

**THE CHARACTER OF METHODISM IN GEORGE ELIOT'S
*ADAM BEDE***

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Throughout the Victorian period, the representation of Methodism in popular literature is not at all uncommon, but this literature is also almost categorically dismissive of Methodism as a rather hypocritical or distasteful sect. The works of George Eliot, particularly her first full novel *Adam Bede*, offer instead a rather sympathetic portrayal of Methodism. It is fascinating to consider how Eliot's familial connection to the Methodist movement, and her considerations of religion in general, shaped her fictional portrayal of Methodism. What is most important in *Adam Bede*, however, is the way in which Eliot fashions the Methodist characters, especially Dinah Morris, in order to represent the character of Methodism itself throughout the narrative. Although Dinah is not the only Methodist, it is significant that a female preacher is one of the main characters in this novel. Bearing this in mind, I wish to pursue Eliot's depiction of Methodism throughout *Adam Bede*, along with a careful consideration of her journals and correspondence as context, in order to investigate the nature of her artistic portrayal of the Methodist movement.

A study of this nature requires three essential elements: a critical reading of the Methodist representation within *Adam Bede*, a comparison between this particular literary representation and a historically grounded study of late 18th century Methodism, and finally a study of Eliot's own journals and correspondence in relation to this novel. These three elements considered alongside one another provide a methodology by which Eliot's portrayal of Methodism in *Adam Bede*, specifically through the character of Dinah Morris, can be read as bearing evidence of a historically grounded understanding of Wesleyan theology and providing an accurate and charitable picture of the Methodist movement at the close of the 18th century in England.

Regardless of the character of the Methodism that George Eliot may wish to be represented in *Adam Bede*, this portrayal is importantly prefaced by Eliot's own cautionary note in chapter three:

The picture we are apt to take of Methodism in our imagination is not an amphitheatre of Green hills, or the deep shade of broad-leaved sycamores, where a crowd of rough men and weary-hearted women drank in a faith which was a rudimentary culture, which linked their thoughts with the past, lifted their imagination above the sordid details of their own narrow lives, and suffused their souls with the sense of a

pitying, loving, infinite Presence, sweet as summer to the houseless needy.¹

She goes on to include the possibility that to

Some of [her] readers Methodism may mean nothing more than low-pitched gables up dingy streets, sleek grocers, sponging preachers and hypocritical jargon—elements which are regarded as an exhaustive analysis of Methodism in many fashionable quarters.²

This last bit may initially seem the most pejorative if one fails to read it in the context of the sentence which directly follows this uncomplimentary depiction of Methodism based on popular opinion. Eliot warns that such a negative portrayal “would be a pity” because she “cannot pretend that Seth and Dinah were anything else than Methodists.”³ She says this because the integrity of Seth Bede and Dinah Morris, two of her primary characters about whom she writes quite charitably, is at stake.

Eliot's literary voice is quite conversational throughout the novel and she exhibits no hesitancy to converse with her audience directly. By adding this cautionary note to her reader she affords them the opportunity to live in the narrative world of these characters without judging them against some rather critical and prevalent stereotypes. Through this rhetorical moment Eliot presents the reader with a sort of parenthetical narrative world where notions of Methodism as “that modern type which reads quarterly reviews and attends to chapels with pillared porticoes”⁴ must be temporarily suspended. Seth and Dinah, as Eliot's archetypal Methodists of the “old-fashioned kind,” can be accepted in a suspension of skepticism.

This alludes to the problem of historical dating which could indeed be its own research topic, but that must be settled before discussion can continue. George Eliot published *Adam Bede* in 1859 but the story itself is set in 1799. This sixty year gap helps to explain why it was necessary for Eliot to direct the reader's sympathies as she does in chapter three. For the purposes of this study the historicity will be judged against the date of 1799 which corresponds with the setting of the narrative, and not with the mid-Victorian dating contemporary with the writing of the novel. The latter approach, if it were to be used to judge Eliot's portrayal of Methodism against the stereotypes of her own day, cannot help to paint the Methodists of 1799 in an idyllic light by comparison. Eliot seems concerned, however, not with making the Methodists seem overly pious or exaggerated by comparison, but rather with showing them as sincere and caring individuals seeking to follow the extraordinary call of God to renew spiritual life in late eighteenth century England.

¹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 2002 Modern Library pbk. ed., *The Modern Library Classics* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 35.

² Eliot, 35.

³ Eliot, 36.

⁴ Eliot, 36.

Who are these Methodists then that deserve to be read in so charitable a light? Eliot uses three main characters—Seth Bede, Dinah Morris, and Reverend Irwine—and a host of minor references from other characters, in order provide the reader with a distinct picture of the Methodist faith both in theory and in practice. The novel opens as Seth Bede and his brother Adam are working at their trade as carpenters, but within the first pages the idle workshop banter identifies Seth as a “Methody,”⁵ who in his absentmindedness finished building a door but had forgotten to add the panels. The inference by his detractors is clearly that Methodists are given to impractical natures and preoccupation with religion. Adam defends Seth, and though he is not himself convinced of Methodism he reminds the others that it has “turned many an idle fellow into an industrious un,” and that “it’s the preacher as empties th’ alehouse.”⁶ Adam, a member of the Church of England like most other residents of Hayslope, also exhibits tendencies toward a sort of spiritualism or humanism but remains charitable to Methodism and sees that at the very least it does no harm.

Eliot then introduces us almost immediately to our next Methodist character, Dinah Morris, who we find preaching in a field just outside of town. It is important that Dinah is a woman preacher, and there is a buzz in the conversation concerning the impending activities. One villager comments that “there’s no holding these Methodisses when the maggit’s once got i’ their head” adding that “many of ‘em goes stark starin’ mad wi’ their religion.”⁷ The townspeople immediately recognize Dinah, however, as quiet and respectable in both appearance and demeanor. She is not the “ecstatic” or “bilious” type of Methodist that they had expected.⁸ She begins in prayer and then takes to exhortation and preaching in a clear, but not overexcited manner, and indeed there is question as to whether “she could have that power of rousing [the crowd’s] more violent emotions” as this “must surely be a necessary seal of her vocation as a Methodist preacher, until she came to the words, ‘Lost!—Sinners!’”⁹

At this point Dinah’s demeanor is swept up into a current of feeling as she becomes invested in her preaching and in the welfare of her listeners:

She appealed first to one and then to another, beseeching them with tears to turn to God while there was yet time; painting to them the desolation of their souls, lost in sin, feeding on the husks of this miserable world, far away from God their Father; and then to the love of the Saviour, who was waiting and watching for their return.¹⁰

⁵ Eliot, 5. “Methody” as dialect slang for Methodist.

⁶ Eliot, 8.

⁷ Eliot, 14.

⁸ Eliot, 20.

⁹ Eliot, 25. The language of Methodist “preacher” used here is representative of Eliot’s prose and must be somewhat qualified. Women “preachers” should be historically distinguished women who engaged in the practice of “preaching” in specific circumstances. The former was not sanctioned or allowed while the latter was only minimally allowed by John Wesley.

¹⁰ Eliot, 26.

Her loving gentle tones gave way to severe appeals to personal repentance and relationship with Christ. Within her preaching a central theme emerges—the fundamental human concern with death which is inevitable and is only overcome through a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. She ends her preaching on the green with an altar call of sorts promising eternal joy for the penitent and giving an offering to “come and take this blessedness” which is “the good news that Jesus came to preach to the poor,” and the knowledge that “God is without end, his love is without end.”¹¹ It is interesting that although Dinah delivers the sort of message which is characteristic of a Methodist, her sincerity seems to overshadow the initially derisive expectations of the townspeople.

Literarily, Dinah's sermon has been deconstructed carefully into an emotional appeal leading to *oratio obliqua*, or as an example of a “religion of fear” that “is a matter not of speech, but of dramatic projection which moves toward hallucination.”¹² Critics have proposed that the “morbid details of the Passion,” set against “real-life melodrama” is nothing short of “Methodism's ruthless exploitation of social injustice.”¹³ Though this close literary analysis seems initially convincing, I believe that it reads far too much back into the text. There are no indications in Eliot's journals or letters that she had any intent of critiquing Dinah's method of preaching, or using her to denounce Methodism as socially predatory upon poorer classes.¹⁴ Historically, Dinah's message is very similar in style to other Methodist lay preachers of her day. Strong connections cannot help but be seen when read along side one of Mary Bosanquet Fletcher's sermons.¹⁵ Mrs. Fletcher's rhetorical pattern of expounding a particular biblical text, exhortation and finally an emotive call for the hearers to seek a personal salvific relationship with Christ also flows through Dinah's mouth as she delivers her message on the Green.

It would be fallacious, however, to claim that Eliot wished for Dinah to simply imitate Mrs. Fletcher as a derivative stereotype. In fact, Dinah owes her fictional existence not to any particular Methodist heroine of the time,

¹¹ Eliot, 29.

¹² Barbara Nathan Hardy, *Critical Essays on George Eliot* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1970), 38.

¹³ Hardy, 39. John Goode provides a helpful analysis of *Adam Bede* in this collection, but I fear that his attempts to unpack Eliot's intentions through Dinah fail to ask the question, “how does Dinah's sermon relate to other similar sermons? Without this context it seems presumptuous to suggest Dinah was being stylistically manipulative.

¹⁴ George Eliot and J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1885). Eliot seems, if anything, sympathetic to her Aunt upon whom Dinah is based.

¹⁵ Mary Fletcher, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher, Consort and Relict of Rev. John Fletcher, Vicar of Madeley, Salop.* (New York: Lane and Scott, 1850). This appears to be the only extant sermon of its type. For a more complete analysis see Paul Chilcote's PhD Thesis *John Wesley and the Women of Early Methodism*, Duke University, 1984.

but loosely to Eliot's aunt who had also been a Methodist preacher.¹⁶ This proposal is supported by textual references to Mrs. Fletcher and other strong Methodist women at the Society at Leeds that establish Dinah as an individual connected to these women.¹⁷ As noted, Eliot based Dinah's character on "an anecdote told [to her] by [her] Methodist Aunt Samuel." Her aunt related to Eliot that

she had visited a condemned criminal—a very ignorant girl, who had murdered her child and refused to confess; how she had stayed with her praying through the night, and how the poor creature at last broke out into tears and confessed her crime. My aunt afterwards went with her in the cart to the place of execution; and she described to me the great respect with which this ministry of hers was regarded. . .¹⁸

This account correlates in great detail with Dinah's actions in *Adam Bede* in chapters forty through forty-seven. In correspondence with her publisher Eliot later describes the method by which she crafted Dinah's sermon by using Dinah's own words. She says the words came "as the tears come because our heart is full, and we can't help them."¹⁹ With this in mind, it is hard to see Dinah as anything less than sincere in her calling to preach the word of God out of an overflowing of the spirit.

The third character through which Eliot helps the reader to see Methodism is the venerable Reverend Irwine, Parish Rector of Hayslope. Though the townspeople immediately exhibit an interest in "maintaining the dignity of the [Anglican] Church in the face of this scandalous irruption of Methodism,"²⁰ Mr. Irwine is not so hasty in judgment. He is so unconcerned that when he hears about the preaching he remarks that he had seen the "Pretty young woman," and had seen "that she was a Methodist, or Quaker, or something of that sort by her dress," but was unaware that "she was a preacher."²¹ Far from perceiving Dinah as a threat, Irwine assumes that her preaching is not going to become a regular happening, and reminds her detractors that Methodists turned a certain local "wild, drunken rascal," who was prone to "neglecting his work and beating his wife," into a man who is "thrifty and decent."²² He even debates whether or not he should question Dinah regarding her preaching, proposing that it may be construed as "pretty a story of hatred and persecution as the Methodists need desire to publish in the next number of their magazine."²³ Mr. Irwine, as the proposed foil to the Methodist Dinah, adopts

¹⁶ Eliot uses the designation, "Methodist preacher," and I am seeking here to represent Eliot's intentions while keeping in mind the distinction between "preacher" and "preaching" alluded to in footnote 9.

¹⁷ These other women presumably include Sarah Crosby (1729-1804) and one Sarah Williamson who is referred to in *Adam Bede* on p. 397 as the "'blessed woman' who was Dinah's chief friend in the Society at Leeds."

¹⁸ Eliot and Cross, *Letters and Journals*, 65.

¹⁹ Eliot and Cross, 138.

²⁰ Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 18.

²¹ Eliot, 56.

²² Eliot, 57.

²³ Eliot, 61.

a rather laissez-faire attitude toward the whole concern.

Eliot uses these three characters in order to construct a picture of what Methodism looks like in 1799 in rural England, and while Seth Bede's character provides an example of Methodism as it is lived-out, Irwine and Dinah are essential for assessing the historical accuracy of such a portrait. In Eliot's narrative the Rector's initial feeling of indifference toward Dinah is finally overcome with curiosity and he is convinced to go meet her. This gathering is quite amiable, but it affords the reader with an invaluable glimpse into Dinah's calling, as a female, to preach. Irwine asks Dinah if her "Society sanctions women's preaching," to which she replies that "It doesn't forbid them . . . when they've a clear call to the work, and when their ministry is owned by the conversion of sinners and the strengthening of God's people."²⁴ She continues by mentioning the case of Mary Bosanquet Fletcher whose arguments for the case of women preachers included both astute biblical exegesis and appeals to the "extraordinary call" of God as spiritual mandate which included women. Dinah says, "Mrs. Fletcher, as you may have heard about, was the first woman to preach in the Society, I believe, before she was married, when she was Miss Bosanquet; and Mr. Wesley approved of her undertaking the work. She had a great gift."²⁵ She continues speaking in a way which seems to echo the discussion of the matter between John Wesley and Mrs. Fletcher:

I understand there's been voices raised against [women preaching] in the Society of late, but I cannot but think their counsel will come to nought. It isn't for men to make channels for God's Spirit as they make channels for the water-courses and say, "Flow here, but flow not there."²⁶

Dinah feels that although her actions are not accepted by the Anglican Church, she is beyond reproach in carrying out what she sees clearly as God's call.

Clear connections can be seen between this sentiment expressed by Dinah and the letter by which John Wesley consents to Mary Fletcher's request to be allowed to preach. Wesley writes:

I think the strength of the cause rests there, on your having an extraordinary call. So, I am persuaded has every one of our lay-preachers: Otherwise I could not countenance this preaching at all. It is plain to me, that the whole work of God called Methodism is an extraordinary dispensation of his Providence. Therefore I do not wonder, if several things occur therein which do not fall under ordinary Rules of Discipline.²⁷

Wesley characteristically reacted to this issue by allowing himself to be led by the Holy Spirit. This is evidenced by his acknowledgement of Methodism as "an extraordinary dispensation" which is evidence of his efforts to "ac-

²⁴ Eliot, 87.

²⁵ Eliot, 87.

²⁶ Eliot, 87. Little did Dinah know that these voices would soon gain enough support in the Methodist movement to effectively end the practice of women preachers in 1803.

²⁷ Letter of John Wesley to Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, June 13, 1771.

commodate the preaching of women, which was apparently owned of God, to the pattern of his ecclesiastical system."²⁸

Wesley did not easily square this "extraordinary call" with his desire to remain within the Anglican Church, but as Paul Chilcote notes:

This acknowledgement of the exceptional means by which God was revivifying the Church of England, the same basic rationale upon which Wesley had countenance and even encourage similar activities among women, regardless of the revulsion of the Church or the State.²⁹

Although a full discussion of Wesley's decision finally to endorse preaching by women is well beyond the scope of this paper, by 1799 Wesleyan Methodism for decades had tentatively recognized preaching as a vocation to which women could indeed be called.

A close study of Eliot's journals and letters and research undertaken as preparation for writing this novel reveals many important items to be considered in judging her treatment of Methodism in *Adam Bede*. In her journal we learn that Eliot chose to depict Dinah's ministry as occurring nearly thirty years after Wesley's letter to Mrs. Fletcher in no small part because she had roughly based the character on her Aunt Samuel who would have been active in preaching around the turn of the century. Her aunt's story was "the germ" of the novel, but even though "the character of Dinah grew out of the recollections of [her] aunt" she insists that "Dinah is not at all like [her] aunt, who was a very small, black-eyed woman," who was "very vehement in her style of preaching."³⁰ The differences clearly indicate that Eliot's Aunt Samuel, though influential in Eliot's conception of the novel, was not simply copied into the novel as Dinah Morris.

It is important that Dinah is actively preaching as the eighteenth century is coming to a close. During this period following John Wesley's death, which has been described as "revivalistic," many women were openly embracing "their gifts in the ministry of preaching."³¹ Mrs. Fletcher and many of the early pioneer women preachers within the Methodist movement remained active throughout this period, but were joined by a great many younger women, like Dinah, who felt a strong calling into ministry. It would be unfair to Dinah, however, to look at her as only a preacher and disregard the other more subtle attributes of her character. Dinah Morris cares deeply for the sufferings of others, and she sees this sentiment is shared in Wesley's commitment to the poor, the imprisoned and the disenfranchised.

Her character in this regard is never more apparent than in the scenes

²⁸ Paul Chilcote, "John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism" (Duke University, 1984), 179. Published under the same title by Scarecrow Press, Metuchen and London, 1991.

²⁹ Chilcote, "John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism," 179.

³⁰ Eliot, *Journals*, 49.

³¹ Chilcote, 281. See also pp.281-294 for an excellent summary of women preaching throughout this period.

surrounding Hetty's imprisonment. In the midst of her despair and confusion, even the parish priest Irwine cannot seem to reach her, and so Dinah is called upon for aid with the mention that "the Methodists are great folks for going into prisons."³² In chapter forty-five Dinah visits Hetty in prison, with the intention of comforting her in the darkness of both her cell and her despair. Dinah is the only one capable of reaching Hetty, and bringing her to acknowledge and repent of her crime. Hetty's pleas for help are answered by Dinah's steadfast faith and intercessory prayer: "Let us pray poor sinner: let us fall on our knees again, and pray to the God of all mercy."³³ Dinah's gift and calling to ministry becomes clear in this moment, and the fruits of her active ministry contrast with the role of Rev. Irwine who is largely ineffectual. With her actions she becomes God's agent of grace and redemption to Hetty, allowing her at last to feel God's love. Regardless of Eliot's personal feelings and convictions about Methodism and religion in general, she seems to recognize something in Dinah which is valuable, and toward which she can be charitable.

Dinah, however, is not meant to be an overly romanticized caricature of a Methodist woman preacher. Eliot clearly intended her representation of Dinah to be realistic, and the research and attention to detail evidenced by Eliot's writing imply that historical accuracy was also important. Numerous critical editions of *Adam Bede* mention that Eliot was careful in her study of Methodism. She read and annotated Robert Southey's *Life of John Wesley* in order to ascertain the nature of Wesleyan theology and a general history of the movement.³⁴ This is evident not only in overt references to *Wesleyan Methodism*³⁵ but in more subtle theological allusions in Dinah's speech and manner. For instance, in referring to the Methodist aunt who had raised her Dinah says "God had given her a loving, self-forgetting nature, and he perfected it by grace."³⁶ Wesley's presence is also felt explicitly through Dinah's description of him in her sermon, but it is also implicit in her desire to live in Snowfield and work through the Methodist society there in ministry to the poor and imprisoned.

As identified, Eliot also specifically makes reference to several prominent women preachers who were not fictional representations. Most notably, Eliot refers to Mary Bosanquet Fletcher as a leading member of the Methodist Society at Leeds with which Dinah was in contact. While her designation as the "first woman to preach in the Society" may be brought into question it is clear that historically speaking she was a pioneer in this area among

³² Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 426.

³³ Eliot, 457.

³⁴ Eliot, notes p.548.

³⁵ Eliot, 87. Rev. Irwine denotes Wesleyan Methodism as an acknowledgement that Whitfield had broken away from Wesley by this time.

³⁶ Eliot, 74.

Methodists.³⁷ Eliot makes the careful distinction that Mrs. Fletcher started preaching while she was still Miss Bosanquet which is evidence of Eliot's careful research and study of Henry Moore's biography of Mary Bosaquet Fletcher. Mrs. Fletcher had long moved from the Society at Leeds by 1799, however and was ministering in her deceased husband's parish in Madeley, Shropshire.³⁸

It is interesting that Eliot chose to end *Adam Bede* with an epilogue nearly a decade removed from the rest of the narrative. In this scene we find Dinah happily married to Adam with two small children in tow. Although Adam had not forbidden her to continue preaching or working in the Methodist movement, we find surprisingly that at some point between 1799 and 1807 the Methodist Conference "has forbid the women preaching, and [Dinah's] given it up, all but talking to the people a bit in their houses."³⁹ Seth cannot help commenting that "a sore pity it was o' Conference; and if Dinah had seen as I did we'd ha left the Wesleyans and joined a body that'ud put no bonds on Christian Liberty."⁴⁰

The conference to which they are referring was convened on July 25, 1803 in Manchester, England. At this conference in response to question nineteen: "Should women be permitted to preach among us," the response was offered:

We are of opinion that, in general, they ought not. 1. Because a vast majority of our people are opposed to it. 2. Because their preaching does not at all seem necessary, there being a sufficiency of preachers, whom God has accredited, to supply all the places in our connection with regular preaching. But if any woman among us think she has an extraordinary call from God to speak in public. (and we are sure it must be an extraordinary call that can authorize it,) we are of the opinion she should in general, address her *own sex* and *those only*: And upon this condition alone should any woman be permitted to preach in any part of our connection.⁴¹

Eliot then is historically accurate in this depiction of the climate within early 19th century Methodism. It is obvious that the leaders within the Methodist movement meant to keep a close definition of the "extraordinary call" that Wesley had recognized as allowing women to preach.⁴² They effectively re-defined the position of women preachers in such a way that prohibited them from speaking almost entirely, and relegated them back into positions of ministry that had been recognized prior to Wesley's recognition of their call to preach.

³⁷ Again, see Chilcote's treatment of the ambiguity surrounding what was to be considered preaching, and what was not. Sara Crosby may perhaps also be recognized as the "first" woman preacher. It is clear however, that the correspondence between Fletcher (Bosanquet) and Wesley in 1771 sets an important precedent in this regard.

³⁸ Chilcote, "John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism," 320.

³⁹ Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 545.

⁴⁰ Eliot, 545.

⁴¹ *Minutes of Several Conversations at the Sixtieth Annual Conference* (Manchester, England, July 25, 1803), 33-34.

⁴² See Chilcote, "John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism," 294-303.

Though Dinah seems to have acquiesced to the decision of the Conference, Seth's questioning of the prohibition is interesting. Seth, who had been the model Methodist lay-person throughout the narrative, recognized this pronouncement as an affront on Christian liberty. Surprisingly it is Adam, who has the last word in this instance saying that "most o' the women do more harm nor good with their preaching." This is not a categorical disapproval of women as preachers, but he reasons that it is because "they've not got Dinah's gift nor her sperrit." He supports Dinah who "thought it right to set th' example o'submitting," and reminds Seth that "she's not held from other sorts o' teaching," and that he "approve[s] o' what she did."⁴³ Dinah becomes uneasy about the conversation and wishes not to discuss the matter at all which no doubt alludes to historical tension over this issue as it was worked out among Methodists. Eliot, however, negates neither Dinah's past good works nor her calling, because although she can no longer actively preach, in the end she chooses to continue ministering to others through humble service.

Eliot's portrayal of Methodism in *Adam Bede*, especially embodied in the character of Dinah Morris, bears the marks of a historically grounded understanding of Wesleyan theology and polity. It also carefully creates a truthful and helpful portrayal of the Methodist movement at the close of the 18th century in England. Her treatment of Methodism is neither overly romanticized, nor is it overtly critical. She paints a faithful picture of Methodism in its relationship with the greater English society, and she creates a Methodist woman preacher who is both carefully researched and tenderly depicted. While other Victorian authors were presenting Methodism as hypocritical and prosaic, Eliot fashioned quite a different picture. Her presentation of Methodism is not without qualification to be sure, but in the end it is historically accurate, honest, and even quite charitable.

⁴³ Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 545.