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The Speaking Elephant: Rightly Dividing MacDonald's Fairy Tales

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**The Speaking Elephant:
Rightly Dividing MacDonald's Fairy Tales**
by Darren Hotmire

What if the elephant could speak? A well-known Indian proverb compares the pursuit of God to several blind men describing different parts of an elephant. One man touches a leg and argues that the creature must be a tree. Another feels his snout and, after scoffing at the first man, says that the creature really resembles a large snake. Another feels the trunk, another the tail. All describe the creature in different ways. All are true, yet not complete. God—and the elephant—is a compilation of what humanity says of him. But, what, one might ask, if the elephant could speak?

One might compare the fantasy stories of George MacDonald to this elephant. Many people have read *The Princess and the Goblin* and others of MacDonald's fairy tales, and the interpretations of these have been as varied as the blind men feeling the elephant.

This is a natural result of the genre; the mythopoetic is designed to stir the imagination and may be subject to many interpretations. But at least two reasons exist why one might wish to go beyond this statement and investigate possible meanings in the works.

Firstly, the interpreters describe positions that are contradictory to each other, yet all claim that they are describing what MacDonald was actually thinking as he wrote his stories. Secondly, the power of the stories themselves may cause the reader to wonder what it is the author had in mind.

The good news is that the elephant did speak. George MacDonald was not only a writer of fantasy, he also wrote letters, essays, sermons, and novels. In all of these writings he writes clearly of what his beliefs are. It is the goal of this paper, after summarizing those thoughts attributed to MacDonald, to examine what the author wrote directly in his other writings that apply to *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*.

Differing Views

Several of the blind elephant feelers voiced their interpretations in the *North Wind: Journal of the George MacDonald Society*. Marie Davies says that the great-grandmother figure found in MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* represents Mother Earth. She

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states: "In MacDonald's fantasy works the feminine figures always appear to be embodiments of the greatest of goddesses, Mother Earth."¹ She concludes her essay with "In both books MacDonald has expressed masterfully the way in which folklore reflects man's need to come to terms with Mother Earth our origin, who is a goddess in most societies and a feminine presence in fairy tales."²

A second elephant interpreter, Diedre Hayward, states that the grandmother figure primarily represents the need for the union of the soul with Sophia. After establishing the presence of Sophia as a female mediator between God and man in Boehme's vision, she asserts the need to "seek some evidence linking MacDonald's great-great grandmother with these Sophianic characteristics."³ She then compares Sophianic aspects in Boehme and Novalis to MacDonald's great-grandmother. She concludes with the following words:

These are only brief examples of the Sophianic aspects of MacDonald's great-great grandmother figure, but it can be seen that the image of the Sophia was of profound interest and importance to him . . . The Sophia, with her life-giving and creative powers, in this world and the next is a figure who had immense meaning and relevance to MacDonald.⁴

Another article found in the *North Wind* was written by Adrian Gunther. Gunther represents the Great-Grandmother as a spiritual guide whose goal is to lead one into the revelation of one's inner light. By doing so she leads one to discover that sacred energy is reality rather than material objects.⁵

Two other interpretations of MacDonald are offered by William Raeper and Robert Wolff. William Raeper explains MacDonald's beliefs on the basis of the influence of Coleridge, Novalis, and F.D. Maurice upon him.⁶ And, finally, the critic Robert Wolff analyzes MacDonald's thought from a Freudian perspective.

A final interpretation is given by both C.S. Lewis, an ardent admirer of MacDonald, and Rolland Hein. Lewis represented MacDonald as basically an orthodox Christian in his beliefs that were unorthodox.⁷ Rolland Hein believes that this is the reason MacDonald's writings have such a profound influence on his readers. He states, "what affects them is the insight into what are felt to be the ultimate truths about existence, conceived from a Christian point of view."⁸

The Elephant Speaks: MacDonald's Concept of God and Revelation in the Princess Stories

Revelations⁹ of God

Fortunately for those who are concerned with what MacDonald himself had in mind as he wrote, the elephant has spoken. Often, events occurring in the fairy stories of George MacDonald sound similar to concepts found in his other writings. These instances should be considered the best interpretation of MacDonald's fantasy works. The elephant himself is speaking.

One instance of this occurs as the princess in *The Princess and the Goblin* finds the grandmother by climbing a series of stairs. This may be reminiscent of a statement of MacDonald about revelation being similar to his climbing in the hills. He writes:

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Once today, looking through the mist, I said with just a slight reservation of doubt in my heart, "There. That is as high as I want it to be," and straightway I saw a higher point grow out of the mist beyond. So I have found it with all the ways of God.¹⁰

Irene climbs "up and up" and finds that she can only climb up more. It is only as she climbs up further that revelation occurs: she meets her grandmother.

Another characteristic of revelation which MacDonald believed, which may be symbolized in this story is the belief that God is the initiator of revelation. When Irene comes to see her grandmother for a second time, she is confused because on a previous occasion she could not find her. When she asks her grandmother why she could not find her, her grandmother responds, "I didn't want you to find me."¹¹ While it is true that Irene has a role in discovering the grandmother, it is equally clear that no revelation would have occurred had not the grandmother initiated the process.

One of the beliefs most often in MacDonald's thoughts is that God reveals Himself to humanity in various ways, such as: Scripture, Jesus, nature, and the child.¹² MacDonald's use of the thread made on the spinning wheel may be seen as an illustration of the revelation of God. They both lead the princess, or any who sees them, to the grandmother. The grandmother gives the thread to Irene and explains it to her. As she does this Irene exclaims, "Oh, how delightful! It will lead me to you, grandmother, I know!" The grandmother responds, "Yes, but remember, it may seem to you a very roundabout way indeed, and you must not doubt the thread. Of one thing you may be

sure, that while you hold it, I hold it too."¹³

The globe of the grandmother fulfills a similar function. This is seen as Curdie sees the globe in *The Princess and Curdie*. Curdie, who has begun to grow less of a child, does an evil deed and feels remorse. As he stands commiserating, he sees the globe of the grandmother. He realizes, then, that he can go to the grandmother and she will come to his aid. The globe guides him to the grandmother.¹⁴

Revelation and Obedience

One of Curdie's interactions with the great-grandmother in *The Princess and Curdie* illustrates MacDonald's belief that the obedience of the person to what one knows to do is essential for further revelation to occur. The grandmother advises Curdie that she is going to put him to a test which requires only trust and obedience. She then instructs him to put his hands in the rose-fire. Curdie obeys and revelation occurs.¹⁵

Childlike

This experience also emphasizes the importance of being childlike. Curdie receives hands that have been purified and can sense in what direction each person's inner life is traveling. Each person's spirit is going, in a sense, either beast-ward or child-ward. It is either becoming worse or better.

MacDonald stresses his belief in the significance of becoming childlike in his sermons. He writes in *The Hope of the Gospel* that it is only to the child-like that God himself can be revealed.¹⁶ He also states that the child has divine characteristics, and that because of this a child can be a revelation of God to

others.¹⁷

Woman and Revelation

The Princess and the Goblin also has elements that illustrate MacDonald's belief that one of God's means of revelation is women. Curdie is faced with a situation that he cannot understand; Irene has just introduced him to her grandmother, but Curdie is unable to see her. Curdie believes that Irene is making her grandmother up. When his father sees that something is troubling Curdie, he confronts him. As he does so, he admonishes Curdie to give all the facts, because, "Your mother may be able to throw some light upon them."¹⁸

At another time, in *The Princess and Curdie*, his father tells Curdie that it is his mother that has made him desire to be a true "gentleman."¹⁹ She influences his father, helping him to desire to be righteous.

Both of these instances reflect MacDonald's belief in women as one means of God's revelation. In both instances, a woman has been the instrument to introduce him to the grandmother. This can also be seen in the grandmother herself. She displays some of the characteristics of God.

The Characteristics of God

One of the characteristics of the great-grandmother, that echoes MacDonald's thoughts about God, is love. During Irene's first encounter with her grandmother, the grandmother asks why Irene did not come to her so that she could wipe the tears from her eyes.²⁰ In a subsequent meeting her grandmother invites the little princess to sleep in her arms. Irene nestles close to her and exclaims, "Oh dear! This is so nice . . . I

didn't know anything in the world could be so comfortable."²¹

The love of God, as believed by MacDonald, is also illustrated in the grandmother's fire of roses. This fire burns everything it touches into purity. The grandmother brushes a single rosebud over her stained dress and it is instantly cleansed.²² One attribute of the God of MacDonald is a love that seeks the purity of that which it loves. This love he compares to a consuming fire which burns all impurities in the object loved.²³

A final thought of MacDonald is illustrated by the appearance of the great-grandmother. When Irene saw her grandmother, her grandmother did not look the same as on previous occasions. There were two basic "looks" of the grandmother, which describe something about the nature of the grandmother that is similar to the nature of God in the thought of MacDonald. The first time the princess sees her grandmother, the grandmother's long hair is almost as white as snow. And her eyes "looked so wise that you could not have helped seeing she must be old."²⁴ There was a divine wisdom in Irene's grandmother.

One another visit of the princess, the grandmother was so beautiful that the princess was "bewildered with astonishment and admiration."²⁵ Irene, when confronted with the beauty of her grandmother, feels dirty and uncomfortable in comparison.

Concluding Comments

The elephant of this essay speaks of the elephant of the Indian proverb. MacDonald's God is a God who is known through reading the scripture, by looking at the person of Jesus, by viewing his work in nature, by being obedient to the duty one sees, by having a

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child-like faith, and by relationships with fellow human beings.

He is a loving Father, one who does not rely on a feminine mediator, but who lovingly reveals Himself to the world. He is a personal God who lovingly created the world; he is separate from it, but chooses to reveal Himself to it. He is a God of love, a God of wisdom, and a God of beauty.

This is the God of George MacDonald—the God that he loved and lived to please and satisfy. The God that he writes of in all his works, including his works of fantasy.

Notes

¹Davis, Marie, "A Spiritual Presence in Fairyland: The Great-Great Grandmother in the Princess Books," *North Wind: Journal of the George MacDonald Society*, 12 (1993):60.

²*Ibid.*, 64.

³Hayward, Deidre, "The Mystical Sophia: More on the Great Grandmother in the Princess Books," *North Wind: Journal of the George MacDonald Society*, 13 (1994): 30.

⁴*Ibid.*, 31-33.

⁵Gunther, Adrian, "The Phenomenal as a Channel to the Real in MacDonald's Fantasy," *North Wind: Journal of the George MacDonald Society*, 13 (1994): 34-38.

⁶Raeper, William, *George MacDonald*. (Tring, Batavia, Sydney: Lion Publishing, 1987), 239-240.

⁷Lewis, C.S., *The Great Divorce*. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1946), 60-61.

⁸Hein, Rolland, *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald*, (Washington D.C.: Christian University Press, 1982), xvi.

⁹Revelation, as discussed in this paper is not always referred to in the strict theological

sense often given to it. In many instances it is being used in a sense more accurately described in theology as "illumination."

¹⁰MacDonald, George, *An Expression of Character: The Letters of George MacDonald*. Edited by Glenn Edward Sadler. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 149.

¹¹MacDonald, George, *The Princess and the Goblin*. (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company Inc., 1949), 75. Compare to comments made in *A Dish of Orts* pages two and three. For the sake of time, the thoughts of MacDonald as displayed in his other works will not be quoted directly, but will be spoken of and documented.

¹²MacDonald, George, *Unspoken Sermons; the First Series*. (London: Strahan and Company, 1869), 59.

¹³PG, 105.

¹⁴MacDonald, George, *The Princess and Curdie*. (London: Blackie and Son. N.D.), 16-18.

¹⁵PG, 69-70. Compare this with MacDonald's thoughts found in *A Dish of Orts* 72, 153, *Unspoken Sermon* 156, *Hope of the Gospels* 121, *Paul Faber Surgeon* 61.

¹⁶HG, 162. See also 155 and US 50-51.

¹⁷US, 3. For further writings of MacDonald on the childlike see HG 86, 114, 56, 11-12.

¹⁸PG, 165.

¹⁹PC, 83. Some examples of MacDonald speaking of Women as means of God's revealing himself to individuals in *Paul Faber-Surgeon* 22, 27, 28.

²⁰PG, 11.

²¹PG, 81.

²²PG, 99.

²³US, 27-28.

²⁴PG, 11.

²⁵PG, 98.

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