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The Transformation from Law to Spirit in *The Princess and the Goblin*

Kathryn Schmitz

George MacDonald's work reflects his struggle with and his reconciliation to a world of conflicting beliefs. He lived to see Muscular Christianity and the rise of the New Woman. Likewise, as a result of his increasing devotion to Christianity, he was expelled from the pulpit and professional preaching. As his literary career developed, so did his understanding of the inexhaustible love of God, which ironically resulted in accusations of unorthodoxy and heresy. MacDonald considered *The Princess and the Goblin* "as good [a] work as the kind as I can do, and I think will be the most complete thing that I have done" (qtd. Greville MacDonald 412). G. K. Chesterton famously praised the fairy story as "the most real, the most realistic, in the exact sense of the phrase the most like life" of all the stories he had read (Greville MacDonald 9). If *The Princess and the Goblin* is MacDonald's "most complete" work and "the most like life," it is no wonder it demonstrates the dualities of his religious thought.

Scholars agree that George MacDonald was a profoundly religious man. John Pennington reads the *Princess* books as an expression of MacDonald's Muscular Christianity. In the characters of Irene and Curdie in particular, Pennington argues, "MacDonald advocates a spiritual muscularity, one that requires strength of spirit rather than body" (135). Bonnie Gaarden's mythopoeic approach identifies MacDonald as a Neoplatonist who subscribes to the "notion that creation comes from God and has God as its goal" (4). She argues that the non-dualistic relationship between God and (wo)man encourages MacDonald's creation of the Christian Goddess in the *Princess* books and elsewhere. Not only does she identify the princess Irene as a Kore figure, but Irene's grandmother as, among other symbolologies, Christ (Gaarden 166, 127). Yet another, more orthodox reading by Stephen Prickett, identifies George MacDonald as rooted in Judeo-Christian literary tradition.¹ MacDonald's tradition, however, reaches beyond his Calvinist familial roots into the distant Hebrew past. Prickett explains that MacDonald's Christianity does not begin and end in human doctrine but reaches into a mystic "approbation and revaluation of the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament as a prelude to the revisionist New Testament . . . that great Book in which we

all play our pre-ordained parts” (Prickett 11). The literary tradition Prickett identifies harmonizes with Gaarden’s analysis of MacDonald’s non-dualistic spiritual mysticism and his “spiritual muscularity” (Pennington 135). *The Princess and the Goblin*, MacDonald’s self-proclaimed “complete work,” lends itself to multiple complimentary views.

I argue that Muscular Christianity, feminist theory, and literary tradition converge in what I suggest is the religious hybridity of two images in *The Princess and the Goblin*, the crown and the ring. These images reflect the Jewish religious objects *tefillin* or *phylacteries*; and the stones in these objects symbolize the Holy Spirit and divinity. One evening, after years of spinning spider’s webs, Grandmother Irene presents the young princess Irene with a gift. The gift is a ring set with a fire-opal. It is like, but inferior to, the opals in the grandmother’s crown. It connects the princess to her grandmother by a magical thread. The grandmother explains to the girl that the thread is “too fine for you to see it. You can only feel it” (*Princess* 121). There has been little scholarly discussion of the ring and the crown; however, the ornaments and the stones set in them are significant. I believe that MacDonald used the symbolism of the crown and the ring together to represent the Old Testament tradition of wearing phylacteries. MacDonald reaches into the distant Hebrew past to explore the Christian present; he redirects the Old Testament Law and reworks it into the higher spiritual truth of beauty in thought and action. Additionally, he uses a lovely aged woman, previously precluded from the Jewish custom of wearing phylacteries, to communicate spiritual freedom.

MacDonald was well educated in Old Testament and Reformed doctrine. Rolland Hein, in his comprehensive biography, describes MacDonald’s education as “highly disciplined and intensely religious” (14). The son and grandson of dissenters, MacDonald was taught “the Shorter Catechism with a vengeance” as a boy (Hein 15). At sixteen he enrolled at King’s College in Aberdeen where “they were expected to be proficient in Latin upon entrance and gained proficiency in Greek and Hebrew during the *bajan*² year, with students reading widely in Hesiod, Homer, Theocritus, and the Old Testament” (Hein 16). Hence, a scholarly understanding of Jewish Law, as represented by Christian Scripture, was very familiar to MacDonald. It is not unlikely that MacDonald was educated in sacred texts including the Hebrew Talmud and the teachings concerning phylacteries and other ancient customs.³

Although highly educated and qualified, George MacDonald could

not keep a pastorate. Only two years after his first appointed position as pastor at Arundel, he was accused of unorthodox teaching and was forced to resign. MacDonald championed a Christian faith that experienced a mystic inner life and refused to conform in any way to religious law that did not produce spiritual freedom. Hereafter, I will use the term “Law” to refer to Old Testament and New Testament doctrine.⁴ Greville MacDonald explains his father’s ambition as “the need of a wider spiritual knowledge than could be found in the mother-country of Calvinistic doctrine and literary convention” (161). By no means would George MacDonald compromise his faith, and he would not be troubled with a lack of popularity. After losing his pulpit, he explains his position to his father who was anxious about his son’s financial welfare:

Paul, I think could trust in God in these things and cared little about orthodoxy, as it is now understood “If in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you” are words of his about the highest Christian condition. And Jesus said “If any man is willing to do the will of the Father he shall know of the doctrine.” *Now real earnestness is scarcely to be attained in a high degree without doubts and inward questionings and certainly divine teachings*, and if you add to this the presumption that God must have more to reveal to every age, you will not be sorry that your son cannot go with the many. (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 198)

The pastor expected “wider spiritual knowledge” from a God who had “more to reveal at every age.” *The Princess and the Goblin* demonstrates how MacDonald incorporated traditional knowledge of religion in new forms, partly by how he uses the crown and ring to symbolize a transcendent Christian phylactery.

Historically, the phylactery originated as a physical manifestation of obedience to a command given by God to the Old Testament Hebrews. God instructs the Jewish nation to remember how they were miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt. When the annual Passover ceremony is instituted, God tells the people to remember: “And you shall tell your son, in that day, saying, ‘This is done because of what the Lord did for me when I came up from Egypt.’ It shall be a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the Lord’s law may be in your mouth” (Exodus 13:8-9). The language is in the form of a command—the freed slaves must perform an act of spiritual devotion—and the action they will perform is remembrance. The Hebrew nation will remember to tell future

generations about their deliverance. When they communicate and pass on their freedom story, it will be signified on the hand and the forehead. Three other times in the Pentateuch, the books of the Jewish Law, the command is repeated.⁵ Based on a literal interpretation of these four scriptures, Jewish Rabbis instituted the tradition of the phylactery that transformed the mystical exchange of a story into a physical accessory.

According to *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, in its earliest form phylacteries resembled amulets (27). Later, rabbis established laws specifically governing their size and shape; now they “consist of two leathern boxes—one worn on the arm and known as ‘shel yad’ . . . and the other worn on the head and known as ‘shel rosh’—made of the skins of clean animals” (“Phylacteries” 22). There are exacting regulations, stories, and “fanciful interpretations” connected to the construction of the phylactery (“Phylacteries” 21). The height, width, length, special knots, stitching, and color are all carefully prescribed. The head-phylactery is attached as a circlet; the box rests on the forehead, and “the strap that is passed through the head-phylactery should be long enough to encircle the head and to allow for the knot; and the two ends, falling in front over either shoulder, should reach the navel” (“Phylacteries” 23). The first time the princess Irene sees her great-grandmother wearing her crown, the imagery is reminiscent of the head-phylactery box with long hanging chords: “The hair seemed pouring down from her head, and vanishing in a golden mist ere it reached the floor. It flowed from under the edge of a circle of shining silver, set with alternated pearls and opals” (*Princess* 117).

There is also a ring-like component to the hand-phylactery. The phylactery box is worn on the inside of the upper arm and “the strap that is passed through the hand-phylactery should be long enough for the knot, to encircle the whole length of the arm, and then to be wound three times around the middle finger” (“Phylacteries” 23). Each box contains all four scriptures written “in Hebrew square characters . . . on parchment . . . specially prepared for the purpose” (“Phylacteries” 23). When the phylacteries, also called “tefillin,” are constructed and worn, there are special blessings that are repeated to emphasize the sacred devotion of the wearer. Only the most devout Jew would wear both the head- and hand-phylactery; usually only one was worn, but “the most important tefillin was the head-tefillin” (“Phylacteries” 27). This distinction is also reminiscent in the princess’s ring with a stone “of the same sort” embedded in the grandmother’s crown “only not so good” (*Princess* 120). As Stephen

Prickett's traditional reading suggests, MacDonald reaches into Christianity's Hebrew roots and, through the connection between the crown and the somewhat less important ring, also implies identity through matrilineal descent. Irene asks her father about her ornament, "'Please, king-papa,' she said, 'will you tell me where I got this pretty ring?'" (*Princess* 125). There is a brief moment where the lights of heaven are represented; the "sunshine" is in the king's face, and the "moonlight" is over Irene's, and he answers that "'It was your queen-mamma's once'" (*Princess* 125). There is a convergence of disparate elements in this moment. Day and night, crown and ring, Hebrew and Christian, all connect through the sacred ring binds Irene to her great-grandmother and to her matrilineal heritage.⁶

The *Jerusalem Talmud* is very particular about who may and may not wear the phylactery; it clearly states, "Women, slaves, and children are exempted from . . . wearing the phylacteries" (63). It is consistent with Hebrew patriarchal doctrine. The *Talmud* explains, "The women because it is said: 'And ye shall teach them unto your sons' (Deut. xi. 19), and consequently not to your *daughters*; and as the men receive special orders to study religious prescriptions, they must also submit to the duty of wearing the phylacteries" (Schwab 37). The literal interpretation of Exodus 13:9 concerning remembrance is consistent with a literal interpretation of Deuteronomy 11:19 about educating sons. The phylactery, however, as represented in *The Princess and the Goblin* becomes a symbol and the antithesis of a literal Law. To MacDonald "a symbol was far more than an arbitrary outward and visible sign of an abstract conception: its high virtue lay in a common *substance* with the idea presented" (Greville MacDonald 481-2). He effectively uses the Jewish symbol for remembrance, originating from traditional Hebrew Law, places it in the realm of fairyland on the forehead of a great-great-grandmother, and transcends its "arbitrary outward" significance. Pickett says "that is the correct use of tradition: vital, yet in the end serving to point beyond itself" (15). MacDonald bravely sets forth a new idea, but he begins with an Old Testament symbol "in which truth has been taught . . . [and] have by degrees come to be held merely traditionally" (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 197). He uses the crown to symbolize thinking—or more specifically, a correct understanding of faith.

The very first time Irene visits her great-great-grandmother's bedroom, the room in which she keeps her crown (95), she has a wounded hand and stays all night in her grandmother's bed. That night the grandmother tells the princess that she "must put [her] to one trial—[but] not a *very* hard

one” (105). Irene is charged with the task to remember her grandmother. Reminiscent of God’s command to the Hebrews, Grandmother Irene says, “You shall not forget. The only question is whether you believe I am anywhere—whether you will believe I am anything but a dream” (105). And here is the great transcendent distinction; it is no longer about simply remembering; the princess must believe her grandmother is who she is. Irene does remember her grandmother is real, and comes to her as requested. There was a very real danger for the princess, however; she almost did not believe. Irene’s grandmother tells her that she was worried “a good deal when [Irene] had all but made up [her] mind that I was a dream, and no real great-great-grandmother” (123). The danger lay not in simple remembrance, but in correct thinking as well.

Irene’s great-great-grandmother expects her granddaughter to think properly. She also demonstrates correct thought about herself. Irene asks her grandmother about her crown, “Is it because you have your crown on that you look so young?” ‘No, child,’ answered her grandmother; ‘it is because I felt so young this evening, that I put my crown on’” (122). A correct perception of herself anticipated her wearing the crown. The crown does not dictate a proper perspective; it is a signifier of it. Grandmother Irene continues, “It *is* so silly of people to fancy that old age means crookedness and witheredness and feebleness and sticks and spectacles and rheumatism and forgetfulness!” (122). She points out that the perception of the self can be incorrect. Likewise, “the right old age means strength and beauty and mirth and courage and clear eyes and strong painless limbs” (123). The crown did not transform an old woman into a young woman; a correct self-perception invited the ornamentation. Irene’s great-great-grandmother exemplifies a proper belief in herself.

Curdie, too, is an example of incorrect and correct thinking in regards to the old woman. After the princess follows her invisible thread, travels through the goblin realm, and brings Curdie to her grandmother, she is very disappointed. Curdie does not believe Irene’s grandmother saved the two. He tells the princess, “I never doubted you believed what you said’ . . . ‘I only thought you had some fancy in your head that was not correct’” (152). Irene knows that it is Curdie who is not thinking correctly, he cannot see the beautiful grandmother, her “lovely fire of roses . . . Nor the blue bed? Nor the rose-coloured counter pane? Nor the beautiful light, like the moon, hanging from the roof?” (153). He only sees a dirty room, dusty and large with “a tub, a heap of musty straw, and a withered apple” (153). The old

woman kindly explains to Irene that Curdie cannot see her because he does not believe, “People must believe what they can, and those that believe more must not be hard upon those who believe less” (153). It is not long, however, before Curdie does come to see and believe, as he ought. He has no trouble believing correctly about the old woman after Irene’s grandmother comes to him, “stroke[s] his head and face with cool, soft hands,” and heals him of a wound in his leg (172). Like the progressive revelation, or “Increase of Truth” MacDonald subscribed to, Curdie comes to think correctly about the great-great-grandmother after his encounter with her (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 198).

If Grandmother Irene’s crown signifies enlightened thinking, the princess’s ring represents correct actions. Bible commentator William Hendricksen reflects MacDonald’s spiritual interpretations of Hebrew tradition. Hendrickson describes the spiritual and performative implications of the only New Testament reference connecting the forehead and the hand, Revelation 3:16, “This mark is impressed on the forehead or right hand . . . The forehead symbolizes the mind, the thought-life, the philosophy of a person. The right hand indicates his deed, action, trade, industry, etc.” (150). When the young princess is presented with the ring, her grandmother asks for her hand; “Irene held up her right hand. ‘Yes, that is the hand I want,’ said the lady, and put the ring on the forefinger of it” (*Princess* 120). The gift is then followed by a call to action. Irene’s grandmother says, “Now listen. If ever you find yourself in any danger . . . you must take off your ring and put it under the pillow of your bed. Then you must lay your forefinger, the same that wore the ring, upon the thread, and follow the thread wherever it leads you” (122). Grandmother Irene expects the princess to follow her instructions and thereby demonstrate of her faith, or correct belief, in her grandmother. MacDonald considered action as a result of faith essential. In another letter to his father he says, “I firmly believe people have hitherto been a great deal too much taken up about doctrine and far too little about practice. The word *doctrine*, as used in the Bible, means teaching of duty” (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 155). It is Irene’s duty to act rightly as an expression of her connection to her grandmother.

At the first opportunity, Irene performs her duty. Early one morning Irene awakes, afraid of “a hideous noise in her room” (140). She instantly remembers, “what her grandmother told her to do when she was frightened. She immediately took off her ring and put it under her pillow” (141). As she follows the invisible thread to places she does not expect to go, she bolsters

her confidence by remembering her grandmother “and all that she had said to her, and how kind she had been, and how beautiful she was, and all about her lovely room, and the fire roses, and the great lamp” (142-3). Irene is made brave by her correct thoughts and continues on her journey to rescue Curdie who is imprisoned by the goblins. In order to follow her thread, Irene must dig, so “she set to work with a will; and with aching back, and bleeding fingers and hands, she worked on” (144). Curdie is amazed to find the princess in the goblin caves, and when he is aware that she is working to dig him out, he praises her performance, “‘There’s a princess!’ Exclaimed Curdie, in a tone of delight” (145). Irene follows her grandmother’s thread all the way back to the castle where they are reunited, and Irene’s grandmother puts her ring back “on the forefinger of Irene’s right hand” (155). A young female child is “not ‘strong,’ not the fittest in body, but [she] can evolve into the strongest spiritual” being (Pennington 136). Irene’s performance of her duty makes her spiritually muscular in thought and action.

Truly, throughout the entire story the princess is reminded to perform correctly. The narrator emphasizes that “a real princess cannot tell a lie . . . [and] a real princess is never rude—even when she does well to be offended” (61). Later, the narrator interjects to say “for the sake of princes and princesses in general, that it is a low and contemptible thing to refuse to confess a fault, or even an error” (167). At the end of the story, Irene and her king-papa reiterate the importance of a princess performing her duty; Irene declares, “‘a princess *must* do as she promises”” and her father affirms her, “‘Indeed she must, my child--except it be wrong”” (186). The industry and duty of a princess is to act. By performing actions rooted in correct thinking, a princess becomes spiritually strong.

The flame-colored stone reinforces the spiritual significance of the ring. The fire-opal of the princess’s ring is “of the same sort” as the stones in the grandmother’s crown, “only not so good” (120). There is also a mysterious rose fire at the other end of the ring. The fire is not frightening, but magical, and “burned in the shapes of the loveliest red roses, glowing gorgeously between the heads and wings of two cherubs of shining silver” (117).⁷ The ball of thread attached to Irene’s ring was tempered in the magical fire before her first adventure (121). Biblical fire imagery is not uncommon, but there is a particular instance when the presence of a flame represents a divine command to act. The fire-opal, as a performative symbol, evokes the presence of a spiritual flame, much like that which signified the first coming of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles and other disciples.⁸ Indeed, MacDonald

makes the connection between fire and action in his *Unspoken Sermons*. He writes, “Yes, there will be danger—danger as everywhere” (78). Princess Irene’s adventure was full of danger—goblins, and tunnels, and dark nights, and if she, “who has striven up the heights should yet fall from them into the deeps, is there not that fire of God, the consuming fire, which burneth and destroyeth not?” (*Unspoken* 78).⁹ The presence of fire in the stone confirmed the spiritual ability to perform a task safely.

The color of Grandmother Irene’s opal is also purposeful; it reflects all colors and is set with pearls; the stones appear perfect.¹⁰ The first time Irene sees her grandmother wearing her crown “the soft light [in the room] made her feel as if she were going into the heart of the milkiest pearl” (117). She wears her crown of “shining silver, set with alternated pearls and opals . . . [And her] slippers glimmered with the light of the Milky Way, for they were covered with seed-pearls and opals in one mass” (117). From head to foot, Irene’s grandmother is ornamented in shining iridescent white stones. The opals and pearls, set in a silver circlet, signify an enlightened consciousness, as Hendriksen suggests, that is depicted in the book of Revelation. But, there is another white stone from that book that MacDonald makes note of in the sermon referenced above, “for the bringing out of the mystical thought in which it is concerned” (*Unspoken* 69).¹¹ The white stone that is given to a man from God is “the mystical energy of a holy mind” (*Unspoken* 70). Irene’s great-great grandmother is the recipient of the white stone representative of correct thought, and “every moment that [s]he is true to [her] true self, some new shine of the white stone breaks on [her] inward eye, some fresh channel is opened up for the coming glory” (*Unspoken* 75). Grandmother Irene’s thoughts are not merely an enlightened philosophy—they are divine.

The spiritual journey of George MacDonald began with established orthodox Reformed Calvinistic doctrine and matured into personal mystic enlightenment. *The Princess and the Goblin* also marks a spiritual transformation. Phylacteries, worn on the forehead and hand of Hebrews, represent an Old Testament tradition of remembrance. It is an earth-bound effort to consider the Law of God. The crown of the great-great-grandmother and the corresponding ring of the Princess Irene represent the mystic truth of remembrance. Remembering the panentheistic, or all encompassing, love of God leads to correct thinking and empowers even the smallest girl to perform well. The truth, set free by imagination, is that we are all empowered to think and act as we ought.

Endnotes

1. I apply Prickett's ideas about tradition in *Lillith* to *The Princess and the Goblin*.
2. According to the University of Aberdeen website, the "bajan year" is the first year.
3. During my research I conducted a phone interview with a Reformed Presbyterian Minister, Rev. Joost Nixon DMin. He was surprised that the theology concerning phylacteries was not considered common knowledge.
4. Divine Law is the body of commandments which expresses the will of God with regard to the conduct of His intelligent creatures. *OED*
5. Exodus 13: 9,16; Deuteronomy 6:8, 11:18.
6. Of course Grandmother Irene is the princess' "father's mother's father's mother" but I am making the connection that the ring is passed through at least three generations of women (*Princess* 55).
7. It is interesting that the fireplace in the grandmother's bedroom is reminiscent of the Old Testament mercy seat on the arc of the covenant (Exodus 25:19-20).
8. Acts 2:3.
9. The non-consuming nature of the fire here could refer to the burning bush Moses saw in Exodus 3, or MacDonald's Universalist theology.
10. In the visible spectrum, white reflects light and is the presence of all colors.
11. Revelation 2:17.

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