

## Inklings Forever

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Volume 4 A Collection of Essays Presented at the  
Fourth Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S.  
Lewis & Friends

Article 7

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3-2004

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### Recommended Citation

Hammond, Marie K. (2004) "Casting Light on Lilith: A Biblical Approach," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 4 , Article 7.  
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**INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume IV**

A Collection of Essays Presented at  
The Fourth

FRANCES WHITE EWBANK COLLOQUIUM

ON

**C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS**

Taylor University 2004  
Upland, Indiana

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A Biblical Approach**

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Hammond, Marie K. "Casting Light on *Lilith*: A Biblical Approach." Inklings Forever 4 (2004)  
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# Casting Light on *Lilith*: A Biblical Approach

Marie K. Hammond

## Introduction

In his essay “The Fantastic Imagination,” George MacDonald states that if a fairy tale has proportion and harmony, and in consequence vitality, then it must also have meaning. He does not, however, advocate that the author make this meaning explicit. Rather, he says: “Everyone . . . who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development: one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as David Robb points out, the author of a fantasy work may not fully understand its meaning or intend a particular interpretation, because its inspiration seems to come from a source outside himself.<sup>2</sup>

Particularly perplexing and disquieting among MacDonald’s works is his fantasy novel *Lilith*, treating as it does the difficult subjects of suffering, death, and sin. Evil in many forms appears before the reader, while the narrator tells us at a crucial point in the story that “(n)one but God hates evil and understands it.”<sup>3</sup> What, then, are we to make of this book *Lilith*?

In recent years, critics of the fantasy have attempted to interpret MacDonald’s work in terms of ideas prevalent in the late 20th century. A more helpful approach, perhaps, is the one adopted here, which takes into account the manifold biblical references and allusions sprinkled throughout the text, as well as the author’s deep religious faith. With such a marvelously complex work as *Lilith*, any generalization one makes or interpretation one gives is bound to be a simplification. Nevertheless, the ideas presented in this paper may cast some light on *Lilith* and thereby assist readers in finding the meaning most enriching and uplifting to themselves.

## Brief Plot Summary

The narrator Mr. Vane sees in his library the shadowy figure of a former librarian Mr. Raven. Encountering Raven alternately in human and bird form, Vane speaks with him and follows him through a mirror into a world of seven dimensions. Here Raven invites him to sleep in a frozen chamber beside many still bodies, but Vane runs away.

In his journeys through the strange world, Vane meets hideous monsters, skeletons engaged in battle, innocent children, and dancers without faces. He

encounters two powerful women, Mara, who is mysterious but good, and Lilith, who is utterly evil. Although Vane’s intentions are usually noble, he is headstrong. In refusing advice from those who know better, he muddles his efforts to help the children and causes much misery.

Meanwhile, Lilith is given opportunities to repent of her selfish deeds but she refuses. After much suffering, she yields a little but still cannot open her clenched hand. She is taken to Raven, revealed to be her former husband Adam, whom she asks to cut off her hand. Once that is done, she and Vane sleep in the chamber of death. Vane wakes, sometimes in his own house and sometimes in the other world, never sure which existence is real and which is a dream.

## Why a Biblical Approach?

Among the many possible avenues to interpretation, it would be worthwhile to choose one that is consistent with the author’s way of thinking. According to his son Greville, George MacDonald considered his first draft of *Lilith* to be “a mandate direct from God.”<sup>4</sup> Thus we know the work has religious significance, at least for the author. Further, we know that MacDonald held moral law to be revealed and absolute; he says a teller of fairy tales may invent new laws of nature so long as he works within them, but he is *not* free to invent moral law, which remains the same in all worlds. “In physical things a man may invent; in moral things he must obey—and take their laws with him into his invented world as well.”<sup>5</sup> Thus it would be profitable to look to the source of moral law, as understood by MacDonald, for help in elucidating this fantasy tale of sin and forgiveness.

If we did not already suspect that the Bible was an important source of inspiration to George MacDonald, a reading of *Lilith* would point us in that direction. Indeed, Tim Martin has compiled a list of approximately 140 biblical allusions in *Lilith*,<sup>6</sup> and John Docherty has stated in particular how some of these passages, especially chapters 9 and 10 of Mark’s gospel, appertain to the novel.<sup>7</sup> Beyond the many scriptural references, the biblical names of some characters provide clues as to the role they play in the story.

Another indication of the importance of the Bible to this story is the part played by books, especially the mysterious book fragment in Vane's library that crosses over between two worlds. While the book in question is certainly not the Bible, its words arouse in Vane certain "spiritual sensations" and a longing to know more of its contents. (14) Vane cannot release the fragment from the shelf where it is firmly fixed, but he later hears Raven read from the book ancient poems about Lilith's experiences in two worlds. Vane's father, in his written recollections of a conversation he had with Raven about passageways between worlds, quotes the librarian as saying, "A book . . . is a door in, and therefore a door out." (39) When Vane goes back into his own world for the last time, he sees the board of a large book closing behind him. Somehow, words and books give means of entry into another world, just as Holy Scripture might be considered a link between bodily existence and spiritual existence, or between earthly and heavenly realms. This idea is reinforced by the fact that Raven, a librarian in one world, is sexton and mortician in the other world, caring for bodies instead of books.

On the other hand, it might be, as Stephen Prickett suggests, that the book spanning two worlds symbolizes in a more general sense the accumulated wisdom from centuries of human experience.<sup>8</sup> Granting this interpretation, it must be remembered that MacDonald was heavily influenced by writers such as Dante, Bunyan, Milton, and Law, whose works are often rooted in Scripture.

Finally, a biblical approach to *Lilith* is consistent with observations of Dr. Greville MacDonald, named by his father in the 1890's as "the only one left to me who quite understands me."<sup>9</sup> According to Dr. MacDonald, *Lilith* is "an allegory of two worlds," one having three concrete dimensions and one containing those three and adding four spiritual dimensions.<sup>10</sup> The son finds similarities in his father's novel to ideas of Spenser, Blake, and Boehme, but he also employs biblical concepts such as grace, hell-fire, and resurrection of the body and mentions Eve and Mary Magdelene in his commentary on *Lilith*.<sup>11</sup>

### **Biblical Themes**

Whether one reads *Lilith* as a series of adventures occurring in two different worlds or as a metaphysical dream taking place entirely within Vane's mind, the themes of the novel will be essentially the same. The book is a profound examination of human sin, its types, its consequences, and its cures. These themes can be illuminated by noting their connection with biblical truths, starting from the creation story and going forward to the teachings of Jesus, the writings of Paul, and the revelation of John.

In a book about sin, it is appropriate that Adam and Eve should appear, inasmuch as they are associated in the Bible with original sin. Giving a nice ironic turn to the story, MacDonald allows the initiators of sin to be sent as rescuers to the human race. Noel O'Donoghue carries this idea further by associating the characters Adam and Eve, who in their roles in *Lilith* attempt to reconcile human beings to God, with Christ and Mary.<sup>12</sup> This theory might be supported by Vane's recognition that "Mr. Raven was indeed Adam, the old and the new man; and that his wife, ministering in the house of the dead, was Eve, the mother of us all, the lady of the new Jerusalem." (155) In depicting Adam and Eve as guides and rescuers, MacDonald is reminding us that our Savior was himself a man, as proclaimed so eloquently by Paul: "For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."<sup>13</sup>

Allusions to Eden and the creation account are plentiful, from the innocent and happy existence of the Little Ones to the scene (98-105) where Vane finds an unconscious, naked woman, notices her ribs, watches by her side for seven days, wonders if she is to be his companion, and even compares himself to Adam. Later he makes clothing for her from leaves and thinks of a serpent in connection with her actions. These allusions to the creation and fall remind the reader that sin is an inevitable part of human experience from the very beginning.

### **Types of Sin**

Appearing in the novel are many types of sin, depicted in the unwholesome creatures Vane meets during his travels. The two sins most emphasized are those exemplified in the main characters Vane and Lilith, which for the sake of brevity will be denoted "willfulness" and "selfishness."

The willful character Vane always insists on doing things his own way, even in the face of evidence that his actions are inappropriate and wrong. Early in the story, he is given the opportunity to rest in the chamber of death, but he declines. Raven attributes this to his being "neither weary nor heavy laden," (26) suggesting by this scriptural allusion that Vane is not willing to be meek or lowly in heart, and that he has refused the light yoke and easy burden. (Matt. 11:28-30) Before submitting to God's will, he wants to go home and accomplish something by his own efforts, much like the men in Luke's gospel who will not follow Jesus until their personal business is done. (Luke 9:57-62)

Vane ignores repeated warnings from people he loves and trusts to stay away from the evil princess, and he forgets Raven's injunction (97) to believe no one who has lied to him. His desire to know more leads him (like the biblical Adam and Eve) into temptation he

cannot resist. Because Vane is willfully disobedient to powers greater than himself, all his good intentions lead to bad results. After he fails repeatedly to accomplish what he intended, Raven asks him, “do you not know why you have not yet done anything worth doing?” When Vane cannot give a satisfactory answer, Raven tells him cryptically, “. . . you will be dead, so long as you refuse to die.” (163-4) What Raven speaks of is dying to self, in the same sense that Jesus says, “he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.” (Matt. 10:39)

Vane himself recognizes the danger in his willfulness. As he leads the children on a military campaign to conquer the city Bulika, he is affected by a sense of dread because he believes himself answerable for their lives. Later (probably in retrospect), he muses: “Alas, I who dreamed thus, had not myself learned to obey! Untrusting, unfaithful obstinacy had set me at the head of that army of innocents!” (186-7) His anxiety is well-founded, for the campaign ends disastrously, perhaps hastening his acceptance of Raven’s earlier admonition: “Whose work is it but your own to open your eyes? But indeed the business of the universe is to make such a fool of you that you will know yourself for one, and so begin to be wise!” (24) These words echo the counsel of Paul to the Corinthians: “Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.” (I Cor. 3:18)

Even Vane’s name testifies to his foolish ways. The words “vain” and “vanity” (in the sense of fruitlessness) occur many dozens of times in the Bible. Repeating over and over again the phrase “all is vanity and vexation of spirit” (or in a later translation, “striving after wind”), the writer of Ecclesiastes emphasizes that the efforts of mankind are carried out in vain. Similar references can be found in Job, Jeremiah, and the Psalms. The first two verses of Psalm 127 seem especially pertinent, as they have bearing on the plot of *Lilith*:

Except the Lord build the house, they labor in  
vain that build it:  
except the Lord keep the city, the watchman  
waketh but in vain.  
It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late,  
to eat the bread  
of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.

When separated from God, a person’s efforts are futile. St. Paul considers the question from a more constructive angle when he says: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” (I Cor. 15:58) Eventually, Vane learns that taking action purely on his own initiative comes to naught, whereas

subordinating his will to a greater wisdom bears good fruit.

The character of Lilith exemplifies total selfishness. She is determined to preserve her own power and pleasure, regardless of the injury she inflicts on others. Her clenched hand suggests that she grasps what she wants for herself and does not willingly give anything to anyone else. Lilith’s fierce pride keeps her apart from God; even after she has suffered great pain and felt the horrible consequences of evil, she will not taste the bread and wine offered to her. The sacramental allusion is inescapable: “Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” (John 6:53)

As we examine Lilith’s role in the novel, it will be helpful to consider the Jewish legend of Lilith, as described in the non-canonical rabbinic writings. Perhaps in an attempt to reconcile the two creation accounts in Genesis (esp. Gen. 1:27 and Gen. 2:20-23), the legend holds that Lilith was the first wife of Adam, created with him at the same time. Asserting equality with her husband and refusing to lie beneath him, she leaves him and becomes the mother of demons. Combining the creation legend with earlier Babylonian mythology, the tradition has portrayed Lilith as a menacing creature who seduces men in their sleep and strangles young children. In some accounts she is identified as Satan’s wife or as the Queen of Sheba, and sometimes she appears in the form of a cat.

In MacDonald’s fantasy, Lilith is the queen of Bulika, who appears in the form of a spotted leopard. In a sort of seduction, she lies with Vane at night and sucks his blood. What Lilith calls love is nothing but hunger to satisfy her selfish desire, as revealed when she tells Vane, “you must follow me, looking for nothing, not gratitude, not even pity in return!—follow and find me, and be content with merest presence, with scantest forbearance!” (135)

Biblical imagery again casts light on the story. When Lilith, in a discussion with her former husband Adam, claims to be beautiful and immortal, Adam replies that she is like “a bush that burns, and is consumed,” (155) emphasizing the self-destructive nature of evil and reminding the reader of the burning bush that was not consumed, from which God spoke to Moses. (Ex. 3:2 ff) Fearing a prophecy that a child would bring about her downfall, Lilith sets out to kill the children, whom Vane calls the “Little Ones.” The situation is reminiscent of Jesus’s warnings against doing harm to children and other innocent beings, referred to as “little ones.” (e.g. Matt. 18:6,10,14) Adam explains to Vane that Lilith’s day will begin to dawn when “she confesses her last hope gone, that it is indeed hard to kick against the goad.” (161) St. Paul

uses the same metaphor in describing his conversion on the road to Damascus. (Acts 9:5)

Thus, Lilith and Vane are both sinners, resisting at first the invitation to sleep in the chamber of death and thereby showing themselves unwilling to die to self. While the woman's sin is greater in this fantasy tale, it would be a mistake to consider Lilith's selfishness or Vane's willfulness to be linked in any way to gender. In his fairy tale "The Wise Woman" MacDonald treats the same two sins, embodied in the spoiled child Rosamond and the willful child Agnes, both female as is the wise woman who tries to redeem them. Indeed, if George MacDonald expresses a gender preference, he tends to favor women, inasmuch as messengers and workers of the divine purpose in his fairy tales are apparently more likely to be female than male.<sup>14</sup>

Readers who construe the action to be taking place entirely within Vane's mind might regard the sins depicted in the novel as facets of one personality instead of characteristics of separate people. If so, the story could bear the interpretation that Vane's selfish nature (represented by Lilith) entices his willful nature (Vane himself) and feeds off it. In any case, sinners are wrestling with powerful forces inside and outside themselves. Fortunately, human beings are not left alone in their struggle with sin. The help they receive begins in the consequences wrought by their own transgressions.

### **Consequences of Sin**

The most horrible consequence of Vane's willfulness is that he is compelled to witness the misery he causes. He cannot see much at first, but as the story progresses, his vision improves, allowing him to better understand the connection between his actions and their unhappy outcomes.

On Vane's first visit to the attic chamber, a cloud of dust obscures the light rays which fill the place. He describes himself as short-sighted, and once having fallen into the mirror, he gropes about, trying to touch what he cannot see. Incapacity to see is surely an indication of Vane's inability to understand what goes on around him. During a discussion about finding the way home, Raven says to Vane, "What you call riddles are truths, and seem riddles because you are not true." (45) Jesus communicates to his disciples a similar understanding about the people of his day: "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand." (Luke 8:10)

In spite of his short-sightedness, Vane sets out confidently in the region of seven dimensions, ready to take action and exert influence on others. His self-assurance wavers as he begins to see the results of his deeds. In the first such instance, Vane is spurred by

curiosity to grasp at a luminous flying beacon Raven has provided, and thus he kills his only guide through the darkness. He is distraught and buries his face in his hands.

Vane gets a notion of the risks he faces in acting as a blind guide to the Little Ones. He interrupts the narrative with a comment about his ill-conceived actions: "The part of a philanthropist is indeed a dangerous one; and the man who would do his neighbor good must first study how not to do him evil, and must begin by pulling the beam out of his own eye." (73) Using another biblical figure (Matt. 7:3-5) MacDonald tells us that Vane's vision is blocked by something within himself, presumably his willful nature that prevents his viewing things with proper perspective.

By repeatedly disregarding Raven's instructions, Vane allows Lilith to pass through the world of three dimensions to the home of the Little Ones, whom she intends to kill. Vane feels responsible and wants to pursue her, even after Raven tells him he will fail to accomplish anything good. Still headstrong, Vane breaks a promise and rides after Lilith on Raven's magnificent horse. When his plans go awry and the horse is killed, Vane again buries his face in his hands, knowing that he is at fault. Later he leads the innocent children into battle and watches as they suffer injuries and endure the loss of their beloved leader Lona. Vane himself is heartbroken at Lona's death, which he helped bring about.

When at long last Vane agrees to sleep in the chamber of death, he dreams of every offense he ever committed and feels the sorrow and hurt of those he had wronged. This treatment is hard, and yet it is the beginning of repentance and amendment of life which are necessary for healing.

For Lilith, the consequence of sin is consuming misery. Her self-centered existence is prophetically described by Vane shortly before he sees her for the first time. "What a hell of horror, I thought, to wander alone, a bare existence never going out of itself, never widening its life in another life, but, bound with the cords of its poor peculiarities, lying an eternal prisoner in the dungeon of its own being!" (85) Soon thereafter, as Vane watches two skeletons contend viciously with each other, he hears a voice over his head: "You are not in hell . . . Neither am I in hell. But those skeletons are in hell!" (96) The speaker, of course, is Raven, who seems to imply that hell exists wherever people surround themselves with hatred, cruelty, and selfish thoughts.

Lilith's poem contained in the book fragment from Vane's library is a hymn to selfishness, chronicling her descent from earthly life into hell: On earth, she hopes to gain power over a man by appealing to his highest ideals, thus binding him with cords stronger than death or life, while giving him nothing in return. Her plan

takes an unexpected turn when she suddenly wakes, gripped by fear, not able to understand the source of her despair. Her body, once perfect and well-cared for, is now rotting and penetrated throughout by darkness. In the last stanza of the poem, Lilith wishes she had never lived and so had escaped the anguish and defilement of bodily existence.

Only in nonexistence can Lilith imagine an end to her wretchedness. After she is taken away from her palace, she asks repeatedly for death, which, to her, means ceasing to exist. But that kind of death is not offered. Rather, she is encouraged again and again to die to self, to give up her exalted opinion of herself, and to admit that she is not God. During the difficult treatment Lilith undergoes in Mara's cottage, she clings to her imagined god-like self-sufficiency. Claiming for herself qualities that are associated with God, she says, "I will be what I mean myself now," "I will do what I will do," and most obviously, "I am what I am." (208-9) It is significant that these statements are possible translations of the Hebrew Tetragrammaton YHWH (transliterated Yahweh), a name of God in the Old Testament.

Employing more biblical allusions, MacDonald tells us how Lilith is finally able to see herself for what she is. A worm-thing enters the black spot on her side and is "piercing through the joints and marrow to the thoughts and intents of the heart." (210) From this unmistakable reference to the book of Hebrews (4:9-13), the reader may infer that the worm-thing is somehow making accessible to Lilith the word of God, in order to help her repent and enter into God's rest.

Vane wants to rescue her from further suffering, but Mara tells him that Lilith "is far away from us, afar in the hell of her self-consciousness. The central fire of the universe is radiating into her the knowledge of good and evil, the knowledge of what she is. She sees at last the good she is not, and the evil she is." (211) The phrase "knowledge of good and evil" reminds us again of the temptation and fall in the garden of Eden, and of the consequences which follow for sinful humanity. Further allusions to the Genesis creation account are evident in Vane's observation that Lilith "was what God could not have created. She had usurped beyond her share in self-creation, and her part had undone His! She saw now what she had made, and behold, it was not good!" (216) With this ironic reversal of God's recognition that his acts of creation were good, MacDonald tells us that human beings must accept themselves as God made them instead of trying to undo his work. By attempting to recreate herself, Lilith transmutes her life into hell, an abode of torment and misery.

In one of his *Unspoken Sermons*, MacDonald makes quite explicit the idea of a self-created hell: ". . . the one principle of hell is—I am my own. I am my

own king and my own subject. *I* am the centre from which go out my thoughts; *I* am the object and end of my thoughts; back upon *me* as the alpha and omega of life, my thoughts return. My own glory is, and ought to be, my chief care; my ambition, to gather the regards of men to the one centre, myself . . ."<sup>15</sup> This is a perfect description of the hell into which Lilith takes herself.

### Cures for Sin

The cures for sin are inextricably tied to the consequences of sin. Echoing an idea expressed repeatedly in Psalms and Proverbs, the author of Hebrews says: "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth . . . Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." (Heb. 12:5b-6, 11) The sufferings Vane and Lilith endure are part of the chastisement that will bring them closer to the kingdom of God.

Early in the story, the bird-sexton Raven digs worms out of the earth, tosses them into the air, and watches as they soar away gorgeous butterflies. He explains to Vane that his business is to help creatures rise up and become larger and better. Likewise, the reader should understand, human beings who consent to be buried can afterwards rise up again in new life. Jesus gives a metaphorical statement of the same idea: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." (John 12:24) Only after a person submits to God and dies (in a figurative sense) can he be reborn in new life.

Vane's discussion with Mr. and Mrs. Raven during his first visit to the chamber of death is rich in biblical allusion. Mrs. Raven says she can give refreshment only to those who ask, suggesting the often repeated scriptural injunction: "Ask, and it shall be given you." (e.g. Matt. 7:7) Vane sits down to a "perfect meal" of bread and wine that "seemed to go deeper than the hunger and thirst," (29) bringing to mind both a communion meal and the conversation Jesus had with the woman at the well: "Jesus answered and said unto her . . . whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." (John 4:13-14) To reap the benefits of the Ravens' hospitality, Vane must accept it to the full by sleeping heartily and entirely in the chamber of death. Thus he is required to demonstrate his complete surrender of self, just as the two men in the parables who seek the kingdom of heaven must sell all they have to purchase what they are looking for. (Matt. 13:44-46) Notwithstanding Raven's counsel, Vane refuses the first

opportunity to sleep and to relinquish his willfulness, prompting Raven to say, “No one who will not sleep can ever wake.” (44) The cure for sin comes only through complete submission to God; then, by his grace, God offers forgiveness, restoration, and healing to the repentant sinner.

Before Vane can accomplish surrender of self, he must “grow up” to be like a little child. He must learn to love and trust the Ravens in the same way the Little Ones love and trust him. “. . . Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 18:3) After failing repeatedly to do anything good on his own, Vane finally learns to trust Raven. Near the end of the novel, by following Raven’s instructions perfectly and completely, he is able to carry out one beneficial act, the burial of Lilith’s severed hand. Immediately, hidden water oozes up from the ground, reawakening an ancient river and restoring life to the desert. With Vane’s submission has come humility, repentance, and amendment of life so that for the first time his actions are in accord with the will of God.

The cure for Lilith’s sin is considerably more painful. Because her sin is so deeply ingrained, she must undergo near torture in Mara’s cottage before the remedy can begin to take effect. MacDonald uses Mara, whose name means “bitter,” to represent the idea of beneficial suffering. When Vane first visits her cottage, he finds out who Mara is not: “Some people . . . take me for Lot’s wife, lamenting over Sodom; and some think I am Rachel, weeping for her children; but I am neither of those.” (79) Yet, the reader is left with the sense that Mara, sometimes called the Lady of Sorrow, can be identified with other women of the Bible who suffer, perhaps Mary Magdalene or Mary, the mother of Jesus. The similarity of names makes this seem a reasonable supposition.

In the cottage, Mara administers the painful treatment Lilith needs in order to recognize and relinquish her selfishness. After intense suffering, Lilith tries to open her clenched hand but cannot do it. When the situation seems hopeless, Vane remembers that “with God all things are possible: He can save even the rich!” (216) Referring again to scripture (Matt. 19:23-26) and injecting a touch of humor, MacDonald tells us that the grace of God is sufficient to save the most heinous of sinners (even the rich!) Immediately after this recognition, Lilith yields and admits her defeat, although she still cannot open her hand.

Mara, acting like a mother, embraces Lilith, kisses her, and puts her to bed. Lilith weeps and listens to the soft rain outside, and then she is able to sleep peacefully until morning. Tears and water have healing and cleansing power, associated in the Bible with salutary suffering, repentance, baptism, and bestowal of grace. The scene of weeping brings to mind the psalmist’s

words, quoted earlier in the novel (82) when Vane first gets a glimpse of Mara’s tearful eyes:

Sing unto the Lord, O ye saints of his, and  
give thanks at the remembrance of his  
holiness.

For his anger endureth but a moment; in his  
favour is life: weeping may  
endure for a night, but joy cometh in the  
morning. (Psalm 30:4-5)

The night Lilith spends in Mara’s cottage can be compared to the pain and bitterness all people encounter in life. Heather Ward has expounded beautifully on how the character Mara serves as an expression of the pain and uncertainty of repentance, and how a person’s grief can lead to reconciliation with God.<sup>16</sup>

Still, after her night of weeping, Lilith’s cure is not complete, for she has not yet been able to open her clenched hand. She is taken to the house of death where she again tries and fails to open it; the wretched woman then asks Adam to bring a sword and cut off her hand. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus says: “And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.” (Mark 9:43-44) The reference is doubly appropriate, in that an earlier part of Lilith’s treatment involved a white-hot worm-thing, described as “the live heart of essential fire,” (210) that entered Lilith’s chest and allowed her to perceive her own sin. By requesting that her hand be cut off, Lilith presumably avoids the unquenchable fire of hell and the worm that does not die.

Now, at last, Lilith is able to sleep in the chamber of death. Two of the Little Ones climb up on the couch to sleep beside her, giving her the loving support and companionship in death that she would not willingly accept in life. Lilith’s cure is assisted by the kind acts of those who love her, reminding us that believers are enjoined in scripture to love their neighbors and help convert the sinner “from the error of his way . . .” (James 5:20)

At the end of the novel, Lilith and Vane both partake of the sleep that brings comfort, restoration, and, we may hope, the grace to abandon their sins. George MacDonald, speaking through the narrator in his novel *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, gives his ideas about the restorative value of sleep and death:

It may be said of the body in regard of sleep as well as in regard of death, ‘It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.’ . . . I believe that, if there be a living, conscious love at the heart of the universe, the mind, in the



quiescence of its consciousness in sleep, comes into a less disturbed contact with its origin, the heart of the creation; whence gifted with calmness and strength for itself, it grows able to impart comfort and restoration to the weary frame. The cessation of labor affords but the necessary occasion; makes it possible, as it were, for the occupant of an outlying station in the wilderness to return to his father's house for fresh supplies of all that is needful for life and energy.<sup>17</sup>

### God's Inexorable Love

Vane and Lilith suffer for their sins, but never is their suffering arbitrary or unavailing. Rather, it is suffering with a purpose, a form of discipline, designed to burn away sin and cleanse the sinner. In one of his *Unspoken Sermons*, MacDonald makes clear his ideas about justice and mercy: "I believe that justice and mercy are simply one and the same thing; . . . that such is the mercy of God that he will hold his children in the consuming fire of his distance until they pay the uttermost farthing, until they drop the purse of selfishness with all the dross that is in it, and rush home to the Father and the Son, . . . I believe that no hell will be lacking which would help the just mercy of God to redeem his children."<sup>18</sup>

The work of redemption for Lilith and Vane is not complete at the end of the book. Yet God is patient and persistent, and, in this story, he and his agents go to extraordinary lengths to win back sinners, even creatures as despicable as Lilith and as stubborn as Vane. MacDonald's comforting and reassuring message to sinful humanity is that we must not despair at our own sinfulness or the futility of our efforts to be virtuous, for God's love is unrelenting. Even when we turn our backs to him or when our suffering blinds us to his presence, he continues working to win our souls.

It would seem that God's relentless pursuit of human souls makes salvation inevitable in MacDonald's vision of the universe. Karl Kegler observes in his essay on Lilith's city of Bulika: "It is significant that in MacDonald's conception there is no place for an eternal damnation. Everything that in the beginning was conceived by the Creator returns—even after ages of self-imposed exile—to the original thought which created it: Adam equally with Lilith, and, finally, 'the Shadow,' Satan himself."<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Greville MacDonald appears to acknowledge his father's tendency toward universalism when he says that *Lilith* was written, in part, to counter claims of some universalists who said that suffering and repentance are not required on the road to salvation.<sup>20</sup> Whether or not he considered himself a universalist, George MacDonald was certainly an optimist who

thought God could (and would) work wonders in the fullness of eternity. It is reasonable to assume that he based his high hopes on Scripture, perhaps the following passages:

But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. (II Peter 3:8-9)

That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: . . . (Eph. 1:10)

C.S. Lewis, in the preface to his MacDonald anthology, summarizes precisely the idea of God's unrelenting love which appears over and over again in MacDonald's works: "I dare not say that he is never in error; but to speak plainly I know hardly any other writer who seems to be closer, or more continually close, to the Spirit of Christ Himself. Hence his Christ-like union of tenderness and severity. Nowhere else outside the New Testament have I found terror and comfort so intertwined. The title 'Inexorable Love' which I have given to several individual extracts would serve for the whole collection. Inexorability—but never the inexorability of anything less than love—runs through it all like a refrain; . . ."<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusion

In his preface to Valdemar Thisted's book entitled *Letters from Hell*, MacDonald writes: ". . . men, in defacing the image of God in themselves, construct for themselves a world of horror and dismay . . ."<sup>22</sup> Vane's region of seven dimensions can be such a place of horror and dismay, or it can be an entranceway to heaven. MacDonald recognizes that our world, too, if we look beyond its mundane three dimensions, can reveal to us the kingdom of heaven unveiled in our midst.

After Vane has slept and dreamed in the chamber of death, Adam tells him he has "not yet looked Truth in the face," has at best "seen him through a cloud," and never did see "save in a glass darkly—that which, indeed, never can be known save by its innate splendour shining straight into pure eyes." (246) The author alludes once again to Scripture (I Cor. 13:12) to suggest that the worlds of spirit and matter coexist, but that Vane does not perceive this to be so. Awareness of God's presence in the world is attainable only with

“pure eyes,” perhaps associated with the qualities faith, hope, and charity commended by Paul in the letter just cited.

The last chapters of *Lilith* contain references to apocalyptic visions from Ezekiel, Daniel, and the book of Revelation. In particular, St. John’s perception of the bejeweled city, the New Jerusalem, shines magnificently through the narrative as Vane and the Little Ones ascend to the city on the mountain and up a great stairway into the clouds. MacDonald leaves readers with a heavenly vision of hope after leading them through trials and terrors representing earthly existence.

By referring often to the Scriptures, MacDonald implicitly suggests that people may turn to them for guidance, comfort, truth, and understanding. The Bible, crossing the perceived divide between physical and spiritual reality, may lead seekers to discover answers to the mysteries of life and what lies beyond. There are many additional allusions to Scripture in *Lilith* that are not mentioned here; hence those who find the approach helpful may wish to read the book with a Bible and concordance close at hand.

Looking once more into MacDonald’s essay “The Fantastic Imagination,” we see that this author does not object when readers find meaning in his work beyond what he intended: “If he be a true man, he will imagine true things; what matter whether I meant them or not? They are there none the less that I cannot claim putting them there! One difference between God’s work and man’s is, that, while God’s work cannot mean more than he meant, man’s must mean more than he meant.”<sup>23</sup> Let us get on then with our reading and our imagining, so that we may find meaning in MacDonald’s *Lilith*, a book so highly regarded by his son that he called it the “Revelation of St. George the Divine.”<sup>24</sup>

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>George MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination,” reprinted in *The Gifts of the Christ Child & Other Stories and Fairy Tales*, ed. by Glenn Edward Sadler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. xxiii.
- <sup>2</sup>David Robb, “‘Imaginative but Intimately True’: The Novels of George MacDonald,” *The Chesterton Review*, Vol. XXVII, 1 & 2 (Feb/May 2001), p. 73. [This entire issue is devoted to “George MacDonald and the Sacramental Imagination.”]
- <sup>3</sup>George MacDonald, *Lilith* (Whitethorn CA: Johannesen, 1994, reproduced from 1896 ed.), p. 215. All subsequent *Lilith* references are to this edition and are indicated in the text by a page number in parentheses.
- <sup>4</sup>Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife* (New York: Dial Press, 1924), p. 548.

- <sup>5</sup>MacDonald, “Fantastic Imagination,” p. xxiii.
- <sup>6</sup>Tim Martin, “A Check List of Biblical Allusions in *Lilith*,” *North Wind* 14 (1995), pp. 75-78. See Appendix for approximately 60 additional allusions.
- <sup>7</sup>John Docherty, Editorial contribution to comments on an article by John Pennington, *North Wind* 21 (2002), pp. 63-67.
- <sup>8</sup>Stephen Prickett, “George MacDonald and the European Literary Tradition,” *The Chesterton Review*, Vol. XXVII, 1 & 2 (Feb/May 2001), p. 88.
- <sup>9</sup>Greville MacDonald, *GMD and his Wife*, p. 548.
- <sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 549.
- <sup>11</sup>Greville MacDonald, *GMD and his Wife*, p. 403, 547, and Greville MacDonald, “Introduction to *Lilith*,” reprinted in *Wingfold* 40 (Fall 2002), p. 38, 39, 40.
- <sup>12</sup>Noel Dermot O’Donoghue, “The Nostalgia for Eden: George MacDonald’s *Lilith*,” *The Chesterton Review*, Vol. XXVII, 1 & 2 (Feb/May 2001), p. 43.
- <sup>13</sup>I Cor. 15:21-22. All Bible quotations are from the Authorized (King James) Version, as this presumably would have been the English text most familiar to MacDonald.
- <sup>14</sup>Some examples in MacDonald’s fantasy tales of female spiritual guides are the wise woman mentioned in this paper, North Wind in *At the Back of the North Wind*, and the great-great-grandmother in *The Princess and the Goblin*.
- <sup>15</sup>George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons, Series I, II, III* (Whitethorn CA: Johannesen, 1997, reproduced from 1867, 1886, 1889 eds.), p. 495.
- <sup>16</sup>Heather Ward, “Earth’s Crammed with Heaven: Fantasy and Sacramental Imagination in George MacDonald,” *The Chesterton Review*, Vol. XXVII, 1 & 2 (Feb/May 2001), p. 36.
- <sup>17</sup>George MacDonald, *Wilfrid Cumbermede* (Whitethorn CA: Johannesen, 1997, reproduced from 1873 ed.), p. 401.
- <sup>18</sup>MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, p. 535.
- <sup>19</sup>Karl Kegler, “A Crystal City: Sodom-Bulika-Jerusalem,” *North Wind* 14 (1995), p. 41.
- <sup>20</sup>Greville MacDonald, *GMD and his Wife*, p. 551-2.
- <sup>21</sup>C.S. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York: MacMillan, 1947), p. 18-19.
- <sup>22</sup>Greville MacDonald, *GMD and his Wife*, p. 552.
- <sup>23</sup>MacDonald, “Fantastic Imagination,” p. xxv.
- <sup>24</sup>Greville MacDonald, *Reminiscences of a Specialist* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932), p. 321.

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## Casting Light on *Lilith*: A Biblical Approach • Marie K. Hammond

### Appendix

ADDITIONAL BIBLICAL ALLUSIONS IN <i>LILITH</i> (Supplementing CHECK LIST by Tim Martin, <i>North Wind</i> , No. 14, 1995)				
Chapter	Johannesen ed. page and line ref.	Quotation or Allusion	Biblical Source	Secondary Biblical Source
4	20/6-	Is not your housekeeper . . . where all are servants	Mark 10:44	
5	24/16-	Whose work is it but your own . . .	Phil. 2:12	
6	27/5-	Let me first go home . . .	Luke 9:59-	
6	29/4	. . . deeper than the hunger and thirst	John 4:14	John 6:51
7	32/33	palm upward, in its centre a dark spot	John 20:25	
9	44/15-	No one who will not sleep can ever wake	John 12:24	
9	45/15-	What you call riddles are truths . . .	Luke 8:10	I Cor. 1:18
13	59/18	Little Ones	Matt. 18:6,10,14	etc.
13	61/14	they were very wise	Matt. 11:25	
15	78/20-	Its foundation stood in deep sand . . .	Matt. 7:24-	
16	85/14	hungry after . . . my kind	Gen. 2:18,20	
17	97/30	evil that is good for you . . .	Heb. 12:11	Ps. 94:12
18	98/24	It was quite naked	Gen. 3:7	
18	98/25-	counted . . . every rib in its side	Gen. 2:22	
18	102/11-	I shall . . . be lonely no more	Gen. 2:22-	
18	104/19-	seven long days and nights	Gen. 2:2	
19	107/33-	to fashion two loose garments . . .	Gen. 3:7	
20	113/35	I knew she was not good	Gen.1:31	
21	118/33-	if she kills all the babies	Matt. 2:16	Ex. 1:22
22	121/17-	a man must not, for knowledge . . .	Gen. 2:17	
28	147/25-	it might be water they wanted . . .	Matt. 10:42	
29	150/14-	believe in what he saw not . . .	Heb. 11:1	
29	153/21	. . . measurelessly wide apart	Luke 16:26	
30	160/6	Only good where evil was . . .	Matt. 12:43-	
31	164/9-	. . . dead, so long as you refuse to die	I Cor. 15:36	John 12:24
33	172/22-	. . . could only become the more a child	Matt. 18:3-	Matt. 19:14
36	191/25-	chose twelve of the . . . boys	Luke 6:13	
38	200/28	Choosing twelve Little Ones	Luke 6:13	
38	205/6	cruel to hurt her too little	Prov. 3:12	
39	211/7-	The central fire of the universe	Heb. 12:29	Mal. 3:2-
39	211/8	knowledge of good and evil	Gen. 2:9,17	
39	215/25-	darkness knows neither the light nor . . .	John 1:5	
39	216/32	slave . . . that shall one day be a child	Gal. 4:7	
40	222/32-	She has gone down . . . she will rise . . .	I Cor. 15:52-	
40	223/2-	all will be little ones . . . young and willing	Mark 10:15	
40	224/8	I cried out for Death	Job 14:13	
41	232/12-	light broke from the ground . . . and showed me	Ps. 119:105	
42	236/30	. . . we were divided	Luke 16:26	
43	241/7-	to restore every good . . . thing a hundredfold	Matt. 19:29	
43	243/8-	ripening sheaves of the harvest . . .	Rev. 14:15	John 4:35
43	247/17-	. . . an abyss impassable	Luke 16:26	
44	251/29	they all breathed upon us	John 20:22	Gen. 2:7
45	255/27-	wind that blew where it listed	John 3:8	
45	257/19-	they ran . . . and foamed with living water	S. of Sol. 4:15	
46	259/4-	a great city, ascending into blue clouds	Rev. 21:2	
46	260/7-	sparkled as . . . precious stones . . . opal . . . jewelry	Rev. 21:11,19-	
46	260/20	a mighty rainbow spanned the city	Rev. 4:3	
46	262/7-	. . . a stair, disappearing in a cloud	Gen. 28:12	John 1:51
47	263/18-	who made . . . ? who guided . . . ? who set . . . ?	Job 38, 39	
47	264/15-	when I wake at last into that life . . .	I Thes. 5:10	