Tendering Greatness: George MacDonald’s The Lost Princess and the Bible

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Dissertation in Progress

In this section of *North Wind* the editors highlight new scholars who are working on MacDonald on the Masters and Doctoral levels.

“Tendering Greatness” is the final project for the Masters degree in Literature and Society: Enlightenment, Romantic, and Victorian at Edinburgh University. The program is described as follows: “This taught Masters degree introduces students to the relation between literary writing in English and political and social discourse in Britain and Ireland between the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688 and the end of the 19th century.”

**Tendering Greatness:**
*George MacDonald’s The Lost Princess and the Bible*

Deborah Holm

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Initials represent works by George MacDonald:

FI  “The Fantastic Imagination”
HS  *Heather and Snow*
HG  *Hope of the Gospel.*
LP  *The Lost Princess*
TW  *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*
US  *Unspoken Sermons Series I, II, and III*

“Greatness is a spiritual condition worthy to excite love, interest, and admiration; and the outward proof of possessing greatness is that we excite love, interest, and admiration” (Arnold 51). Matthew Arnold’s
definition of greatness informs about George MacDonald, who can excite love, interest and admiration for his writing as well as for his subject. Kristin Jeffrey Johnson claims: “George MacDonald is a storyteller for storytellers. Many of the authors who revere him consider his work not only enjoyable, but life-transforming” (91). G.K. Chesterton prophesied that MacDonald would be “quarried industriously by people who wish to borrow ideas” (qtd in Trexler 9) and Glen Edward Sadler confirms: “He has been credited . . . with establishing in the nineteenth century a tradition of symbolic fantasy fiction that has many modern admirers and imitators . . .” (n. pag.). MacDonald’s writing may excite love, interest and admiration because his imitators wish to inspire their readers with the same love for their subjects that MacDonald can excite in readers of his fantasy. MacDonald’s genius lies in his ability to enthuse others. Enthusiasm is appropriate to describe MacDonald’s writing because the Greek roots render the meaning as the god inside, which matches his agenda.

This paper will discuss how MacDonald excites love for his subject in The Lost Princess. He describes how God loves people and this thought of a loving God inspires love for God. This is an idea that MacDonald, the minister, could have found in the Bible, another great book by Arnold’s standard: “We love him, because he first loved us” (KJV 1rst John 4:19). In a sermon, MacDonald explains: The one use of the Bible is to make us look at Jesus” (US 55). The Lost Princess is also a book that points the reader to God. MacDonald’s story borrows from biblical literary practice to excite love for God. While there are stylistic differences in the Old and New Testaments, MacDonald emulates semantic devices, language, motifs and stories from both parts of the Bible in his defense of God’s loving nature. The literary inspiration he finds in the Bible reflects his knowledge of his audience. He knows that in the same way that reading the Bible has inspired Christian worship, reading The Lost Princess can excite his readers to feel love, interest and or admiration for God. This response is what makes MacDonald interesting to critics and creative writers.

The Lost Princess is a useful study of MacDonald’s skill because of its thematic focus. The other fantasies deal with multiple themes but this succinct story is concerned with God’s love for his children. It is largely about two characters: one who is Godlike and one who is becoming like God. MacDonald employs comparable characters elsewhere, but David Neuhouser explains “Although most of his fairy tales employ fairy godmothers who show us many wonderful things about the nature of God, The Wise Woman or The Lost Princess gives the most complete picture of MacDonald’s concept of God as a loving parent” (43). When MacDonald tenders God as a tender parent, he encourages his readers to love and admire God.

That the Bible still inspires love for God in a time when some
consider him a figment of past imaginations is one proof of its literary value. The Bible appeals, in part, because of its interpretative potential. MacDonald’s work contains the flexibility of symbols that foment thoughts of God while leaving room for personal application. Daniel Gabelman claims: “MacDonald was a Celtic mystic, but unlike W. B. Yeats and other modern mystics who delight in philosophical vagueness, MacDonald loved clarity, brightness, and actuality” (3). MacDonald’s fantasy can be both mystical and clear because his symbols may be mystic when read alone, given the variety of potential interpretations and they can be clear when read in conjunction with his sermons, which act as a gloss. His readers can choose plausible confidence or pleasurable confusion. MacDonald explains how his stories might be read in a conversation between a reader and himself: “... how I am to assure myself that I am not reading my own meaning into it, but yours out of it? Why should you be so assured? It may be better that you should read your meaning into it” (FI 66). MacDonald writes to provoke thought not to proscribe it. Johnson maintains: “MacDonald explains elsewhere that with his own art he hopes not to show readers what they already know, nor indeed what they want to know, but instead to ‘wake them up’” (94). His stories, like, scripture, must be pondered. Adrian Gunther describes MacDonald’s fantasy work, which “haunts the edges of the mind, provoking interpretation, demanding understanding and the bringing of its symbolic significances into the light of conscious recognition” (108). MacDonald grows the branches, which his readers find bare, budded or blossoming, as they choose. Similarly, MacDonald’s God is more pleased with searching than particular about conclusions. MacDonald’s story can be read in the same way that the Bible can be interpreted to apply to individual circumstances.

The Lost Princess was first published in 1875 as A Double Story, a serial in Good Things magazine but the title: The Lost Princess or the Wise Woman was “the author’s final choice,” explains Elizabeth Yates (LP vii). This title specifies two ways that readers can learn about God. They can learn what he is like through the wise woman or feel inspired to begin their own relationship with God by noting Rosamund’s experience. The Bible also has a descriptive title: the Old and New testaments which indicate that it too is a double story.

1. “Names Like the Engraving of a Signet” (Exodus 39:14)
MacDonald could have consulted Smith’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the Bible, which defines the word name as follows: “Name in the scriptures not only equals that by which a person is designated but frequently equals all that is known to belong to the person having this designation . . . ” (qtd in Talmage 41). Biblical names such as Joseph, Immanuel and Elizabeth expound their association with God. MacDonald also chooses names
purposefully—Anodos, Irene and Wingfold instruct the reader. Only three characters are named in The Lost Princess: Rosamund, Agnes and Prince. MacDonald might have kept consistency with the book’s other characters by calling them the princess, the peasant and the lead dog but instead he alerts the reader to the importance to God’s value for the individual. Each one that receives the wise woman’s attention is named while those around her are titled showing that for the moment, this character is preeminent. Elsewhere, MacDonald writes: “the story of God’s universe lies in the growth of the individual soul” (HS 18). Discussing Revelation 2:17, MacDonald comments: “God’s name for a man must be the expression of His own idea of the man, that being whom He had in His thought when He began to make the child . . . ” (qtd in Lewis 8). The three with whom the wise woman has worked are named as a mark of their contact with her. It is probable, had the story been longer, that the reader may have learned the shepherd’s name and story of his growth as he accompanies the wise woman. MacDonald can use names to explain that coming to God can heighten individuality.

Rosamund’s parents choose her name because it means, “Rose of the World” (LP 5). MacDonald’s Rosamund is ill named at the beginning of the story because she shares little with Mary, the rose of the world from some Christian traditions. By the story’s end, Rosamund begins to be a lovely as her name promises. Rosamund’s name is like Mary’s also because her name has another meaning that informs about her destiny. The name Rosamund takes its alternate meaning from its Germanic origins—“protector of horses” (Hanks, Hardcastle and Hodges 622). This tenor is again, initially inappropriate, because Rosamund hurts animals. At the end of the book, she learns to how to gently handle the horse, Peggy so her name more accurately reflects her ability. Both the Germanic people who coined the name and MacDonald’s pre car society valued horses. The protector of horses can thus imply the protector of what is precious. This name is appropriate for the woman Rosamund will become. The wise woman tells the princess “I saw, through it all, what you were going to be” (LP 127). MacDonald gives the princess a name she can grow into and implies that his God sees potential in humans and anticipates their development. The irony of Rosamund’s name at the beginning of the story alerts the reader to look for additional meaning in names.

The name Agnes means “holy, pure or chaste” (Hanks, Har dcastle and Hodges 12). Agnes appears to be a good little girl when compared with Rosamund. She doesn’t disobey her parents and she doesn’t mistreat animals. She represents the non-offensive ideal, who minds her own business. The words pure, holy and chaste sometimes describe the do-no-harm side of Christianity and become negative when applied to those who neglect the do-good side. MacDonald can use Agnes to teach about the importance of
sincere Christianity, which goes beyond avoidance of sin to arrive at love. Agnes does not choose to live up to her name: she will not relinquish the impurities in her soul.

The name Prince, for Christians, can be associated with the Prince of Peace. Prince serves the wise woman just as Christ does his father’s bidding. He exemplifies perfect obedience and his name recalls the wise woman’s definition of a princess: “Nobody can be a real princess . . . until, when she finds herself unwilling to do the thing that is right, she makes herself do it” (LP 108). Jeff McInnis compares Prince to Aslan, C.S. Lewis’s Christ symbol, because they both use their teeth to teach. MacDonald writes elsewhere of dogs “as a lower sort of angels” (HS 173). Both meanings recall Christ’s words “He that is greatest among shall be your servant” and strengthen the connection of the wise woman, Prince’s true master, to God (Matthew 23:11). MacDonald can use the biblical practice of significant names to teach about God.

MacDonald’s other characters are called by an article and generic: the lord-chancellor, the queen, and the guard which remind of the New Testament appellations: the Samaritan, the centurion, and the woman at the well. MacDonald follows this format with his unnamed characters to create interpretive space around the stereotypes. His character, the king, is not Isaiah’s enthroned Lord of heaven but relates to one of the Bible’s fallible kings like Saul or Agrippa. Rosamund’s father, though a bad parent and an unjust ruler, is a sympathetic character. MacDonald allows the reader to pity the king and hope for his redemption and the reader may accordingly be reminded of God’s mercy for flawed characters.

Both the Old and New Testaments feature shepherds, who represent the Savior or his servants. The shepherd in The Lost Princess serves as a surrogate father to Rosamund and thus points to both the Father and the Son. The shepherd informs about God when he participates in Rosamund’s discipline. Durie remarks:

MacDonald speaks of sufferings as ‘the strong sharp-toothed sheep dogs’ of the Great Shepherd’s. Pursuit, pain and demand are there, but only to bring the wandering sheep back to the fold: throughout God remains the shepherd, an image with all its biblical associations of devoted caring, and he controls the dogs to ensure they inflict no real damage. (171)

The shepherd tells about God in his control of the dog. From the sheep’s point of view, the shepherd is the authorizer of biting. Humans may look at God as the tolerator of evil. Sheep may forget that shepherd’s dogs bite wolves as well as sheep. Humans cannot know all they may be protected from. MacDonald can extend the familiar concept of the Christian shepherd to teach more about his God’s benevolence.
This shepherd is both a type and an individual. He is the best of the adult humans in *The Lost Princess*. He has not been a perfectly wise parent but he is kind. He is the first of the adults to receive the wise woman. For MacDonald, the shepherd is an adult who can take on the virtues of childhood. He is mature and meek. He is a gradation on the path to godliness. In the gospels, Christ asks those who love him to feed his sheep. The shepherd character can become inclusive: he is a standard for all God’s children.

MacDonald’s king and shepherd capacitate multiple readings. Kathryn Lindskoog elucidates: “. . . [MacDonald] has been known to use a great feminine figure as his symbol for God, and he has been known to state that every child on earth is both the child of a king and the child of a shepherd” (88). The double heritage suggests a composite God who is both royal and pastoral. Both images of God are present in the Bible but in *The Lost Princess*, the wise woman is neither king nor shepherd. MacDonald can separate his concept of God from its traditional components to make a personal and transcending parent. Durie claims: “. . . MacDonald’s symbols are attractive precisely because of their open-endedness and ambiguity . . .” (179). MacDonald constructs his symbols to encourage the reader to reexamine preconceptions.

The wise woman’s name recalls the exotic stargazers who visited the holy infant and Christ’s name for his mother from the cross. She is a symbol of God, which informs about the nature of God. She could be also interpreted as an angel or agent of God. MacDonald indicates that there might be “one” behind the wise woman, when he writes of Agnes: “But, as I have said, the wise woman had her eye upon her . . . else she would be one of those who kneel to their own shadows . . . and what becomes of them at last, there is but one who knows” (LP 54). If there is someone directing the wise woman, her actions are the best clue to his or her identity. MacDonald explains: “But I know no other way of knowing that there is a God but that which reveals what he is . . .” (TW 88). MacDonald asks readers to evaluate God through the actions of the wise woman.

MacDonald matches his wise woman with God’s biblical attributes. She is Omnipotent. The wise woman is able to abduct the princess right out of the throne room in the gated and guarded palace. Rosamund cannot affect her release although she struggles and screams. Rosamund realizes that she is personally powerless against her antagonist but also that her enemies are equally impotent. She witnesses the wise woman kill one wolf barehanded and repel others. This omnipotence establishes Rosamund’s trust in the wise woman: she sees that the wise woman has the power to hurt her but does not exercise it while the wise woman has the power to protect her and does exercise it. Rosamund comes to understand her relationship to an inexorable
but benevolent entity. This is the same realization that young children may come to have with their parents. MacDonald uses the wise woman to explain what God’s omnipotence means for his children.

The wise woman is Providential. MacDonald describes her care of Rosamund: “The wise woman lifted the princess tenderly, and washed and dressed her far more carefully than even her nurse. Then she set her down by the fire, and prepared her breakfast” (LP 31). The wise woman has considered all of Rosamund’s physical needs but Rosamund is more than clean and fed. She receives food “so that she thought she had never in her life eaten anything nicer” and “strangely good—one of her favorite dishes, only better than she had ever tasted it before” (LP 31,36). Rosamund finds “the loveliest little well, just big enough to wash in, the water of which was always springing fresh from the ground, and running away through the wall. Beside it lay the whitest of linen towels, with a comb made of mother-of-pearl, and a brush of fir-needles” (LP 41). It is as if the wise woman delights as much in providing for Rosamund as a parent enjoys caring for a child. MacDonald implies that God gives the necessities and pleasures of life to humans because he loves them.

MacDonald presents the wise woman as a Healer. When Rosamund falls and injures herself, the wise woman takes her ankle in her hands and strokes and presses it “gently kneading it, as it were, with her thumbs, as if coaxing every particle of the muscles into its right place” (LP 100). The wise woman doesn’t heal in the human way by aiding the body’s regenerative effort; she persuades the particles back into line, ending Rosamund’s pain. MacDonald writes about the pain that results from disobedience:

> It is true that Jesus came, in delivering us from our sins, to deliver us also from the painful consequences of our sins. But these consequences exist by the one law of the universe, the true will of the Perfect. That broken, that disobeyed by the creature, disorganization renders suffering inevitable; it is the natural consequence of the unnatural—and, in the perfection of God’s creation, the result is curative of the cause; the pain at least tends to the healing of the breach. (HG 14)

Rosamund is warned that she will fall and be injured if she doesn’t obey. Her pain comes from her disobedience. Her pain also comes because the muscles of her body are not correctly aligned: they are imperfect or in other words, noncompliant. The wise woman illuminates the healing that only comes from a correct relationship to God.

MacDonald explains about God the Law Giver by contrasting the wise woman with the human parents in the story: royals who never say no and cottagers who always commend. Rosamund does not have the knowledge to ask for what is good for her. By giving her all that she asks, the king and
queen neglect their duty to protect their child. MacDonald can use the story to gently remind that humans complain against God when he doesn’t respond to their prayers like a butler. MacDonald’s wise woman corrects the king and queen’s indulgence by giving Rosamund what will benefit her and in time Rosamund comes to want what the wise woman wants to give her. Agnes is raised in ignorance of her own imperfections. In the wise woman’s cottage, she learns the truth about herself but descends into the dishonesty of her pride. In both sets of parents, MacDonald’s coddlers contrast with the wise woman’s discipline and explain how a withholding, correcting God may be preferable.

God has high expectations. The Wise Woman reminds the beautified Rosamund: “. . . you have yet only begun to be what I saw” (LP 127). Rosamund has progressed but the wise woman wants more for her. Bruce Hindmarsh quotes MacDonald and comments:

‘. . . no keeping but a perfect one [of God’s law] will satisfy God, I hold with all my heart and strength; but that there is none else he cares for, is one of the lies of the enemy. What father is not pleased with the first tottering attempt of his little one to walk? What father would be satisfied with anything but the manly step of the full-grown son?’ God wants his wayward children to become adult sons bearing the likeness of their Elder brother, Christ himself. (70)

Christ commanded “be ye perfect” (Matthew 5:48). “One of MacDonald’s favorite sayings is that ‘God is easy to please but hard to satisfy’” (Neuhouser 43). The wise woman is not finished with Rosamund and MacDonald’s God will not be finished with his children until they are as powerful and glorious as they can be.

MacDonald’s wise woman demonstrates God the Hearer. Rosamund is unused to petitioning anyone and so she is ill prepared to recall the wise woman to her in the forest. Fortunately, her ignorance is anticipated: “How she wished she knew the old woman’s name, that she might call it after her through the moonlight! But the wise woman had in truth heard the first sound of her running feet, and stopped and turned, waiting” (LP 18). MacDonald pictures God as willing to assist his children even when they are unsure of his name or how to pray. MacDonald uses Rosamund’s ignorance to highlight her desire. Rosamund is unsure of how to address the wise woman but she still attempts communication. Her intent is more important than her form. Elsewhere, MacDonald recommends “extempore” prayer: “it is a perplexity how prayer and reading should ever seem one” (HS 101). Rosamund’s halting efforts to communicate are rewarded because MacDonald’s God is a companion with whom to converse.

God is Knowable. MacDonald preaches: “The New Testament is full
of urgings to understand” (HG 25). MacDonald shows God as a parent who wants to be known. The wise woman’s raison d’etre is to help each of the characters in the book to know her better. Her teaching process emphasizes that academic knowledge of God is insufficient. Rosamund becomes beautiful like the wise woman when her learning has become a change in behavior. T.H. Huxley depicts those who know about God but do not know him well enough to trust his word: “Every day, we see firm believers in the hell of the theologians commit acts, by which they believe, when cool, they risk eternal punishment” (55). MacDonald’s God is trustworthy enough to inspire the confidence, which results in obedience. His characters know the wise woman, not as a legend but through experience. Kerry Dearborn observes: “His stories demonstrate the destructiveness of trying to attain theological mastery in lieu of serving the Master” (97). MacDonald’s God wants his children to serve him because in serving him, in copying his works, they will test his words more thoroughly than any mental analysis. The wise woman wants Rosamund to know what she must do so well that she will find herself always trying to do it. The shepherd knows something of the wise woman and she builds on his limited information by rewarding him with “a glimmering vision of her” and by allowing him to accompany her, which will let him know her better still (LP 141).

MacDonald’s beliefs about God’s desire to be known are evident in the wise woman’s patience with the dullness of the story’s people. MacDonald writes that knowledge is a reward for purity: “Then shall we know him with the infinitude of an ever growing knowledge” (HG 116). Bonnie Gaarden believes there are some parallels in the views that MacDonald and Hegel hold about spiritual development. Hegel discusses some of the knowledge of God that MacDonald develops in *The Lost Princess*:

In the Christian religion God has revealed Himself,—that is, he has given us to understand what He is so that He is no longer a concealed or secret existence. And this possibility of knowing Him, thus afforded us, renders such knowledge a duty. God wishes no narrow-hearted souls or empty heads for his children; but those whose spirit is of itself indeed, poor, but rich in the knowledge of Him; and who regard this knowledge of God as the only valuable possession. (15)

Rosamund makes the transition from material wealth, narcissism, and ignorance to spiritual wealth, altruism and wisdom. She has become a new creature and duty is now as “common as breathing” to her (LP 66).

Rosamund experiences what Harold Bloom describes as “the perpetual shock of discovering yet again what she and he have always known, which is that God loves her and him on an absolutely personal and
indeed intimate basis” (Bloom xiii). She questions, “How could you love such an ugly, ill-tempered, rude, hateful little wretch?” yet she is certain enough of the wise woman’s love to persevere through her trials (LP 127). Rosamund knows that the wise woman knows her because her trials are tailor made. She realizes that the wise woman’s persistence is a sign of her love. She learns that the wise woman has been doing what “[she] could to make [her] a lovely creature” (LP 103). MacDonald writes: “God loves thee whether thou feelest or not . . . “God loves us always because he is our God” (US 177) (US 172).

The Old Testament names God Great and Terrible. MacDonald responds to this designation by presenting the wise woman as a kidnapper. She removes both Rosamund and Agnes from their parent’s homes without enticing the children or consulting the parents. Although the king sends for the wise woman in hope of her help, he and his wife are just as baffled about their child’s disappearance as are the shepherd and shepherdess. Rosamund and Agnes are not initially given the choice to accept or reject the journey with the wise woman. There are parallels in Joseph of Egypt, Esther, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who are all taken from their homes in their youth to have experiences in strange places, which enable them to become influential. Rosamund follows this pattern. She will probably save her nation, as her biblical counterparts do, because she will be a better ruler than her parents.

Rosamund’s kidnapping initially removes her agency. The question of agency is important to an understanding of God’s love. If moral agency is the ability to choose right or wrong, then God must ultimately allow humans to reject him or he becomes a tyrant. Rosamund and Agnes are both forced into the wise woman’s rehabilitation center. In the story it is clear that the wise woman’s intent is good but the issues are complicated. The wise woman stands in loco parentis. Human parents may forbid their children to play in the street and then physically restrain them when the children insist on their agency. In this circumstance, limiting agency for the good of the child seems appropriate. MacDonald uses this kind curtailing in Heather and Snow, where Kirsty carries Phemy away to prevent her liaison with a selfish lover. When the wise woman kidnaps Rosamund, it is for Rosamund’s benefit and it may be argued that Rosamund’s disagreement with the plan for her improvement stems from her ignorance of her own potential: she has no desire to change because she realizes neither how awful she is nor how nice she can become. Once Rosamund begins to understand what the wise woman has in mind for her and once Rosamund realizes how impossible it is for her to change unaided, then she joins her will with the wise woman’s and progresses. Her agency has been preserved in the same way that the child, who reaches adulthood, is free to choose not to play in the street because he or she has
been kept from the death or maiming that would have resulted from unbridled freedom in innocence.

Rosamund’s agency is active when she aligns her will to the wise woman’s. When Rosamund desires help, the wise woman is more able to give it: “Couldn’t you help me?” said Rosamond piteously . . . Perhaps I could, now you ask me . . . Come, my child; I will help you all I can, for now I can help you” (LP 116). MacDonald explains that submission is more an agreement of will than a sacrifice of will. He shows that God’s desire for obedience reflects his desire to bless his children.

Agnes presents the other side of agency or the freedom to rebel that must exist in order for agency to function. The wise woman shows Agnes her sinful condition and how to escape it but Agnes prefers her own wisdom. The wise woman has forced Agnes to face herself but she does not force her to continue the treatment. Instead, she allows Agnes to take the consequence of her choice, which is unhappiness. It is important that the story leaves Agnes unpunished by the wise woman. The wise woman acquaints Agnes with the need for repentance and arranges for future assistance should Agnes desire it but she allows Agnes to remain in rebellion.

Much has been written about MacDonald’s universalism. Bonnie Gaarden summarizes: “MacDonald conceived of salvation, however, not as an absolute state, but as a continuing transformation (spiritual evolution) undergone by all people, lasting through and beyond earthly existence. To make this unfamiliar concept clear to his readers he depicted hell as a sort of divine reform school” (Aufhebung 42). For Universalists, “Every knee shall bow” means, that all will eventually be saved (Romans 14:11). Durie reports: “Lilith is the incarnate principle of rebellion, yet MacDonald not only states her desire to be saved but suggests that finally the Shadow, Satan, himself will choose to repent” (175). But if salvation is only a matter of time, if God eventually wears down even the wicked into agreement, then agency is lost and God is a tyrant. Humans must be able to choose between good and evil instead of between sooner or later if they are to truly exercise their will. If the wise woman is to define God as a tender parent she must allow Agnes to ultimately reject her. There is a biblical parallel in the prodigal son whose father allows him to take a destructive path. The prodigal’s father makes no effort to force his son’s return and the wise woman is content to hope.

Margaret Parsons notes that Agnes is not redeemed in the “scope of the book”: “The wise woman does not always succeed. She also takes over Agnes, a shepherd’s child, complacent, spoilt, and silly… But Agnes has not really changed, and, once away from the wise woman, becomes worse than before” (111). Is Agnes worse for the wise woman’s meddling? She has “seen the truth concerning herself” but she has chosen to disregard this self-knowledge and reject the wise woman’s plan for her improvement (LP
65). Her accountability increases as her ignorance decreases. Had she not met the wise woman, the cancer in Agnes’s soul would have continued to grow and she would have eventually degenerated into her post wise woman state. Agnes accelerates her degeneration by rejecting the wise woman’s assistance but this is Agnes’ choice.

Parsons raises another question of agency:

The wise woman works hard with both Agnes and Rosamund, undeterred by misplaced pity. She is insistent on the necessity for breaking the individual will. ‘You must not do what is wrong, however much you are inclined to do it, and you must do what is right, however much you are disinclined to do it.’

(112)

Breaking the individual will belies God’s goodness but Parsons does not include the wise woman’s implication. Rosamund and Agnes must learn to do what is right, if they want to be happy. If they choose wrong, they must accept the consequent unhappiness. MacDonald’s God cannot remove the suffering associated with unrepentant sin. He writes:

It is the indwelling badness, ready to produce bad actions that we need to be delivered from. Against this badness if a man will not strive, he is left to commit evil and reap the consequences. To be saved from these consequences would be no deliverance; it would be an immediate, ever deepening damnation. (HG 10)

The question of agency is an important dimension of God’s kindliness. MacDonald makes his wise woman seem truly loving because she desires the happiness of the two girls.

At the end of the story, Agnes returns to live with her mother. Because the peacemaking shepherd accompanies the wise woman, mother and daughter will be left to endure each other’s pride. The wise woman tells them to come to her when they can no longer tolerate the mutual irritation she foresees for them. The wise woman’s confidence in their eventual humility does not limit their opportunity to choose discomfort. Lewis interprets MacDonald’s universalism as optimistic rather than authoritative: “He hopes indeed that all men will be saved but that is because he hopes indeed that all men will repent” (xxxvi).

MacDonald’s story recognizes that humans want absolute agency for themselves but they sometimes complain that God does not limit agency to prevent evil in others. Kathryn Lindskoog reasons:

If the adult withdraws from the child’s environment, the child is not then automatically ‘free.’ When parents decrease their influence, other forces increase theirs. The wise woman knew that the only thing that could save the princess from her hatefulness was that she should be made to mind somebody else
than her own miserable Somebody. (84)
As soon as Rosamund’s somebody becomes less miserable, she is trusted
to mind it. The wise woman exemplifies the balance that a good God must
maintain. Rosamund must be stopped from hurting others until she can
learn to stop herself. If the wise woman does not act to limit Rosamund and
Agnes she will be unjust to all who interact with the two selfish girls. If she
completely arrests their misbehavior, she will be unjust to the girls. The wise
woman balances justice with agency and does all that can be done in the
space between the two ideals. MacDonald can use her to display the Great
and Terrible God as an object of awe rather than dread.

The Bible names God Father. If the wise woman is a symbol of
God, does MacDonald argue with patriarchy? Scholars have pondered the
gender of MacDonald’s God in his fantasy novels. Gaarden claims: “George
MacDonald . . . thought that the conventional wisdom of his day was giving
God a bad name. He wished to rehabilitate the divine reputation. So, along
with sermons, literary criticism, poetry and novels, in which he presented
God in a new light, he wrote fantasies in which he presented God as a
woman” (Goddess 1). There are some reasons for MacDonald to choose a
woman to explain a traditionally male personality. Roderick McGillis notes,
“MacDonald allows his female characters agency and he invests his male
characters with characteristics we might think of as ‘feminine’” (86). The
reverse is true as well. The wise woman has characteristics that may be called
masculine because she intimidates, protects and commands. MacDonald
tenders a God who goes beyond the boundaries set for masculinity to embody
a perfectly rounded character. He allows his readers to find what they seek
in God. Neuhouser records that MacDonald had a close relationship with
his father who cared for him after the death of his mother: “this could have
contributed to his being able to see traditional feminine or masculine traits
in either man or woman” (42). Judith John maintains: “MacDonald frees his
old women from the ravages of time and gives them the knowledge to change
the world and create a better place to live. These may indeed be women
who fulfill male fantasies. But they also fulfill the fantasies of women” (33).
MacDonald’s appreciation for the women in his life may have induced him to
conceive a more accessible God. In this way, MacDonald can show that God
loves both his sons and his daughters.

William Gray recognizes that MacDonald can describe men in
female characters: “ . . . MacDonald caricatures John Ruskin in his novel
*Adela Cathcart* by presenting Ruskin virtually in drag, as Adela’s aunt, Mrs.
Cathcart” (58). MacDonald can emphasize that quality may trump gender as a
determiner. In his novel, *Heather and Snow*, MacDonald has his idiot savant,
Stenie, mistake his sister for Christ, saying: “Maybe ye’re him efter a’! . . .
He can take ony shape he likes. I wudna won’er gien ye was him! Ye’re onco
like him ony gait!” (HS 103). For MacDonald, those who approximate God, demonstrate God.

Gaarden believes MacDonald “anticipated the modern quest for the feminine face of God” (Goddess 1). He may, however, respond to ideas from his own century. Charles Kinglsey describes God the Creator in his Mother Carey, and Eliza R. Snow pens in 1845:

I had learned to call thee Father,
Thru thy Spirit from on high,
But, until the key of knowledge
Was restored, I knew not why.
In the heav’ns are parents single?
No, the thought makes reason stare!
Truth is reason; truth eternal
Tells me I’ve a mother there. (1039)

Snow’s reasoning makes the wise woman seem plausible as a feminine Deity without robbing God of his masculinity. It is difficult to establish any of these sources as an influence on MacDonald but they represent ideas that may have been available to him. The wise woman, as a symbol, is general enough to warrant any of these interpretations.

Some MacDonald scholars note, however, that MacDonald is committed to the fatherhood of God. Hindmarsh expostulates: “His vision of the universe was Father-centered, and his belief in the divine paternity ought to be discerned as the one great presupposition underlying all he did and everything he wrote” (56).

And discussing Abba, Father, Thomas Gerold observes:
MacDonald wants to enable his readers to call God “Father.” So he tries to help them develop a perfect child-father relation to God our true father. This is very important for MacDonald’s theology, because this child-father relation between man and God is, for MacDonald, the only natural man-God relation. He regards it as the form of relation that is directly wanted by God. (14)

For these Scholars, the masculinity of God is central to MacDonald’s theology. Neuhouser notes: “Perhaps the theme MacDonald emphasized most in his writing was that of God as a loving father. However, in his fairy tales, God is portrayed as a loving mother” (42). Neuhouser’s observation explains that the key feature of MacDonald’s position on God is love.

Gendering God may seem to limiting to a 21st century audience. John Pridmore makes the wise woman representative of a convenient “it”: “... she can be seen as a personification of all that, within a spiritually and morally ordered universe, as MacDonald holds it to be, is working for the well-being of its children” (111). For Pridmore, God and the wise woman
are both layers which cover and reveal the nature of the universe. Pridmore’s word, “children” implies parent and that is the feature that seems more worthy of emphasis, not that the wise woman represents a father or a mother, but a loving parent in contrast to the ineffective parents in the story. Under the anonymity of the wise woman, MacDonald invites readers to meet God objectively.

2. “Distinction in the Sounds” (1 Corinthians 14:7)
MacDonald uses language that sounds like the Bible to connect his ideas of God with what his readers may already know. MacDonald’s sensitivity to his original audience is noteworthy. Poetry, adapted quotations, and questions appeal to the readers who are most likely to be persuaded by his fantasy.

In the Old Testament, poetry teaches Israel about God. In the same manner, MacDonald uses his own poetry to enrich his writing. The wise woman sings to Rosamund as she carries her to the cottage. The wise woman’s song can be about the wise woman, who fits the description or about Rosamund, who will soon find herself a lonely old woman if she does not reform enough to make friends. There are layers of potential meaning that remind of Isaiah’s imagery.

The song is instructive in the way it connects the wise woman to God. The first line of the first stanza, “Out in the cold” rephrases itself in the other stanzas, “Like a castaway clout,” “There is never a hut,” “She is all alone,” “None to come near her.” These words remind of Christ’s words: “but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head” as well Isaiah’s prophecy: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Luke 9:58) (Isaiah 53:3). These words can allude to incidents in Christ’s life and they can be interpreted figuratively as well. MacDonald puts the emphasis on the humility rather than the grandeur of God and makes him seem approachable.

There are other words in the song, however, which challenge the tender nature of God that the wise woman exemplifies. The phrases “Her heart is as dry as a bone”, “She does not care” “She has not a tear” and “She never will smile” all make the wise woman and by extension God, sound heartless. The wise woman contains MacDonald’s reconciliation of the great and terrible in God. The righteous may be gently urged to greater obedience but the rebellious will not heed unless brought to it by fear. MacDonald writes: “ . . . the princess was, at this time of her life, such a low-minded creature, that severity had greater influence over her than kindness. She understood terror better far than tenderness” (LP 14-5). Terror can be the door for some to know God: the penitent progress to know his goodness.

The wise woman’s song tells us more about her. She is not merely
old—she is “old, old, old.” The repetition creates a ripple of meaning. Age comes in degrees: The wise woman is not as old as a grandmother or as far removed as Shakespeare; she belongs to prehistory. MacDonald may have been thinking of Paul’s words about the “King of peace” “having neither beginning of days, nor end of life” (Hebrews 7:2-3). The woman in the song is “as cold as death” but she does not die which gives her a kind of immortality.

The song gives other details about the woman. She is dressed in a “thin worn fold/of withered gold.” The temple of Solomon contains olive wood overlaid with gold. Olive trees are symbolic of the House of Israel or God’s covenant people (Romans 11). The olive wood with its gold veneer represents the finest and holiest substances available to Solomon and thus his honoring of God. The woman in the song may be a servant of God or one who has covenanted with him. She is suffering from neglect; her gold covering has not been sustained. Solomon’s temple is not maintained in its grandeur because the people of Israel begin to disregard their covenants. The withered gold in the woman’s wrapping may remind that people forget to honor God.

MacDonald writes that the woman is always awake and that her heart will not break. She has “not a door to shut.” He may be explaining that God never sleeps, that he is always ready to answer and that he will never despair of loving his rebellious children. The mixed message of the song says something about the singer’s purpose. The wise woman means to frighten Rosamund so that she will listen. MacDonald writes: “you would have thought she wanted to frighten the princess, and so indeed she did” (LP 17). Assuming attention, the wise woman has inserted instruction that may reassure Rosamund. The wise woman is well intentioned and knows her audience. Similarly, MacDonald can picture a God who seeks his children’s attention because he wants to teach them.

Biblical language includes the vocabulary of redemption but MacDonald simplifies his diction to use just the words that describe the ideas behind repentance or salvation. Pridmore claims: “In these [fantasy] works, MacDonald abandons overt Christian terminology and it is in them that MacDonald’s distinctive genius find voice” (110). Although MacDonald uses less Christian terminology in his fantasy, his language is sometimes biblical in his adapted quotations. Many of the wise woman’s lines echo the words of God. For example, she tells the shepherd and shepherdess “you are sufficiently punished by the work of your own hands” (LP 141). This line reminds of the Psalmist’s request for justice: “give them after the work of their hands; render to them their desert” (Psalms 28:4). MacDonald portrays a God who does not delight to punish. Natural consequences are sufficient.

The wise woman instructs the reformed Rosamund: “you must be
their servant, as I have been yours” (LP 140). MacDonald combines two loved quotations from the New Testament: “love one another; as I have loved you” and “but he that is greatest among you shall be your servant” (John 13:34) (Mathew 23:11). By using the words of Christ, MacDonald can make the wise woman seem Christ like.

When the wise woman explains, “every time you feel you want me, that is a sign I am wanting you,” MacDonald uses a rephrasing of “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you” (LP 126) (James 4:8). MacDonald alters the meaning of the verse slightly to strengthen the connection between God and his children. The wise woman tells Rosamund that Rosamund will realize that she is loved and needed whenever she remembers the wise woman with fondness. Her pleasant thoughts are a witness that she is part of the wise woman’s plan.

The wise woman tells Rosamund: “There are yet many rooms in my house you may have to go through” (LP 126). Christ informs his disciples: “In my Father’s house are many mansions” (John 14:2). MacDonald adds meaning to illustrate his personal understanding of God’s mercy. He sees heaven as a place where people can continue to be refined until they are perfect.

Rosamund must “submit to be tried.” God says he “will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The Lord is my God” (LP 107) (Zechariah 13:9). Rosamund comes to know the wise woman and her purposes through the tests she is given. After the trials, Rosamund is able to recognize the wise woman in a new way.

When Rosamund is frightened, the wise woman comforts: “... till the light comes. I will stand here by you” (LP 103). These words sound like the Lord’s promises, “he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” and “I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you” (John 8:12) (John 14:18). The wise woman will wait with Rosamund until the light comes. This could mean, that she will stay with the princess until Rosamund has a full understanding or until the danger of night has passed or until the millennial day. MacDonald maximizes exegetical potential in the same way the Bible does.

The wise woman says, “come to me” (LP 142) Christ says, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Much of the story’s resolution relies on the implications of Rosamund’s coming to the wise woman. Bible readers can finish MacDonald’s story in the same way that they can finish the familiar verse.

Rosamund is warned: “No one ever gets into my house that does not knock at the door and ask to come in” (LP 22). She must humble herself in order to enjoy the blessings of the wise woman’s house. Christ teaches:
“knock and it shall be opened unto you” (Luke 11:9). When Rosamund knocks, she is invited in and enters the wise woman’s territory. In another way, her knocking or conscious request for assistance allows the wise woman to open the door of her spoiled princess heart. This tableau reminds of Christ’s words: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him . . .” (Revelation 3:20). Rosamund’s success foils the failure of the applicant in the parable of the householder: “When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are” (Luke 13:25). If Rosamund will follow the instructions she receives from the wise woman she need not be rejected at the last day. MacDonald uses the words of the Lord to give the wise woman credibility as a symbol and to give his 19th century Christian readers the pleasure of identifying familiar quotations. Reading *The Lost Princess* feels something like reading the Bible. MacDonald gives his readers a simulation of obeying the Lord’s injunction to “search the scriptures” (John 5:39).

*The Lost Princess* also sounds like the Bible because it is written in third person. This perspective distinguishes *The Lost Princess* from *Phantastes*, notes David Robb, where the first person causes a transfer of “moral explicitness” (89). MacDonald’s narratorial intervention serves the same purpose as the Bible’s relay of events. Cornelis Bennema explains:

This identification of the reader with the character is secretly directed by the narrator. The narrator tries to influence the interaction that occurs between the reader and the characters, counting on a ‘permanent mechanism of reading, which is partly unconscious: the evaluation of the characters.’ The implication is that a narrative is not neutral since it has an inbuilt perspective. This perspective is communicated to the reader who cannot remain neutral—he or she will either accept or reject the author’s ideology. (394)

The Bible’s occasionally contradictory position on judging becomes superficial when its narrative voice invites commendation or condemnation. MacDonald’s decision to involve a narrator also involves the reader in the Christian action of “rightly” judging (Luke 7:43). The reader must evaluate MacDonald’s ideology just as New Testament readers must appraise Christ’s.

Christ invites, “Ask and it shall be given you” (Matthew 7:12). Investigation is a learning pattern that increases engagement. MacDonald uses 63 questions in *The Lost Princess*. 29 of them are polar questions. This type of question is useful to reinforce information that is already known. Christ employs this type of question in the New Testament, when he asks: “Will you also go away?”(John 6:67). Answering yes or no forces
the respondent to decide where he or she stands. It is key in establishing commitments. Many of the questions from *The Lost Princess* are useful in the quest to know God. For example, would you believe? Did she not tell you . . . ? Couldn’t you help me? Will you forgive . . . ? These types of questions require an immediate determination. Christians believe that life is a continual round of choosing and that consistently choosing right over wrong will yield a Christ-like character. Choosing Godly choices shows an understanding of divine nature.

MacDonald indicates that questioning is an appropriate way to learn about God with his non-polar questions. He writes: “The child may not indeed be capable of looking into the father’s method, but he can in a measure understand his work, has therefore free entrance to his study and workshop both, and is welcome to find out what he can, with fullest liberty to ask him questions” (HG 58). Rosamund asks questions of the wise woman and receives answers because the wise woman wants her to have the spirit of inquiry that accompanies humility.

The 34 non-polar questions are divided up into 6 hows, 6 whos, 9 whats, 6 wheres, 2 whys and 0 whens. The absence of whens is instructive because both MacDonald’s and the Bible’s God answers all questions in his own time but those who would follow him should demonstrate their trust by accepting his timetable. Those who ask, when will this end, when will I get what I want and when will Christ come again are likely to receive counsel about patience. MacDonald has the reader read only the type of questions that will lead to the most satisfying answers. He does not tell his readers not to ask when because they can have the delight of discovering it for themselves.

Although there are many questions in the story, it is interesting to note that MacDonald did not structure the story completely around questions. He might have written a long conversation between Rosamund and the wise woman where the wise woman becomes the voice of theology. Some of this asking and answering happens in *At the Back of the North Wind*. For MacDonald, the act of questioning is useful as long as it is performed appropriately. He warns about careless questioning:

Such questions spring from the passion for the fruit of the tree of knowledge, not the fruit of the tree of life. Men would understand: they do not care to obey—understand where it is impossible they should understand save by obeying. They would search into the work of the Lord instead of doing their part in it—thus making it impossible both for the Lord to go on with his work, and for themselves to become capable of seeing and understanding what he does. Instead of immediately obeying the Lord of life, the one condition upon which he can help them, and in itself the beginning of their deliverance, they
set themselves to question their unenlightened intellects.

*(HG 23)*

MacDonald makes Rosamund’s quest for understanding a practical one. She learns by completing assignments. Her knowledge of truth is deeper than it would have been had she merely listened to a sermon. She receives a different faith as her reward. Paraphrasing Martin Buber, Walter Moberly explains: “One type of faith . . . is characterized by trust. The other type . . . is characterized by the belief that something is true” (403). Rosamund knows more about the wise woman at the end of the story but it is more important that Rosamund trusts the wise woman because it is her trust that gives her the confidence to persevere. Gerold believes: “For MacDonald it is much more important to believe in God than to believe things about God. The true question is not: ‘Do I believe or feel this thing is right?’ (US 392). The true question the Christian has to ask is: Have I left all to follow him?” (13). MacDonald advocates the faith that allows the Christian to exchange his or her way of life for heaven. This good bargain shows his God’s generosity.

3. **“Familiar Spirits”** *(Deuteronomy 18:11)*

MacDonald’s election of the fairy tale as a vehicle for his message relates to his reading of the Bible because bible and fairy tales share motifs. The fairy tale form allows him to influence his reader to think productively.

MacDonald uses stories to help readers to replicate the experience of coming to God. Gray explains: “. . . the point of *Adela Cathcart* is that Adela is, so to speak, given back her life by the therapeutic experience of listening to stories—stories that take her out of the limitations of self-preoccupation and open her up to “the Other”, that is, the world, other people and ultimately the divine Life itself” (2). Just as Rosamund must learn to think of others, the reader is for a moment, thinking of others. Christ asks his followers to love their neighbors so that they can understand love. MacDonald writes: “To do as God does is to receive God” (US 6).

MacDonald takes his own counsel. In creating the fairy world, he mimics his maker. He writes: “. . . a man may, if he pleases invent a little world of his own . . . which is the nearest perhaps, he can come to creation” (FI 65). The reader can learn about creating by exploring MacDonald’s created world just as people can learn about God by enjoying nature.

MacDonald’s fairy tales relate to Bible tales because both forms provide a space to consider the consequence of actions. Margaret Parsons manifests: “The reader comes gradually to realize that Fairy land is only another name for the regions of the soul where will and circumstance and choice unite to promote, or degrade, the living spirit” (8). Condemning or condoning the characters in the story requires a positioning on the part of the readers. MacDonald’s God wants people to decide what they value because
determination is a prerequisite for conversion. Those who have no opinion may not take the trouble to investigate truth enough to accept or reject it. By enticing the reader to finish the story, MacDonald invests the reader in an evaluation of God. Joyce Hines defines:

. . . mythopoeic writing springs from visceral perception of universal truth; it will couch intuitively known truths in the symbols which most vividly present themselves to the mind of the writer and will inspire a variety of interpretations. MacDonald himself wrote that a true (good) fairy tale will vary according to the person interpreting it and should awake in the reader “things which are in him” and make him “think things for himself.” (26)

MacDonald’s God values the conversion, which comes from individual seeking.

MacDonald also writes with the same purpose he attributes to the Bible: “The Bible leads us to Jesus, the inexhaustible, the ever unfolding Revelation of God. It is Christ ‘in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,’ not the Bible, save as leading to him” (US 53). MacDonald’s stories explain his understanding of God in the same way that the Bible inspires people to know God. MacDonald recognizes that fairy tales and bible stories share motifs and employs these doubly familiar ideas in The Lost Princess. MacDonald can connect the reading of fairytales in general and his own in particular to the Bible as a communicator of morals. Sadler observes: “MacDonald’s special talent was to create literary parables, which borrowed heavily from fairy tale, myth, and biblical tradition” (n.pag.). MacDonald uses the mainstays of fairy tales and connects them to Christian images thus increasing the felicity of the fairy tale as partner of moral teaching.

MacDonald uses familiar motifs in his fairy tale. Fairy tales are often for and about children and “of such is the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:16). Rosamund is a believable child who learns by making mistakes. She may be more representative of her readers than MacDonald’s other child characters. This is a notable point given what Robb calls MacDonald’s “startlingly direct equation between the child and Christ” (110). If children represent a pure ideal for adults to emulate, the obnoxious Rosamund and Agnes present a problem. They are much more human than MacDonald’s angelic Diamond or estimable Irene. MacDonald may assume the distinction between childish and childlike. He admonishes adults to be childlike or in other words patient, humble, obedient, trusting and loving. Rosamund’s castle faults may be due to immaturity but after her refinement, she matures past her parents into a degree of wisdom. She approaches the ideal represented in the wise woman who appears as a child during Rosamund’s final trial. Rosamund may be said to have grown both older and younger. She possesses more childlike
virtue and less childish vice. Agnes rejects what may be the determining characteristic of children—she refuses to grow. The faulty girls teach that even children must become childlike because the child is the symbol of the trusting teachable whom God can assist to heaven. If Rosamund can become childlike or Christ like with all her faults then so can the reader. MacDonald’s intended audience, those who “look a little solemn, and sigh as they close the book” will identify with Rosamund because they have also tried and failed to improve themselves (LP 128). Gillian Avery affirms: “MacDonald also excelled at making virtue in children both creditable and attractive” (136). Rosamund is believable because the reader can understand her weakness: she is appealing because she does not give up.

Wolves are another proverbial figure in fairytales like “The Seven Kids,” “Peter and the Wolf,” and “Little Red Riding Hood” and in the Bible, wolves appear as false prophets, judges, and the housemates of lambs. In MacDonald’s narrative as well as the Bible, wolves are fearsome but ultimately under divine authority showing that faith can supersede fear.

Disney has established the primacy of the princess in fairy tales but the princess is also a biblical figure. Jerusalem is called a princess and princesses share the guilt of Solomon’s downfall. Michal, Jehoshabeth, Maachah, and Jehu are all kings’ daughters. MacDonald, who viewed God as the father of all, can teach that each woman can be considered a princess as part of her divine heritage.

In the Bible, Esther and Jezebel align with the Queen Bee and the Snow Queen of fairy tales. These stories show that women in high places are not guaranteed to deserve the epithet of nobility. Royalty does not distinguish MacDonald’s queen in The Lost Princess: she commits the same maternal misdemeanors as her vulgar counterpart. MacDonald, the loving husband, doting father and kindly instructor at a women’s college, may be supposed to mean that women should not be pigeonholed into sovereigns or servants.

The Prince in disguise is another fairytale ploy. “The Frog Prince,” “Snow White and Rose Red,” and “The Six Swans” all feature princes who have been transformed into animals. The Bible also offers tales of princes who are not what they seem. Moses, adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter, becomes a prince disguised as a shepherd and the Prince of Peace is often unrecognized in his guise of a carpenter’s son. In The Lost Princess, MacDonald writes about Prince, a dog that is not what he seems. MacDonald doesn’t reveal Prince’s true identity in order to remind that God works in mysterious ways, that his servants are sometimes very humble and that it is wise to be polite to everyone, just in case.

Fairytale shepherds include, “The Boy Who Cried Wolf,” “The Shepherd’s Flute” and “The Shepherd Boy.” The book of Psalms is largely attributed to the shepherd boy David. Abraham and much of his famous
progeny kept sheep. Pastoralists were invited to the stable under the star. Shepherds in these stories represent faith, stewardship, humility, folly, power and wisdom. These characteristics are all present in MacDonald’s shepherd who is one of the more likable people in a book full of flawed mortals. MacDonald’s shepherd is most like those witnesses of Christ’s advent because he is not the main character and he does not fully understand the gospel but is willing to “come and see” (John 1:39).

Rosamund calls the wise woman a “witch” (LP 35). Witches in fairy tales are always defeated and in the Bible, God has more power than the witch of Endor. The wise woman cannot be a witch by this standard because she is the most powerful force in the world of her story. MacDonald’s narrator provides a rubric: “In some countries she would have been called a witch, but that would have been a mistake, for she never did anything wicked, and had more power than any witch could have” (LP 8). Nevertheless, the wise woman fits the witch profile. The King calls her an old hag. She lives in the forest like Baba Yaga. She is tall like Meg Merrilies. She wears a cloak the color of death, mourning and evil. MacDonald might portray his symbol of a loving God in a more attractive form but he chooses to present her in a fearful light. Owen Davies argues that a widespread belief in witchcraft persisted through 19th-century Britain. MacDonald may have chosen to use the witch concept because it was potentially frightening. Lewis notes, “Nowhere outside of the New Testament have I found terror and comfort so intertwined” (xxxv). MacDonald’s choice of a woman mistaken for a witch is apropos because his first readers may have understood a fear of witches and at the same time may have been able to perceive the fear of witches as incorrect. His original audience may have understood God as vindictive, from some Calvinist teachings but MacDonald tenders the idea of a cruel God as a misunderstanding.

Avery finds that “punishment and purification” are “characteristics of the Victorian fairy tale” (131). Punishment, as defined in fairy tales, might mean a painful consequence of poor behavior as when the wicked queen is forced to don red-hot shoes and dance herself to death in the Grimm Snow White. Biblical punishment may be like the destruction of the impenitent Sodom and Gomorrah. Purification might mean the removal of a harmful feature as in “The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily” or the mastery of a weakness as in Peter’s conversion. In *The Lost Princess*, MacDonald can use these themes to enhance his picture of God as a loving parent. Were Rosamund to find herself in the Grimm Cinderella or the second book of Kings she might have her eyes pecked out or be devoured by bears. Lindskoog discusses Rosmund’s instruction: “natural consequences… punished her repeatedly during her curing” (84). MacDonald shows God as a gentle disciplinarian whose intent is to correct rather than coerce. His fantasy
teaches by contrasting the expectations set by fairy and Bible stories.

4. “It is Written Again” (Matthew 4:7)
Repetition has both literary and theological value. The chanting of “The Three Little Pigs” and the beatitudes make the stories memorable. Repetition features in stories and preserves them. Repetition is important in the Old and New Testaments as repeat concepts remind of the human tendency to forget priorities in the press of living. Humans learn through repetitions; indeed learning may be said to consist in the ability to repeat successful actions. MacDonald has Rosamund repeat her lessons until she masters them. Rosamund must perform her household tasks in the cottage for multiple days, thought she feels she has proved her obedience after only one. The wise woman wants Rosamund to understand the consistency that comes from repetition. If Rosamund can habitually obey, she will be more able to resist temptation. The wise woman has Rosamund replicate her learning experience by helping her parents. Arnold believes: “The individual is required, under pain of being stunted and enfeebled in his own development if he disobeys, to carry others along with him in his march towards perfection” (48). Rosamund must be more than a good person; she must be a force for good in her world. Rosamund can duplicate some of the wise woman’s methods and as she helps her parents, she will learn the lessons better herself. Christ also commands, “Follow me” because in mimicking Christ, humans learn to be Christ-like (Mark 2:14).

“The Three Little Pigs” and “The Golden Goose” as well as Cain and Abel and Christ and Satan are stories that feature parallel sibling plots. Rosamund and Agnes become sisters of a sort when Agnes’ parents foster Rosamund. The girls are both taken to the wise woman’s cottage. They are both given tasks to do and both promised the same reward. MacDonald can tell a similar story twice in the same book because the details are instructive. Rosamund and Agnes follow a pattern until their individual choices cause their stories to diverge. Those readers who pity Agnes or see some of themselves in her can understand why patterns are important to God. MacDonald ends Rosamund’s story when she can repeat the wise woman’s pattern. She will be happy in the way that the wise woman is happy. Aldous Huxley attests: “There is something curiously boring about someone else’s happiness” (247). MacDonald balances his story by leaving Agnes in the misery she has chosen with the option to repeat the treatment. Any reader who pities Agnes or finds something familiar in her character will regret that the girl’s stories are not more similar, or wish for more repetition. MacDonald wants readers to think of the differences as well as the similarities between fiction and reality. His ideal reader may finish the book by wishing for a
repetitious predictability in actual kindness, self-discipline and success. MacDonald uses repetition to teach that God desires a consistency of results for all his children whom he loves equally.

MacDonald varies the girl-in-a cottage theme by having Rosamund stay in two different cottages. In both cottages, she learns to do some of the practical work that can give her confidence and help her learn how to learn. In both, her bad behavior is checked. In one cottage, she receives divine love. In the other she receives human and animal love. In the wise woman’s cottage, she is instructed and allowed to practice. In the shepherd’s cottage, Agnes’ parents and Prince correct her efforts to practice what she has learned. Rosamund leaves the first cottage of her own will but the wise woman knows Rosamund well enough to anticipate her preference. Rosamund leaves as an expression both of her own will and of the wise woman’s. Rosamund believes she is choosing a more pleasant option and the wise woman has prearranged conditions to continue Rosamund’s education. She is asked to leave the second cottage because her hosts cannot tolerate her bad behavior. At this point, Rosamund has learned enough to desire correction. She chooses to return to the wise woman’s cottage.

In Rosamund’s third cottage experience, MacDonald describes three trials, variations on a theme. Rosamund must experience temptation to be selfish until her learning is thorough enough to enable her to resist it. MacDonald uses repetition to explain through Rosamund why people often find themselves in familiar situations; people must make different choices if they want different results.

5. “Waxed Greater and Greater” (1 Chronicles 11:9)
MacDonald has the wise woman build on Rosamund’s experience: once she has learned one lesson, she can apply what she has learned to the next. God teaches in the same way, “precept upon precept, line upon line” (Isaiah 28:10).

In the New Testament, Peter’s progress under the Lord’s tutelage is detailed instructively. In the Old Testament, Elijah is guided through learning experiences. MacDonald emulates this progress in Rosamund’s development. He encourages the reader to love God by explaining why God does what he does. His narration details the stages of Rosamund’s development, using each stage to instruct. Her first lesson is that the wise woman can overpower her. Like Balaam, Rosamund is unable to continue in her selfish course. Rosamund must learn to fear because she has been so protected that she imagines there is no one to hurt her and so has no value for protection. MacDonald teaches, through Rosamund, that God’s children may ignore him when they fear no want, harm or disappointment. Rosamund’s fear comes from her lack of understanding. As she knows the wise woman better, her fear
recedes and Rosamund is ready to value knowledge as an antidote to anxiety. Valuing knowledge prepares her to learn.

The wise woman comforts Rosamund by carrying her and holding her hand. She is laying the foundation for trust. MacDonald may consider Paul and others who come to Christ when he has Rosamund look back at the mercies of her life and say, “It was, you then, after all!” (LP 126). Initially, Rosamund takes kindness for “a sign of either partiality or fear” (LP 14). She has never met a disinterested person and so she cannot recognize the wise woman’s motivation. As Rosamund never meets with sincere affection until the wise woman, MacDonald teaches that people may be surprised at the depths of God’s love, which surpasses all they have known in their mortal relationships.

The wise woman next gives Rosamund a conundrum: the black cloak is alternately hard and soft. This apparent impossibility prepares Rosamund to accept what she cannot yet understand. Christ also poses paradoxes—lose your life in order to save it. MacDonald’s God allows his children to puzzle over the information he gives them. When they accept that they do not know everything, then they are ready to know more. Another example is the wise woman’s song, which contains useful information in cryptic form. Rosamund understands only one thing in the song: that it is about the wise woman. God gives his children scriptures and perhaps the most important thing to learn from his words is that they are about him.

The wise woman has given Rosamund some new ideas but Rosamund is not ready to really learn. Learning requires self-discipline and Rosamund has never made herself do anything. The wise woman asks her to perform simple tasks with immediate consequences for non-compliance just as the Israelites are given the Ten Commandments. First, Rosamund must request entrance to the cottage. She could have been carried serenely across the threshold but her choices leave her with an opportunity to practice submission. Her first obedience is motivated by fear. Ironically, Rosamund is in no danger but her warped perspective causes her to hear the “hissing of serpents” in the “soft wind” (LP 23). She decides that the human form of the wise woman, ogress or not, is preferable to the howling of the wolves and hyenas she thinks she hears. She is in no danger because she is under the wise woman’s watchful eye. Hindmarsh notes: “... MacDonald will not allow his characters—even the evil ones—any experiences which are not, if responded to correctly, a means of progressing towards God” (62). Her fear leads her to reexamine her judgment of the wise woman temporarily. Like humans, who may only pray in desperation, Rosamund’s obedience is in its infancy. Her small decision to prefer the wise woman as the lesser of two evils is the beginning of her learning and her love.

When she first tries to obey, she is surprised to find that obedience
is more difficult than she imagined. Rosamund is willing to knock but she cannot find a door or window. Her first response is her default reaction, rage. She decides against screaming because voicing her frustration, which works for her in the castle, only draws wolves in the forest. Once she is quiet, Rosamund’s thoughts are led to her parents. When she begins to consider the sorrow of others, she can cry “real tears—soft, mournful tears” (LP 25). As she is softened, her thoughts of love for her parents make her wish to see the wise woman. MacDonald suggests that when God’s children are still and let go of their own hurts to think of others, they can be open to thoughts of God.

Finally, Rosamund decides to do what is in her power, despite its apparent futility, and she knocks on the wall. Faith is trust that the instructor has a purpose in his instruction. Again, her knocking is like early prayer. Those who learn to pray may at first feel that it is pointless to speak to someone who is not in the room. MacDonald believes that if these petitioners persist, they will find God waiting to reward their humility.

When Rosamund gains entrance to the cottage, she finds herself alone. The reader knows the wise woman is there but unseen. MacDonald can reassure that first prayers sometimes seem unanswered because the petitioner is still learning to recognize God’s hand. As Elijah learns to distinguish the still small voice, Rosamund learns to trust the constancy of the wise woman.

Rosamund’s next decision is to congratulate herself on her spiritual progress: “It seemed to her as if her soul had grown larger of a sudden” (LP 28). She has never tried to be good before and so she has no experience with which to compare. Her self-admiration soon turns to pride in her goodness and she does not realize that she is undoing all the progress of the night before. MacDonald uses Rosamund’s experience to point out snares, which would be Christians can avoid. In the same way, The Ten Commandments, The Sermon on the Mount and Pauline epistles warn about temptation and testify of God’s love for his children.

Rosamund’s pride is checked temporarily by a return of fear in the form of thunder and lightning. The wise woman has evidently been aware of Rosamund’s thoughts and she steps in before Rosamund has time to go further down a destructive path. The wise woman may or may not have access to her thoughts but she knows Rosamund well enough to predict her behavior and to understand how best to correct it. In the same way, MacDonald’s God anticipates the challenges his children will face because of his thorough acquaintance with their personalities and can construct experiences, which will give each child the best chance of success.

The princess responds to her fright by calling for the wise woman. When she receives no immediate answer, she again resorts to rage and self-justification. Similarly, those who seek God tentatively sometimes blame him for his schedule and rationalize him out of existence or into cruelty.
MacDonald uses Rosamund’s thoughts in his apology to show how humans may be tempted to malign God.

MacDonald gives Rosamund another familiar experience: waffling. She goes back and forth between thoughts of her own goodness and thoughts of the wise woman’s goodness. Consistency is a characteristic of eternal goodness that Rosamund must develop.

Her misery makes her decide to again seek the wise woman but Rosamund’s bad temper has made her “stupid” and she runs into to something hard; it reminds her of the Wise Woman’s cloak (LP 29). When she falls from the blow, she does not land on the floor, as she expects, rather she falls back on to a bed, a “soft and pleasant” patch of heather (LP 29). MacDonald’s contrast of hard and soft is reminiscent of what Lewis calls “his Christ-like union of tenderness and severity” (xxxv). MacDonald can teach that God does not spare his children from the consequences of their mistakes. His God may step in front of his children to prevent worse collisions or check destructive behavior to limit its potential harm. But always, MacDonald’s God cushions the landing and gives his children something to be grateful for.

On her heather bed, Rosamund dreams of the wise woman’s song. She wakes from her nightmare, when the hopelessness is unendurable, to find the wise woman at her bedside. Rosamund embraces her and receives a kiss “like the rose gardens of Damascus” (LP 30). MacDonald illustrates how God gives his children fleeting moments of joy to treasure in the dry days of a thorough conversion. Were he to offer this joy continually or even frequently, his children might take it for granted or worse, find themselves unable to resist. MacDonald’s God is careful to preserve agency by not overwhelming those who seek him. The memory of joy is enough to swing the balance when a Christian is tempted to abandon obedience for convenience.

Even though Rosamund has experienced the wise woman’s love for her, the cares and distractions of the body soon return to claim her attention. Habit too, is stronger than her baby faith. Rosamund returns to her original opinion of the wise woman. MacDonald demonstrates that coming to God requires patience and perseverance. Rosamund has neither of these characteristics. She must first gain the tools of commitment before she can feel committed to the wise woman or enjoy the wise woman’s commitment to her.

The wise woman wants to teach Rosamund to trust her. She promises to return Rosamund to her parents if Rosamund is a good girl. When Rosamund is truly good, the reunion with her parents will be a happy one. On the first morning in the cottage, Rosamund cannot understand the joy the wise woman has in store for her because she has never known true happiness. In the Bible, God promises: Delight thyself also in the Lord and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart” (Psalms 37:4). God gives his children more,
however, than they can imagine to request: “But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1st Corinthians 2:9). The wise woman keeps her promise and returns Rosamund to her parents. The reunion is the beginning of greater happiness for them all and Rosamund will become much more than a good girl.

Rosamund submits when she understands that it is in her best interest. The wise woman can use what T.H. Huxley calls the “instinct of unlimited self-assertion” to motivate her recalcitrant charge (59). God also uses self-interest to motivate; for example the golden rule is a tool to attract companionship. Rosamund can do nothing the wise woman asks without gaining present and future benefits. The Bible teaches that Christians cannot obey God without being blessed although it may require additional obedience to fully comprehend the blessings received (Malachi 4). MacDonald says: “Do the will of God and thou shalt know God and he will open thine eyes to look into the very heart of knowledge” (HG 221). For MacDonald, obedience is the portal to understanding.

Although Rosamund has begun to practice reluctant obedience in the cottage, she is far from a real conversion. The wise woman realizes that Rosamund will choose the hard way to learn and lets her choose it. Rosamund feels she has somehow bested the wise woman by leaving her cottage because she is unaware of the wise woman’s perpetual supervision. Her story is like Jonah’s because in both stories God respects his children’s agency but he never abandons them. MacDonald’s God knows his children thoroughly enough to provide that any choice a child makes will benefit her or him. Rosamund’s preferences do determine the flavor of her lesson in the shepherd’s cottage but the wise woman is still directing.

In the shepherd’s cottage, Rosamund meets people who treat her contemptuously. Because Rosamund has always been treated respectfully, she does not know to value respect. When she meets the disdainful shepherdess, who calls her an “ill-tempered toad” and “ungrateful hussy,” Rosamund can perceive the importance of courtesy (LP 75-6). In this story, MacDonald can explain that God may tolerate evil because of its instructive contrast.

Rosamund learns to earn both kind words and her board, through improved manners and household chores. Necessity controls her. Rosamund cannot control herself until she can comprehend controlled behavior. God’s commandments are a similar aid to self-discipline.

Rosamund most enjoys learning from her friend, Prince. Again, she shares an experience with Balaam who also learned from an animal with superior spiritual sight. Prince replaces the correction Rosmund’s parents neglect to give her. God sends his children friends to teach them but his most productive instructors are often found in family. MacDonald notes that
Christ finds his symbols in the “family”, among other things (HG 53). Prince has been introduced into the Shepherd’s family previous to Rosamund’s discovery of the shepherd’s cottage. The wise woman has put him there by design as if according to some master plan in which Rosamund’s and the others’ choices were anticipated. MacDonald alludes to a previous existence before mortality where such planning might take place when he quotes from Wordsworth: “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting” and “… we come from God who is our home.” (HG 56) and Henry Vaughn: “this place appointed for my second race” (HG 57). MacDonald leaves room in the story for either of these interpretations: the wise woman could have made the plan with a pre-mortal knowledge of Rosamund or she may have been observing the princess from birth. The impression of tender care is the same in either case.

Just when Rosamund has begun to value her relationship with Prince, the wise woman takes him away. MacDonald defends the God, who sometimes takes loved ones from his children through premature death. Rosamund is angry and regresses because she has a fair weather faith. She will try to be good as long as her efforts are immediately rewarded by friendship but when she is asked to be good in less comfortable circumstances, she has not the determination to continue. She is not truly converted. Rosamund has behaved, up to this point because she anticipates reward. She must deepen her righteousness until it reaches the level of conversion where she is good for goodness’ sake and not merely for the blessings that accompany obedience. Rosamund is blessed throughout the story, but from her point of view in the shepherd’s cottage, everything is falling apart. Her best friend is gone and she is expelled from the shepherd’s family. MacDonald may be writing from a personal perspective. He lost family members and positions and learned from these afflictions to love God better. He found his solace in God just as Rosamund eventually finds her comfort in the wise woman.

On her way home, she receives help from the wise woman in disguise. Rosamund has learned to respect some people, but she must learn to respect and love all people. She doesn’t see the wise woman in the old woman who helps her. She does not even see an equal. MacDonald reprises the commandment to love your neighbor in his description of the ideal man: “He would lift every brother to the embrace of the father,” “He looks up to every man,” and “His brother’s well-being is essential to his bliss” (HG 86-7). Rosamund must learn to see the wise woman not only in her different guises but in every person she meets. MacDonald presents God, as the father of his children, who has transmitted a portion of his divinity to each of his children who are created in his image. Learning to love each neighbor is another way to learn to love God. Seeing the goodness in each of his children
is another way to feel God’s love.

After repeated mistakes, Rosamund is alone for the final time. Her solitude leads her to ponder: “And again all her own story came up into her brain from her repentant heart” (LP 104). When Rosamund reviews the past, she can find gratitude for the wise woman’s continual kindness because she has developed spiritually enough to perceive it and her trust deepens.

When Rosamund is ready and willing, the wise woman gives her three trials. None of the trials appear very trying. Rosamund does not find herself burning at the stake or suffering with consumption, instead her first test is to be annoyed by an everyday incident—she must wait to see her mother. Rosamund allows a series of small choices to set a train of behavior that leads to rage and rabbit throwing. At any point along the way, she could have replaced her bad thoughts with good thoughts and arrived at self-control. MacDonald’s God does not waste his children’s time. Even small conflicts are opportunities to prove loyal or rebellious. He demonstrates the mental process of success and illustrates the thoroughness of God’s design.

The second trial is not the repetition Rosamund expects. She finds herself in a beautiful garden with pleasant people. Again, Rosamund brings the unpleasantness that is in her heart to the scene: this time, she drowns a child. Outside the chamber of moods, Rosamund’s misery returns “afresh and tenfold” (LP 115). She realizes that she has not progressed so much as she had imagined and that she needs help to become a “blessed creature” (LP 107). Her failure, despite her best efforts, has increased her devotion to the wise woman and in that respect, it is not a failure. MacDonald can teach that those who sincerely try to be Christ-like know best how much they need Christ.

Rosamund asks for the wise woman’s help and receives it. In her final trial, she is able to perceive where she is beginning to go wrong and correct herself. Her reward for her success is more knowledge of the wise woman. Katharine Bubel expounds:

MacDonald captures in narrative form what he preached:

But if we, choosing . . . to do the right, go on so until we are enabled by doing it to see into the very loveliness and essence of the right, and know it to be altogether beautiful . . . delight with our whole souls in doing the will of God . . . we are free indeed, because we are acting like God out of the essence of our nature, knowing good and evil, and choosing the good with our whole hearts and delighting in it. (56)

Rosamund sees the wise woman in her truer form “a woman perfectly beautiful, neither old nor young for hers was the old age of everlasting youth” (LP 125). The withered woman has been a doorway into the wonderful. Rosamund’s experience is a narration of the process that Christ advocated.
when he said; “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God” (John 17:3). MacDonald aims Rosamund and the reader at the Bible’s ultimate destination.

MacDonald writes: “for life to be a good thing and worth living, a man must be the child of a perfect father and know him” (HS 190). The act of reading The Lost Princess increases the reader’s knowledge of God and the story can generate a desire to know God better. If readers finish the book with only admiration or interest, MacDonald’s purpose is still fulfilled but as Johnson indicates, some may find his work “life-transforming” (91). As he proves his subject’s greatness, per Arnold’s definition, MacDonald validates his writing by the same standard.

Works Cited


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