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Old MacDonald Had a Farm *An Exploration of Animal Literature and its Subtext through the Theology of George MacDonald*

Laura Stanifer

Tales all the way from Grimms' *The Frog Princess* to C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* all tell us that there is more subtext to animals in literature than we realize. They can represent the meaning of family, as in the werewolves in Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series, or the character of our soul, as in the *Harry Potter* series. I will touch on each of these elements while centering on George MacDonald's view of animals as representing one of God's miracles, amazingly similar to humans in their feeble nature and yet just as capable of being redeemed in the end. Matthew 15:27 says, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." MacDonald, taking this verse to heart, shows us the extent of God's love and mercy for every one of his creation.

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In writing *The Hope of the Gospel*, George MacDonald gave us a glimpse into the deepest thoughts of an exceptional man. He based the last chapter on deciphering what the apostle Paul meant when he said in Romans 8:19, “For the earnest expectation of the *creature* waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God” (*KJV*, emphasis added). MacDonald, believing that Paul needed to be interpreted on a much higher plane of thought than most people would dare venture, presented his case in this chapter for the redemption of animals. Because I agree with him that there is much more to our fellow creatures than lowly submission, I will be exploring his theology on the afterlife and substantiating it with examples from other literature.

First, MacDonald makes the case that if God created animals only to let them be destroyed, then He is not the God we know and love. MacDonald scoffs at the idea many Christians have that yes, animals suffer in this life, but when they die, although not redeemed, they’ll no longer suffer. He says, “Surely rest is better than ceaseless toil and pain! But what shall we say of such a heedless God as those Christians are content to worship! Is he a merciful God” (99)?

To believe that God would take time to create something good and then “annihilate” it forever (101) was illogical, MacDonald thought. Perhaps still reeling from his Calvinistic childhood, it seems that he could not bear any part of theology that suggests that God is less than loving. “Were such a creature possible,” he insists, “he would not be God, but must one day be found and destroyed by the real God” (99). He believed that God must be at least as loving as the

most compassionate human being, and since MacDonald himself couldn't bear the thought of damning any creature for all eternity, neither, he thought, could God.

The reason for our unbelief in the beast's redemption, MacDonald states, is twofold. One reason is that we have picked up "prejudices" from others and don't care to waste thought on any creature's salvation but our own (100). Another reason is that we are afraid of imagining too *much* of God. "Multitudes evidently count it safest to hold by a dull scheme of things," he says. "Can it be because, like David in Browning's poem *Saul*, they dread lest they should worst the Giver by inventing better gifts than his" (103)? Considering some people's mediocre ideas of heaven, this reason is plausible. It demonstrates not only our fear of going against the flow of mainstream theology but MacDonald's audacity for a man of his time.

Second, MacDonald believed that animals, like humans, are fallen from the way they were meant to be, and are therefore destined to be redeemed. He persisted in denying that God would create animals "only that they may be the prey of other creatures, or spend a few hours or years, helpless and lonely, speechless and without appeal...then pass away into nothingness" (100). It is the "speechless and without appeal" part that I want to focus on. In the Bible, the only instances of an animal talking were the serpent in Genesis and Balaam's donkey. Neither of these animals had the power of speech on his own but was simply a vessel for Satan, in the serpent's case, or God, in the donkey's case. Because there is no mention of other animals speaking in the Garden of Eden, it would seem that God did not intend them to.

By emphasizing that animals, in their helpless state, cannot defend themselves by speech, MacDonald gives the impression that he hopes speech will come to them when they are redeemed. In his novel *Salted with Fire*, James Blatherwick, a reformed minister, muses that we will someday know the thoughts of dogs. "Wha can tell," he says, "but the vera herts o' the

doggies may ae day lie bare and open to oor herts, as to the hert o' Him wi' whom they and we hae to do! Eh, but the thoughts o' a doggie maun be a won'erfu' sicht" (320)!

C.S. Lewis gives us quite a glimpse into a paradise of talking animals in *The Magician's Nephew*. Aslan, the great lion himself, is *singing* creation into Narnia when the children Polly and Digory show up and watch. When Aslan finally speaks, Lewis writes, "It was of course the lion's voice. The children had long felt sure that he could speak: yet it was a lovely and terrible shock when he did" (127). Echoing MacDonald's hopes, the animals Aslan creates all chorus together, "Hail, Aslan. We hear and obey. We are awake. We love. We think. We speak. We know" (127). Here, at last, is creation the way it was meant to be, no longer "dumb and witless" (129) but fully alive.

MacDonald, in *The Hope of the Gospel*, warns us that if we are to meet animals in heaven, we should be careful how we treat them in this life. Lewis shows agreement with this thought when a cab driver in *The Magician's Nephew* meets up with his now talking horse, Strawberry. When the horse finally remembers him, he says, "You used to tie a horrid black thing behind me and then hit me to make me run" (133). The cab driver only recalls that he treated the horse with care; but Strawberry's memory, forcing us to take a walk in the shoes (or hooves) of a horse, can be taken as a warning to us humans. If animals truly have a redeemed soul, how will our treatment of them be remembered, and how will it be seen by God?

Third, MacDonald draws a parallel between humans and animals. He says we are both lowly creatures and share a connection because we came from the same Creator. "Do you believe in immortality for yourself?" he asks. "If you do, why not believe in it for them?..Had God been of like heart with you [in condemning animals to the grave], would he have given life and immortality to creatures so much less than himself as we" (101)? MacDonald is trying to open

our eyes to the fact that we may see animals as lowly creatures not worth redeeming, but God could have felt the same way about *us*. The chasm between ourselves and God is as deep as the chasm we think exists between ourselves and animals.

In fact, having come from the same Creator, many of us have animal-like traits. We may be more like a bulldog or a parakeet than we realize! For instance, how many people have said that you move like a turtle? How many noses have you seen that reminded you of a bird's beak? It is not just superficial traits we have in common with animals, however. They can also represent a part of our soul. In the *Harry Potter* series, J.K. Rowling gives each witch or wizard something called a *Patronus* which takes the form of a silvery animal. This creature represents what is inside each character's soul and helps them ward off evil in the form of *Dementors*, which are agents of the bad guy, Voldemort. In order to understand certain *Patronuses*, however, you also have to understand the *Animagi*, which are people who can change into animals. Harry Potter's father, James, was an *Animagus* when he attended the school of Hogwarts, and he shifted into a stag. Harry's *Patronus* therefore takes the shape of that stag, meaning that his thoughts are constantly on his father, who was killed.

A *Patronus* can also change form if the witch or wizard falls in love. For instance, the unpredictable Professor Snape comes to Harry's rescue with his *Patronus* in the shape of a silver doe. Harry later finds out that his mother Lily had a *Patronus* that was a doe, and Snape had always loved her. What does this say? That love changes the soul, and the animal in this case represents the soul.

Another example of our connection with animals is in Stephenie Meyer's phenomenally successful *Twilight* series. In the first book, *Twilight*, the character Jacob Black explains his family's ancestry to the heroine, Bella. Born into a Quileute Indian family in the state of

Washington, Jacob recalls the legend that says Quileutes are descended from wolves and that they have a connection with these animals even now. He experiences the legend himself in the second book, *New Moon*, when he becomes part wolf and joins the already-established wolf pack on the Quileute reservation.

The wolf pack is essentially a group of “disciples” headed by Sam, their leader. Similar to the relationship between the twelve Biblical apostles, or even Isaac’s sons in Exodus, the appropriately named *Jacob* and his wolf brothers run around fighting corrupt vampires. Each wolf-man has his own characteristics even as a wolf. In Jacob’s case, he has the longest fur because he has the longest hair as a human.

Connections between man and animal go back a long time, though. An earlier example comes from one of Grimms’ fairy tales, *The Frog Prince*. Everyone knows the story of a frog that is kissed by a princess and turned into a prince. In Grimms’ version, though, the frog is thrown against the wall by the princess and then shifts back into his normal princely form. However the story is told, the idea of a prince being trapped inside the body of a frog is what captures our imagination. Considering George MacDonald’s high regard for lowly creatures and his hope that they might have the gift of speech someday, he could surely imagine the *qualities* of a prince coming out of a frog in heaven.

A final example comes from one of my favorite books, *Tarzan of the Apes*. When Edgar Rice Burroughs created the character Tarzan, he wrote a story of an Englishman and his wife stranded in Africa who leave behind a baby boy when they are killed by apes. The baby Tarzan is found by a mother ape and grows up in the very family who killed his human parents. He feels a connection with these apes, though, illustrated in the Disney version of *Tarzan* with the song “You’ll Be in My Heart.” Although Darwin’s evolutionary theory was taking off during George

MacDonald's time, the Scottish author's belief in a connection between humans and animals arose, I believe, not out of evolution but because of our ties to God. So also, no matter what Burroughs intended for his story theologically, Tarzan's connection to his ape family can be interpreted as him feeling that they are both made by the same Creator.

What does the Bible have to say about animals? In Matthew chapter 15, a Canaanite woman comes to Jesus and asks for her daughter's healing. When he tells her, "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to dogs," she answers, "Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (v. 26-7, *KJV*). Jesus applauds her faith and heals her daughter instantly. In MacDonald's view, this would give us hope that the dogs and other animals would at least get the crumbs which fall from the Great Supper of the Lamb.

Jesus draws a comparison between humans and the poorest of creatures, sparrows, in Matthew 10:29, saying, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father" (*NIV*). And the will of the Father, MacDonald believed, was one of compassion for the weak. Wouldn't this compassion extend to the very sparrow he was talking about? There must be animals in heaven, MacDonald thought, so why not the box turtle you're already attached to on this earth? "The sons of God are not a new race of sons of God," MacDonald says in *The Hope of the Gospel*, "but the old race glorified: - why a new race of animals, and not the old ones glorified" (106)?

As with so many verses of the Bible, we cannot absolutely interpret what Paul meant when he said, "For the earnest expectation of the *creature* waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God" (*KJV*). But we *can* be sure of one thing: God is loving, He is merciful, and He will always do what is just. This applies to every creature, including sparrows, frogs, humans, bulldogs, turtles, and parakeets. He said, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the

age” (*NIV*). Like Aslan, he breathed His creation into existence, and He will be with us at the Last Battle... and beyond.

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