed the physical metal in the Bank of England. Both the metal of choice and its abstract associations were eighteenth-century developments: in 1696 John Locke insisted that silver, not gold, was “the instrument and measure of commerce in all the civilized and trading parts of the world”; and by silver he meant the metal itself and not an abstract measure of account. Both parts of Locke’s definition faded during the eighteenth century, as an endemic silver shortage rendered gold as the only reliably available coin in the country. Gold, however, was too valuable to be divided into coins that could be used for most transactions, with the result that it took on a double life: tangible bullion and guineas, for international trade and big-ticket domestic purchases, and a unit of account against which token currency and bank notes were measured. Gold’s new identity, simultaneously concrete and abstract, achieved legitimacy as a basis for Britain’s financial system only through concerted political and cultural effort—ultimately yielding, as

³ Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); A. M. C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian Political Economy 1798–1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776), 1:216, 388.

⁵ Deborah Valenze, *The Social Life of Money in the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 260–70.

Catherine Desan has argued, a transformed “modern imagination” regarding the paradoxically intrinsic-yet-arbitrary value of money.⁶

In religion, as in economics, British Protestants consistently gravitated to gold as an abstraction, despite the fact that the metal appeared figuratively much less often in the Bible than in its tangible form.⁷ Occasions when they did focus on these tangible references, including New Testament condemnations of female adornment and Old Testament celebrations of sacramental gold, exposed internal divisions and exegetical conundrums. Dissenters routinely clashed with their more sumptuous Anglican counterparts over the proper lessons to be drawn from St. Peter’s caution against the “wearing of gold, or putting on of [costly] apparel.”⁸ Biblical references to Solomon’s prodigious consumption of gold, similarly, occasioned hard questions about the role of wealth in worship.⁹ The exception to this rule of divisive references to tangible gold in the Bible concerned the numerous golden idols—most prominently the calf that Aaron erected beneath Mount Sinai—that received divine condemnation.¹⁰ These idols prompted similar interpretations among British Protestants after 1750, including a suspicion of mob rule (Aaron, in one account, acceded to “a rebellious presumptuousness of spirit”) and a relentless, often anti-Semitic, condemnation of Mammonism.¹¹ The common denominator in British Protestants’ condemnations of gold worship was their identification of idolatry with social or

⁶ Christine Desan, *Making Money: Coin, Currency, and the Coming of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 330–77, quoting Locke at 346. Dick, in *Romanticism and the Gold Standard*, reaches a similar conclusion, drawing on Charles Taylor’s concept of a “modern social imaginary”: see esp. p. 4.

⁷ Of 440 appearances of *gold* or *golden* in the Bible (compared to 310 references to *love*), nearly half refer to materials used for constructing altars, tabernacles, and priestly garments; most of the rest refer to Solomon’s treasure, various acts of plunder and idolatry, personal adornment, and measures of value. Fewer than twenty references, mostly from Old Testament prophets and the Book of Revelation, are explicitly metaphorical or allegorical.

⁸ 1 Peter 3:3; also 1 Timothy 2:9. See, e.g., *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the Methodist Societies Established by the Rev. John Wesley* (London: George Whitfield, 1798), 6; “Gurney on Quakerism,” *British Review* 23 (1825): 117; and more generally, Dominic Janes, *Victorian Reformation: The Fight over Idolatry in the Church of England, 1840–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). All quotations from the Bible are from the King James Version.

⁹ Timothy Alborn, “King Solomon’s Gold: Ophir in an Age of Empire,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 20 (2015): 496–99.

¹⁰ On the golden calf, see Exodus 32; other golden idols appear in Isaiah 2:20, 40:19, 46:6; Jeremiah 10:4; Ezekiel 16:17; Daniel 5:23; Hosea 2:8, 8:4; and Habakkuk 2:19.

¹¹ Sarah Trimmer, *Sacred History* (London: T. Longman, 1796), 2:6. On Mammonism, see, e.g., Douglas Jerrold, *Cakes and Ale* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1852), 322.

religious elements that threatened what they assumed to be their own superior values: including Catholics, as well as radicals and Jews.¹²

In contrast to tangible gold in the Bible, British Protestants could usually agree that they were uniquely capable of appreciating the divine significance of figurative gold—which offered the additional promise of avoiding the lure of idolatry. At the same time, metaphorical gold was sufficiently overdetermined to enable diverse applications of the same biblical passages, which prevented the often-deep divisions within British Protestantism from interfering with a sense of national purpose.¹³ The two most prominent of these metaphors, which are the focus of this article, compared human suffering to gold tried in the fire and included gold among the wonders of heaven. The image of gold tried in the fire, which connoted the purification of Christians under the watchful eye of a divine assayer, achieved authority from its multiple biblical references and a centuries-old tradition of Protestant exegesis. The changing political economy of the gold that lay at the heart of the metaphor, however, altered the metaphor's impact after 1750. Specifically, the emerging *de facto* gold standard and the metaphor of gold tried by fire, both of which were especially popular among evangelicals, reinforced a faith that long-term rewards (prosperity and salvation, respectively) would repay short-term sacrifices. It was for this reason, as Boyd Hilton has argued, that politicians and clergymen alike referred to a “sacred standard of metallic value” when urging the official adoption of the gold standard in 1819.¹⁴

The biblical image of heaven, adorned with streets of gold and precious gems, intersected with the economy in a different manner, by drawing a sharp contrast between the status of gold in Protestant as opposed to Catholic and non-Christian afterlives. British Protestants routinely claimed that they were uniquely able to appreciate the figurative quality of heavenly gold: Catholics, they suggested, needed to see it tangibly represented in their cathedrals, while Muslims and Hindus offered the afterlife as a literal fulfillment of sensuous desire.¹⁵ Neither contrast was new as of 1750, but both

¹² For examples of an extension of biblical condemnations of the worship of gold idols to Catholicism, see Thomas Wood, *The Parish Church; or, Religion in Britain* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Co., 1825), 156; Charles Lucas, *Joseph: A Religious Poem* (London: printed for the author, 1810), 1:50–52. Lucas was an Anglican curate in Avebury.

¹³ On denominational divisions as a problem for Colley's thesis, see J. C. D. Clark, “Protestantism, Nationalism, and National Identity, 1660–1832,” *Historical Journal* 43 (2000): 261–63.

¹⁴ Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 127 (quoting Lord Grenville).

¹⁵ On representations of heaven in Catholic cathedrals, see Peter Fingesten, “Topographi-

gained currency as anti-Catholicism grew more strident and encounters with Asia and the Near East grew more frequent. The same contexts that prompted this insistence on an allegorical afterlife informed evolving British attitudes about money and credit. Britons took pride in pitting their “good as gold” Bank of England notes against the failed French experiment with *assignats* during the Revolution—although they never fully quelled an undercurrent of anxiety about the calculus that pinned credit on bullion in the Bank.¹⁶

To make sense of the metaphorical gold they found in the Bible, British Protestants typically resorted to a wide range of religious tracts, sermons, and commentaries, many of which reappeared in the popular genre of the annotated family Bible.¹⁷ Since figurative gold in the Bible most often directed readers’ attention to suffering or eternal life after death, references to these passages most often appeared in correspondence or advice manuals relating to these topics. Significantly, they only very rarely served as a source text for sermons.¹⁸ Instead, they occupied a more diffuse space in what Callum Brown has termed “discursive Christianity,” forming important components of that which was “collectively promulgated as necessary for Christian identity.”¹⁹ The broadly practical application of these metaphors also set these exegeses apart from a competing German Protestant model on offer during the century before 1850. Although British Protestant readers were quick to find (and use) metaphorical references to gold in the Bible, they stopped short of interpreting most other biblical accounts as symbolic rather than literal, as such German critics as Friedrich Schleiermacher and W. M. L. de Wette made it their business to do.²⁰

cal and Anatomical Aspects of the Gothic Cathedral,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20 (1961): 10–11.

¹⁶ Dick, *Romanticism and the Gold Standard*, 83–91; Hiroki Shin, “Paper Money, the Nation, and the Suspension of Cash Payments in 1797,” *Historical Journal* 58 (2015): 415–42.

¹⁷ Scott Mandelbrote and Michael Ledger-Lomas, eds., *Dissent and the Bible in Britain, c. 1650–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Mary Wilson Carpenter, *Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies: Women, Sexuality, and Religion in the Victorian Market* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ John Gordon Spaulding’s *Pulpit Publications 1660–1782* (New York: Norman Ross, 1996), lists only seven sermons based on passages referring to gold tried in the fire and none referring to gold in heaven (vol. 3, *Biblical Books*).

¹⁹ Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 12.

²⁰ This distinction from German criticism would not start to change until after 1850, when influential exegetes such as Thomas Arnold and F. D. Maurice introduced echoes of German thinking into British theology. See John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (London: Fortress Press, 1985); James

I. GOLD TRIED IN THE FIRE

The metaphor of gold tried in the fire appears repeatedly in both the Old and New Testaments: starting with Job's assurance that when God "hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold," reappearing in Zechariah and Malachi, and also receiving mention in 1 Corinthians, 1 Peter, and Revelation. An additional reference in Psalms, comparing the word of God to silver "purified seven times . . . in a furnace of earth" was often modified to refer to gold, which never actually receives sevenfold purification in the Bible. Besides referring to purification (in Malachi as well as Psalms), the metaphor carried the different, though often overlapping, meaning of trial (in Job, but also in all three New Testament references).²¹ Most importantly, the metaphor drew attention away from gold and toward God, the agent who perfected it; it was most likely for this reason that Malachi's reference to gold, which explicitly identifies God "as a refiner and purifier," was the most commonly cited.

British appeals to God as an assayer of gold dated back to medieval martyrologies, which often drew on the metaphor to describe the persecution of early Christians. The Roman Breviary, for instance, reminded Catholic worshippers that Eleutherius had grown "more steadfast, like gold tried in the fire . . . at every new torment." In his enormously influential *Book of Martyrs* (1563), John Foxe transposed this tradition into a Protestant key, reprinting multiple letters from victims of Queen Mary who compared their persecution to "the furnace that fineth God's gold."²² By the seventeenth century, Protestants increasingly extended the metaphor's ambit from martyrdom to suffering and temptation more generally. The Presbyterian Robert Leighton, among many other seventeenth-century divines, found "Gladness" in "hot Sufferings" by reasoning that "we are our Lord's Gold, and he tries us in the Furnace to purify us."²³

In this and all subsequent refinements of the metaphor, the common

Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 225–58.

²¹ Job 23:10; Zechariah 13:9; Malachi 3:3; 1 Corinthians 3:10; 1 Peter 1:7; Revelation 3:18; Psalms 12:6.

²² *The Roman Breviary* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1898), 4:613; John Foxe, *The Book of Martyrs: Containing an Account of the Sufferings and Death of the Protestants in the Reign of Queen Mary the First* (London: Hart and Lewis, 1732), 306, also 219, 225, 292, 308, 329, 496, 732. On the lasting impact of *The Book of Martyrs* on British Protestantism, see Colley, *Britons*, 25–28.

²³ Robert Leighton, "A Commentary upon . . . the First Epistle of Peter" (1693), in *Expository Works and Other Remains* (Edinburgh: David Wilson, 1748), 2:243, 250–51.

denominator was an ascription of watchful agency to God. As one hymn on “The Difficulty of Submission under Afflictions” put it: “When the Refiner to the fire / Commits his precious ore / We much his art, and skill admire.” Most deserving of admiration, and central to the metaphor’s key role in evangelical theology, was the fact that God directly intervened in the purification of the soul, and knew exactly when to reduce the heat; this both glorified God and assured sufferers that their afflictions would cease once they had served their divine purpose. John Willison’s *Afflicted Man’s Companion*, which stayed in print for almost a century after its first publication in 1743, offered the solace that “the goldsmith will not let his gold ly longer in the furnace than it is purified.” Other evangelical clergymen depicted God standing “warily over the fire, and over the gold”; and taking care, at least in the case of a Christian, that his fire was “not more intense or longer than is needful for his good.”²⁴ Unsaved sinners, in contrast, could be assumed to suffer an eternal residence in hell, where the fire never ceased.²⁵

In addition to the theological factors behind the popularity of the metaphor of gold tried in the fire, the literal source of the metaphor gained increasing resonance with British readers of the Bible during the century after 1750. In the economic as well as biblical realm, the crucible was relevant both to retrieving gold from ore and to testing its purity. Knowledge about each of these processes reached wider audiences, as treatises on the purification of gold traced the progress of Latin American ore through local refineries and on to Britain. William Lewis’s widely cited *Philosophical Commerce of Arts* (1763) treated readers to lengthy details on the best furnaces for assaying gold and the best materials to use in constructing the device called a cupel, in which lead was added as a leaching agent. The process of cupellation, as he described it, would remain largely unchanged for the following century: “The mixture being brought into thin fusion, the heat is to be regulated according to the appearances, and in this consists the principal nicety in the operation.”²⁶

The biblical image of gold tried by fire received added resonance in the

²⁴ John Clark, *Hymns on Various Subjects and Occasions* (Trowbridge: T. Long, 1799), 26; John Willison, *Afflicted Man’s Companion: or, A Directory for Families and Persons Afflicted with Sickness or Any Other Distress* (Edinburgh: E. and J. Robertson, 1743), 48; Tobias Crisp, *Christ Alone Exalted; in the Perfection and Encouragements of the Saints* (London: J. Murgatroyd, 1791), 32; *Short Comments on Every Chapter of the Holy Bible* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1838), 671.

²⁵ Dimitris J. Kyrtatas, “The Origins of Christian Hell,” *Numen* 56 (2009): 291–92.

²⁶ William Lewis, *Commercium Philosophico-Technicum, or, The Philosophical Commerce of Arts* (London: H. Baldwin, 1763), 132.

“trial of the pyx,” which the British state staged in a converted chapel in the Westminster Abbey Cloisters after each new gold and silver coinage. This ritual gathered a jury of goldsmiths, who tested a random sample of newly minted coins to confirm that the master of the Mint had come within a sixth of a carat of the legal standard. After receiving their charge from the lord chancellor, the goldsmiths melted the gold in a furnace built for this purpose at the exchequer’s office; a feast at Goldsmiths’ Hall followed.²⁷ Although this trial, which dated back to medieval times, was accurately described by a contemporary as “little better than an idle ceremony” for much of its history, at crucial turning points it enabled the state to generate faith in the integrity of its coinage.²⁸ One such opportunity was Britain’s official adoption of the gold standard in 1819, after which the trial of the pyx occasioned a series of speeches connecting the coinage with Britain’s new role on the world stage. In 1822 Lord Eldon directed the goldsmiths’ attention to “the superscription of a gracious Monarch upon the coins submitted to your trial, and not that of a tyrant, reigning over subjects little better than slaves”; the following year he reminded them that the sovereign (the coin, if not the king) was “taken with the greatest confidence all over the world.”²⁹

For modern goldsmiths interested in distinguishing among different precious metals, purifying or trying gold required an additional step, since crucibles were ineffective at separating out silver and platinum. An up-to-date divine assayer would have additionally subjected the Christian to the metallurgical process called parting, employing such solvents as nitric acid, sulfuric acid, or antimony in combination with mercury. Since gold was roughly fifteen times more valuable than silver as of 1800, this distinction mattered for metallurgists; it mattered less in the Bible, where the primary distinction was between precious metal and dross. Hence although gold appeared most often in biblical references to crucibles, prophets made do with silver in a pinch, as when Ezekiel contrasted that metal with “copper, tin, iron and lead left inside a furnace” in order to emphasize that the people of Israel had “all become dross” in the eyes of the Lord.³⁰ The same

²⁷ Thomas Wright, *The History and Antiquities of London, Westminster, Southwark, and Parts Adjacent* (London: George Virtue, 1837), 5:270; see also Rogers Ruding, *Annals of the Coinage of Britain and Its Dependencies* (London: Lackington et al., 1819), 1:192–212.

²⁸ Ruding, *Annals of the Coinage*, 1:211. One turning point in the early modern period concerned James I’s attempt to restore faith in England’s silver coinage in 1611: see Simon Wortham, “Sovereign Counterfeits: The Trial of the Pyx,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 49 (1996): 334–59.

²⁹ *Gentleman’s Magazine* 131 (1822): 390; *London Times*, July 14, 1823.

³⁰ Ezekiel 22:18–19. On the relative value of gold and silver, see, e.g., Walter Merrey, *Remarks on the Coinage of England* (Nottingham: S. Tupman, 1789), 12–34.

logic held sway for British readers of the Bible, who never thought it necessary to hedge their bets by adding some sulfuric acid to the mix. Revealingly, however, as in the case of the Psalm mentioned above, they did often quietly substitute gold for silver when appropriating such passages from the Bible.

By reserving agency to a divine goldsmith, people who invoked the image of the crucible produced human it-narratives, in which sufferers compared themselves to an object—gold in the process of being refined—that was acted upon by a divine goldsmith. Indeed, gold figured prominently in it-narratives, especially during the second half of the eighteenth century when human identification with refined gold reached its height.³¹ In all such narratives, being melted down and turned into a coin represented a crucial coming-of-age moment, as when the hero of *Adventures of a Rupee* was subjected to “the strongest force of fire to my body, till every part of my substance assume[d] a liquid state” prior to being given “the roundness and character I still retain.”³² A rare example of this language directly entering into religious discourse appeared in 1788, when a Lincolnshire Methodist speculated: “If gold were an intelligent being, it would not think it strange to be thrown into a crucible to be melted by the fire, and so purged and purified from its dross, and thereby become fit for making a vessel for a prince’s use.”³³

The many intelligent British Christians who did not think it strange to compare themselves to gold did so for a number of reasons, which varied from sect to sect.³⁴ The single most common reference to gold tried in the fire in nearly all denominations accompanied accounts of affliction, sickness, and death, although even in these instances Methodists, Presbyterians, and evangelical Anglicans were nearly twice as likely to seek solace from the metaphor. Non-evangelical Anglicans were as likely to appeal to the metaphor of gold tried in the fire to assert that their religious beliefs would survive rational argument, especially after 1820 in response to Dissenters

³¹ Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 28–54, 129–50.

³² Helenus Scott, *The Adventures of a Rupee* (London: J. Murray, 1783), 7.

³³ Robert Carr Brackenbury, *An Estimate of Human Life: Being an Humble Attempt to Vindicate the Ways of God to Man* (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1788), 55–56. Brackenbury copied this passage from the York prebendary Valentine Nalson: see Nalson, *Twenty Sermons on General Subjects* (London: John Hildyard, 1737), 305.

³⁴ This paragraph is based on a survey of 550 uses of the metaphor in works published in Great Britain between 1780 and 1850, including reprints of earlier works; religious denomination has been identified in 358 of the 433 cases that used the metaphor in the service of religious belief.

and Tractarians. One Church of Ireland rector, for instance, defended the “beauteous and useful” Book of Common Prayer as the result of “a variety of examinations and controversies calculated to try it to the utmost, and bring it out at last, *like fine gold seven times tried in the fire.*”³⁵ English Catholics, for their part, resorted to the metaphor of gold tried in the fire less commonly than their Protestant counterparts, and retained its original application to the martyrdom of saints as well as using it to assuage their own afflictions.³⁶

Leaving aside the occasional nod to Anglican theology or Catholic saints, the preponderance of references to the metaphor of gold tried in the fire offered personal comfort to Christians who suffered from illness, the death of a loved one, temptation, poverty, or even bad weather. John Newton (of “Amazing Grace” fame) asked a friend in 1766 to pray that his wife, who was recovering from a fever, would “be brought out of the furnace, refined as gold”; a 1777 diary entry by a servant reported “a day of great temptation” averted by a timely sermon on “furnaces and fires,” and hoped that she would emerge from her “hot bout in it . . . purified like gold.” Such testimonies literally provided golden opportunities for inspiring similar acts of faith among others. One collection of exemplary Christian correspondence reprinted “a Remarkable Letter written by a Woman without Hands or Feet,” who assured her friend that God would “try me as gold, and bring me forth when meet for himself.”³⁷ Especially among Non-conformists, the metaphor also often offered strength in the face of religious persecution—or made sense of the persecution of others, in the case of inspirational biography. In the wake of anti-Unitarian riots in Birmingham, Joseph Priestley preached: “As gold is tried by the fire, so are our principles, and our integrity in maintaining them, by such scenes as these.”³⁸

Clergymen of all denominations repeatedly compared their congregants to refined gold in order to console or admonish them. Besides the usual topics of illness and death, spiritual doubt featured prominently in

³⁵ Gerald Wensley Tyrrell, *The Ritual of the United Church of England & Ireland Illustrated* (London: John W. Parker, 1840), 21.

³⁶ Alban Butler, *The Lives of the Primitive Fathers, Martyrs, and Other Principal Saints* (1756; 3rd ed., Edinburgh: J. Moir, 1798), 4:97 (on St. Waltrude); *The Life of the Baroness de Chantal* (London: Fry and Couchman, 1787), 59.

³⁷ John Newton, *The Christian Correspondent; or a Series of Religious Letters* (Hull: George Prince, 1790), 103; Margaret Magdalen Althens, *The Christian Character Exemplified* (London: J. Walker, 1793), 61–62; *The Christian's Elegant Repository* (London: Button and Son, 1800), 31.

³⁸ Joseph Priestley, *The Duty of Forgiveness of Injuries: A Discourse Intended to Be Delivered Soon After the Riots in Birmingham* (Birmingham: J. Thompson, 1791), 27.

this correspondence. A woman sent the Baptist *Gospel Herald* one such letter from her pastor, who had reassured her that after she had been tried “as gold is tried” . . . every wave of doubting and fearing will be gone.” Unlike letters between friends, these often took on a sharper tone, as when an Anglican rector told a female congregant in 1777 that she was “kept low for very good reasons,” while assuring her that “the furnace shall not be a bit too hot” and her “gold shall not lose an atom.” To underscore this last point, the Nonconformist *Christian’s Magazine* reminded readers who had “been long in the fire, *and art yet in it*,” that this was because “a little pride or worldly mindedness” still remained, which “God means to have all . . . burnt up before thou art released.”³⁹

As this last reminder indicates, the counterpoint to refined gold was dross—the “original evil of a fallen nature,” in the words of one sermon on Job—that was burned off by the application of fire.⁴⁰ When the Anglican clergyman William Goode described Jesus as a “Purifier and Refiner,” he dwelt at length on “that drossy and earthly mixture which . . . injures and debases the gracious principles of the renewed heart.” A Presbyterian cleric’s daughter, explaining “the Purposes of Affliction,” similarly emphasized the “sordid, and the earth-born, and the carnal of our nature” that was “left behind in that furnace.”⁴¹ Besides finding common ground in this opportunity to contrast the gold of the purified Christian with sinful dross, evangelical Protestants also came together in identifying dross with errant elements in Catholicism. Hannah More praised the Reformation for its role in separating “those precious remnants of ancient piety from their drossy accompaniments,—and, while these last were deservedly cast away, to mould the pure gold which remained into a new form, fitted at once to interest and to edify the public mind.”⁴²

Once purified and assayed, the good Christian was ready to enter into circulation: an end result of refinement that Protestants of all stripes could

³⁹ *Gospel Herald* 11 (1843): 373, quoting Zechariah 13:9; William Romaine, *Works* (London: T. Chapman, 1796), 7:397, 399; “The Furnace,” *Christian’s Magazine* 2 (1791): 146–47.

⁴⁰ James Haldane Stewart, *Sermons Principally Designed to Strengthen the Faith . . . of Christians in the Present Remarkable Era* (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1828), 378.

⁴¹ William Goode, *Essays on All the Scriptural Names and Titles of Christ* (London: L. B. Seeley, 1822), 2:312, 303; “The Purposes of Affliction,” *Scottish Christian Herald* 3 (1841): 416.

⁴² Hannah More, *Hints Towards Forming the Character of a Young Princess*, 2nd ed. (London: Cadell and Davies, 1805), 1:308. Such arguments echoed much earlier Anglican commentaries on Catholicism, many of which remained in print. See Thomas Jackson’s account of “where our Church was before Luther’s time” in his *Treatise of the Holy Catholic Faith and Church* (1626; London: Hatchard and Son, 1843), 144–45.

support. As the oft-cited Puritan Thomas Watson succinctly put it: “solid gold is best; the solid christian is the only metal that will pass current with God.”⁴³ *Current with God*, in this context, could mean a long subsequent life of good works—an outcome that was especially prominent among missionaries, who hoped their trials would render them sufficiently strong to “be more active in the service of God.”⁴⁴ It could also mean communion with the heavenly host, for those whose suffering terminated in death. Henry Manning, preaching on “The Sleep of the Faithful Departed” at St. Paul’s, promised that God’s refining fire would detach from dead Christians all “earthliness of heart,” rendering them as “pure even as He is pure.”⁴⁵ This image of circulating gold also implied an additional role for God, as mint master as well as assayer. The Welsh Calvinist preacher Christmas Evans compared the law-abiding Christian to a coin “of pure gold; full measure, and full weight, and bearing the right and lawful stamp,” and a popular pamphlet from 1803 featured a divine official who tried people’s “religious Coin” by “the Touchstone, and the Aquafortis.” The latter pamphlet provides a striking illustration of the relevance of contemporary monetary debates to theology: it had first appeared in 1774, during a massive government recall of underweight guineas, and resurfaced during the suspension of cash payments, when a hodgepodge of token and foreign coin passed as current.⁴⁶

Had references to gold tried in the fire been limited to sermons, hymns, and Christian correspondence, they would have been potent enough at shoring up a belief system founded on the dual bases of evangelism and economics—and in evangelism, at least, the metaphor of gold in the crucible has remained strikingly resonant down to the present day. In Britain, however, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century, the metaphor circulated well beyond the relatively narrow confines of Protestant discourse. Prior to 1800, secular references to gold tried in the fire were relatively scarce, and mainly appeared in novels to underscore female protagonists’ redemption following adversity. In this vein Elizabeth Bonhote concluded *Olivia; or, Deserted Bride* with a friend of the heroine providing

⁴³ Watson, *Sermons and Select Discourses on Important Subjects* (1657; Glasgow: William Bell, 1798), 1:256.

⁴⁴ John Howard Hinton, *Memoir of William Knibb, Missionary in Jamaica* (London: Houlston and Stoneham, 1847), 127.

⁴⁵ Henry Edward Manning, *Sermons* (London: James Burns, 1843), 313–14.

⁴⁶ Christmas Evans, *Sermons on Various Subjects* (Beaver: W. Henry, 1837), 260; John Clark, *The Coin Act: or, Scales for Professors. Intended to Assist Them in Proving and Ascertaining the True State of their Souls, and the Sterling Value of Their Religion* (London: T. Williams, 1803), 5, 15.

the assurance that “like gold, she is the purer for every additional trial.”⁴⁷ After 1815, nearly a third of all references to gold tried in the fire appeared in secular contexts, ranging from politics to music criticism. The radical Henry Hunt claimed that he had emerged from jail “triumphant over his and his country’s enemies . . . ‘like gold tried in the fire, more and more refined’”; the editor of *Musical World* tried to appease an offended organist with his assurance that “the metal of sterling character gains lustre and value by the ordeal of impartial discussion.”⁴⁸

II. GOLD IN HEAVEN

A more problematic manifestation of gold as a symbol of value in the Bible was its appearance in heaven. Heavenly gold makes two appearances in Revelation 21: the holy city of New Jerusalem is first described as “pure gold, like unto clear glass,” then three verses later only the streets of the city are described as being made of gold.⁴⁹ By the time these passages had passed down to British readers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they had accumulated famous glosses by John Milton and John Bunyan, among dozens of other earlier writers. Milton’s heaven, in *Paradise Lost*, includes a “frontispiece of diamond and gold” and “a broad and ample road, whose dust is gold.” Bunyan’s pilgrims initially require special goggles to view heaven’s gold-paved streets without falling ill from desire, before finally being “ravished with an inexpressible delight” by the sight.⁵⁰

These canonical Protestants moved the metaphor of heavenly gold from its Catholic abode in cathedrals, adorned by the tangible metal, to the printed page. As Dominic Janes has observed, medieval churches, replete with gold and silver artifacts that broadcast the piety of their wealthy congregants, had been “intended as the closest there could be to a recreation of heaven, both in the sanctity of those gathered there and in the very experience of being in the place.” The vision of heaven set forth in Milton and

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Bonhote, *Olivia; or, Deserted Bride* (London: W. Lane, 1787), 3:85.

⁴⁸ *To Radical Reformers, Male and Female, of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (London: T. Dolby, 1822), 29–30; “Dr. Gauntlett,” *Musical World* 18 (1843): 92.

⁴⁹ Revelation 21:18, 21.

⁵⁰ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667; New York: Clark, Austin and Co., 1849), 72, 162; John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come* (1678; Edinburgh: Sands, Murray, and Cochran, 1768), part 1, 233–34; part 2, 27. On Milton’s struggles with the problem of representing heaven: see John R. Knott, “Milton’s Heaven,” *PMLA* 85 (1970): 487–89.

Bunyan, in contrast, invoked that experience through the act of pious reading, and British Protestants after 1750 were keen to emphasize this contrast. The Anglican rector Thomas Hartley chastised the “creaturely pomp” of Catholic cathedrals as “absurd and childish,” guilty of an overly literal reading of the Bible’s “carnal emblems of spiritual kings.”⁵¹

Allusions to heavenly gold in British Protestant discourse mainly offered solace in the face of loss. By moving from the experience of suffering (which accompanied the metaphor of gold tried by fire) to heavenly reward, such allusions moved from gold as an object of earthly desire to a sought-after spiritual end. Britons typically learned about heaven from such clergymen as John Willison, who offered the prospect of removal from “a vile Dunghill to a glorious City” by way of consoling the “dying Believer.” One Scottish minister offered the image of gold streets and crystal streams to cheer up those about to join “the congregation of the dead,” and numerous hymns reinforced his message in verses describing heaven’s “shining pomp” and harps, streets, roofs, and mansions of pure gold.⁵² Meditations on recently deceased Christians also commonly imagined the splendor of their subjects’ new surroundings, as when an “elegiac stanza” envisioned Charles Wesley tripping “o’er streets of gold . . . to pay his homage to the King of Kings,” or when one of Elizabeth Singer Rowe’s “letters from the dead to the living” reported “Rivulets rolling over orient Pearls and Sands of Gold.”⁵³

Applying such descriptions of heaven to daily life (and death) was one thing; interpreting them was another. Unlike the image of gold tried in the fire, which, by comparing people to gold, was too obviously figurative to be taken literally, the image of gold in heaven had the dangerous potential of inciting avarice along with its intended signification of hope and glory.

⁵¹ Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 94; Thomas Hartley, *The Doctrine of a Trinity in the Divine Nature, Defended* (London: E. Hodson, 1791), 22–23.

⁵² Willison, *A Treatise on the Sanctifying of the Lord’s Day* (Edinburgh: James M’Euen, 1716), 123–24; Neil Douglas, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (Edinburgh: George Caw, 1789), 84; *A Collection of Hymns, for the Use of Christians of All Denominations* (Leeds: Baines, 1799), 118; *An Enlarged Edition of a Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors*, ed. J. Rippon (London: J. Bateson, 1800), 422; Joseph Proud, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs, for the Use of the Lord’s New Church* (London: P. Hodson, 1798), 95, 113; *A Collection of Hymns, for Camp Meetings, Revivals, &c., for the Use of the Primitive Methodists*, ed. Hugh Bourne (Bemersely: J. Bourne, 1821), hymn 24.

⁵³ James Creighton, *Elegiac Stanzas Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. Charles Wesley* (London: Bruce, 1788), 12; Elizabeth Singer Rowe, *Friendship in Death* (in print from 1728 through 1815), cited in Philip C. Almond, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 104.

Hence while religious writers pervasively adopted the language of gold tried in the fire with almost no recursive reflection concerning its status as a metaphor, those who discussed gold in heaven bent over backwards to emphasize its purely figurative nature, and insisted that the metaphor was necessary owing to the human incapacity to describe perfection. Saint John's prophetic peek at heaven was, by this logic, "a faint representation" that employed "the figures of such things as we most admire here below." Heaven's treasures similarly prompted John Newton to caution that "large allowances must be made, for the metaphorical language of prophecy." He concluded: "no person of sound judgments can suppose, that this description is to be understood strictly, according to the letter."⁵⁴

One problem with such rationalizations was that British Protestants routinely carted out the image of heavenly gold in offering spiritual succor to children, who were seldom trusted to exercise sound interpretive judgment in other contexts.⁵⁵ A more general problem lay less with using figurative language per se than with embracing gold as the metaphor of choice. The contours of this problem came to light in 1776, when Edward Gibbon had the temerity to suggest that the early Christians converted paradise from a pastoral Eden into a city blazing with gold and gems because this was more "suited to the advanced state of society which prevailed under the Roman Empire." He added that this image was "so well adapted to the desires . . . of mankind, that it must have contributed in a very considerable degree to the progress of the Christian faith." This view of heaven was an "invidious reflection concerning gold and precious stones," according to the evangelical divine Joseph Milner, since it claimed "that the advantages which the Gospel holds out to its faithful followers are very much of a mere worldly nature." Milner concluded that this was clearly not the correct interpretation, since the New Testament "continually declaim[ed] against worldly objects considered as the materials of bliss." The correct reading of Revelation, instead, was that heaven "was conveyed under the images of gold and precious stones, not with a view to feed the avarice of Christians, but to enliven their idea of spiritual glory by such sensible images, as are most adapted to strike the imagination in our present state."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ John Guyse, *The Practical Expositor: or, An Exposition of the New Testament, in the Form of a Paraphrase* (Edinburgh: W. Darling, 1775), 6:379; Richard Challoner, *Considerations upon Christian Truths and Christian Duties* (London: n.p., 1754), 2:76; John Newton, *Messiah: Fifty Expository Discourses* (London: J. Buckland, 1786), 2:197.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Mary Martha Sherwood and Sophia Streeten, *The History of the Fairchild Family; or, The Child's Manual*, part 3 (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1847), 88, 97–98.

⁵⁶ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Dublin: William Hallhead, 1776), 2:249–50; Joseph Milner, *Gibbon's Account of Christianity Considered* (York: A. Ward, 1781), 125, 119, 122–23. On context for Gibbon's remarks,

If Milner's interpretation seems suspiciously similar to Gibbon's original proposition, this was because neither Milner nor any of his fellow travelers ever figured out how to distinguish between gold in heaven as glorious (and hence useful as a spur to holiness) and gold on earth as an object of avarice. Their dilemma can be summed up as follows: Thou shalt not covet gold, but thou shalt covet heaven—the more so because it is adorned with gold. And although many writers exercised more ingenuity than Milner in trying to resolve this dilemma, most in doing so either drew attention to the many parallel tensions between gold's positive and negative connotations elsewhere in the Bible, or scrambled to invent a heaven-friendly theory of sense perception. One rector fended off the potentially offensive presence of gold in heaven by referring back to its use by “divine command . . . to add magnificence to the Tabernacle and the Aaronical garments of old.” The philosopher Isaac Taylor, for his part, predicted that “gold will no longer shine” in heaven, since a “new faculty of seeing through forms and semblances” would convert “the material universe, lately so gay and blooming to the idolatrous eye,” into “a gaunt skeleton, barely knit together with its sear sinews.”⁵⁷

The most plausible efforts to resolve the tension between earthly and heavenly gold hewed closest to the Book of Revelation. The Cambridge don Joseph Whiteley pointed out that by the time New Jerusalem had been constructed, only God's chosen people would be left on earth; hence its gold and gems merely provided “lively colours” for the innocent contemplation of Christians during the millennium, and were not, as Gibbon wrongly implied, “pious frauds, invented to allure the Jews and Pagans into the Christian church.”⁵⁸ The evangelical economist Thomas Chalmers proposed an even simpler proof of gold's purely metaphorical status in heaven: since Peter had ranked earthly gold “among corruptible things,” the world's supply would surely be entirely consumed in the flames of the apocalypse—leaving none behind with which to pave New Jerusalem's streets. Revealingly, Chalmers's assurance that there would “neither be silver nor gold . . . in heaven” appeared in the context of his claim that “in this world the poor shall be with us always,” and his related insistence that

see Janes, *God and Gold*, 15, and Davit Wootton, “Gibbon, Irony, and Faith in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*,” in *Edward Gibbon: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. David Womersley (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1997), 216–24.

⁵⁷ Thomas Hartley, *Paradise Restored: or, A Testimony to the Doctrine of the Blessed Millennium* (London: M. Richardson, 1764), 70; Isaac Taylor, *Physical Theory of Another Life* (London: William Pickering, 1836), 133.

⁵⁸ Joseph Whiteley, *An Essay on the Rewards of Eternity* (Leeds: J. Bowling, 1781), 21.

the horizon of their economic betterment ended at Christian charity. His implication seemed to be that removing the prospect of boundless gold in heaven helped reduce the parallel anticipation of boundless material improvement on earth.⁵⁹

If the working poor had listened only to Chalmers, his denial of material gold in heaven might have rendered them sufficiently content with their lot on earth. Unfortunately for Chalmers, other notions concerning heaven circulated among that population that ran directly counter to his. Popular millenarian prophets regularly produced eyewitness accounts of heaven, almost always replete with very tangible gold. Ann Cutler, the “Praying Nanny” of Leeds, saw golden girdles, crowns, and doors during her visit to Paradise, and her successor George Turner foresaw a second coming that featured “walls of gold set with precious stones” during his confinement in a York insane asylum.⁶⁰ Another prophet, Edward Irving, provided sufficient grounds for a cheeky paraphrase by the poet Thomas Moore, depicting heaven as “A bran-new Jerusalem, built all of gold, / Sound bullion throughout, from the roof to the flags.”⁶¹ What might anachronistically be called this “big rock candy mountain” view of heaven was no laughing matter for mainstream clerics, who did their best to marginalize such literal visions of heaven as the work of madmen and imposters.⁶²

Precisely the same anxieties accompanied British discussions of Muslim and Hindu versions of heaven, which they insisted, on rather flimsy evidence, to be far more literal than the Bible in describing its interior design. Although British theologians had been warning against the “fleshly” nature of Islamic paradise since the late sixteenth century, interest in its material riches increased with George Sale’s translation of the Qur’an in 1734, which featured gold on “the walls of its buildings” and “the trunks of all its trees.” The East India Company official John Malcolm provided a typical interpretation of these passages in his *History of Persia* (1815): the Muslim heaven, with its “palaces of gold” and “virgins of never-fading beauty,”

⁵⁹ Thomas Chalmers, *The Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns* (Glasgow: Chalmers and Collins, 1821), 1:277–80.

⁶⁰ William Bramwell, *A Short Account of the Life and Death of Ann Cutler, Commonly Known by the Name of Praying Nanny* (Leeds: A. Newsom, 1798), 21–22; J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780–1850* (London: Routledge, 2012), 120.

⁶¹ “The Millennium. Suggested by the Late Work of the Reverend Mr. Irving ‘On Prophecy,’” *London Times*, August 2, 1826. For context on Moore’s *London Times* money poems, see Dick, *Romanticism and the Gold Standard*, 145.

⁶² See, e.g., “Matthews the Madman and Imposter,” *Chambers’s Edinburgh Magazine*, March 28, 1840; review of Emanuel Swedenborg, *Concerning Heaven and Its Wonders*, *The Critic* 4 (1846): 613.

was “well adapted to the principles and habits of those to whom it was first addressed.”⁶³ As in the response to Gibbon, such commentators strained to distinguish this allegedly sensual appeal to gold and jewels from a strictly metaphorical representation in Revelation. The Anglican clergyman Joseph White contrasted the Bible’s “indefinite and figurative terms” describing heaven with Muhammad’s “religion of depravity,” which “absurdly and impiously aimed to sensualize the purity of the divine essence.” Rarer in its self-reflection was George Ensor’s admission, after condemning the “worldly manner” in which Muhammad described heaven, that Milton’s parallel account also “had recourse to sensual pleasures.”⁶⁴

British writers discovered similar levels of sensuality, and worked just as hard to contrast these with a purely metaphorical biblical heaven, when they turned to the Hindu afterlife. The Methodist Joseph Nightingale commented that the account of heaven in the Hindu Puranas was “like the paradise of Mohammed, . . . truly in the eastern style: all things, even the beds of the gods, are made of gold and precious stones.” The Anglo-Indian journalist John Capper similarly described “the heaven of Vishnu” as “composed entirely of gold, with . . . every luxurious adjunct which the warm and fertile invention of oriental minds could picture.” The stakes in distinguishing this Hindu variant of heaven from its Christian counterpart were especially high for missionaries in India. Hence Alexander Duff, a Presbyterian missionary in Calcutta, emerged from the golden streets and palaces that filled his description of the Hindu afterlife with the assurance that these were “all to be understood in strictest literality,” invoking “carnal tastes and desires, appetites and passions”—in stark contrast to the “chiefly figurative and emblematic” biblical depictions of heaven, which conjured “ineffable bliss.”⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

Comparing Christians to gold tried by fire, or emphasizing the purely figurative nature of gold in heaven, represented efforts by British Protestants to

⁶³ George Sale, “Preliminary Discourse,” *The Koran* (London: J. Wilcox, 1734), 96; John Malcolm, *The History of Persia from the Most Early Period to the Present Time* (London: John Murray, 1815), 1:169.

⁶⁴ Joseph White, *Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford, in the Year 1784* (Oxford: D. Prince and J. Cooke, 1784), 245–46; George Ensor, *The Principles of Morality* (London: Couchman, 1801), 186, 188.

⁶⁵ Joseph Nightingale, *The Religions and Religious Ceremonies of All Nations: Accurately, Impartially, and Fully Described* (London: Richard Phillips, 1821), 410; John Cap-

transcend that metal's sensual qualities by elevating it to the realm of metaphor. As the example of heaven illustrates, however, slippage between metaphorical and tangible gold posed a recurring problem. A century before 1750, John Milton noticed this problem when he scolded a friend who had compared the Book of Common Prayer to gold: "You forget that gold hath been anathematized for the idolatrous use, &c. and thus you throttle yourself with your own similes." Although the nineteenth-century clergyman who reproduced this quote scoffed at Milton's "sophistry," the conundrum it raised was not so easily dismissed.⁶⁶ Certainly in the case of the many references to physical gold in the British Bible, but even in the more flexible realm of metaphor, this potentially sin-inducing metal often revealed fissures within British Protestantism.

For most of the century after 1750, Britain's credit economy was poised with similar imprecision between the fictive and the tangible. Although political economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo were able and willing to hold the physical and abstract qualities of gold concurrently in their minds with little apparent effort, political radicals pointedly rejected this bifurcation: they either dismissed gold out of hand as an unnecessary obstacle to a system of public credit (in the case of Thomas Paine), or rejected credit tout court as the plot of usurious bankers (in the case of William Cobbett).⁶⁷ The latter stance, which resolutely directed public attention to gold's physical manifestations as coin and bullion, and attacked as "tricksical mysteries" claims that it could simultaneously stand as a unit of account, was also the most dangerous to the superstructure of credit that the gold standard was intended to support.⁶⁸ The largely working-class clientele who believed millenarian claims that heaven was literally full of treasure also regularly heeded radical calls to demand gold en masse from the Bank of England in exchange for their paper money, in order to bring about a heaven on earth.⁶⁹

per, *The Three Presidencies of India* (London: Ingram, Cooke, 1853), 403; Alexander Duff, *India and Indian Missions: Including Sketches of the Gigantic System of Hinduism, Both in Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1840), 118–19.

⁶⁶ Milton to Joseph Hall, quoted in William L. Bowles, *The Life of Thomas Ken* (London: John Murray, 1830), 1:75.

⁶⁷ Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 171–218.

⁶⁸ The quote is from the radical politician John Thelwall, in a campaign speech from 1819: *An Authentic Narrative of the Events of the Westminster Election* (London: R. Stodart, 1819), 379.

⁶⁹ On bank runs as a political tactic, see Timothy L. Alborn, *Conceiving Companies: Joint-Stock Politics in Victorian England* (London: Routledge, 1998), 61–62; on millenarianism and radical political economy, see Gregory Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the*

This threat, in turn, made matters difficult around the edges for the otherwise protean metaphor of gold tried in the fire. When the Anglican cleric Theophilus Biddulph reminded his Bristol parishioners that “the poorer they are for this world, the more reason why they should labour to be rich for another,” his promise that they would overcome their trials “as the gold comes out of the refiner’s fire” was both consoling and dangerous. At the very least, this sort of assurance blurred the sharp distinction Chalmers tried to draw between earthly gold and heavenly bliss.⁷⁰ Cobbett, for his part, greeted a financial crisis in 1825 with two articles entitled “Gold For Ever!,” which featured as epigrams God’s command in Revelation to “get gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich”—in the process stripping the passage of any hint of its figurative reference to the afterlife.⁷¹ Perhaps with that in mind, Christian political economists invariably steered well clear of the analogy to gold tried in the fire when discussing the financial panics that became a regular feature of life under the gold standard after 1820—despite the fact that these same economists commonly depicted losers in such crises as drossy victims of divine retribution.⁷²

Such problems, however, generally fall under the category of exceptions that proved a rule. In general, the century before 1850 in Britain witnessed the uneven expansion of its empire, with increasingly intensive contact with and knowledge of other cultures; the rise of evangelical convictions concerning man’s relationship to the divine; and the rise of economic prosperity that met with challenges only occasionally and at the margins. Gold occupied a prominent, interconnected, and ambivalent place in all three domains. In the emerging empire, it offered a means for Britons to measure their own use of gold against allegedly less civilized uses by others. In evangelical Christianity, as Deborah Valenze has argued, it signified “a universal instrument of personal agency,” which was equally liable to being used for good works or sinfully abused.⁷³ And

Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815–1860 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

⁷⁰ Theophilus Biddulph, *Plain and Practical Sermons; Intended Chiefly for Family Reading and Parochial Libraries* (Bristol: J. Chilcott, 1834), 70.

⁷¹ “Gold For Ever!,” *Cobbett’s Political Register*, September 10, 1825 and February 18, 1826.

⁷² Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 121–47. The only example I have found in which the metaphor of gold tried by fire was applied to survivors of a financial crisis appeared in 1794, long before the official adoption of the gold standard and the development of its accompanying economic justification: see George Chalmers, *An Estimate of the Comparative Strength of Great-Britain, during the Present and Preceding Reigns* (London: John Stockdale, 1794), lxxviii–lxxix.

⁷³ Valenze, *The Social Life of Money*, 260–61.

in the economy, gold signified a strong currency that fueled cheap imports and accelerated industrialization, but also recurrently carried in its wake deflation and commercial stagnation. These three contexts help to account for the prominence of the metaphor of gold tried by fire among British Protestants after 1750; and for the common assumption, shared by most if not all Britons, that they were uniquely capable of appreciating that the gold in heaven was merely a figurative substitute for ineffable glory. In turn, these references to figurative gold assisted in propping up the gold standard, which emphasized its disciplinary potential for constraining financial speculation.⁷⁴ Yet even the Bible had its limits in bolstering gold's role as a peculiarly British symbol, not least because its treatment of gold was itself so ambiguous.

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⁷⁴ Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 127.