

Introduction

“Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without parables he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.’” Matt 13:34–35, quoting Ps 78:2

“[I]n the realm of parable writing no one went further than MacDonald in the whole of the nineteenth century.”¹

PARABLES—USED BY JESUS TO reveal to us the Kingdom of God, used to move us from being bystanders to active recipients of God’s work of revelation—are constantly at risk of being buried into “mummies of prose” as George MacDonald puts it. We become so familiar with the language of Scripture and are so far removed from the context in which these parables had their meaning that Jesus’ parables no longer work on us in this revelatory and transforming way. Each new generation must recover the vibrant, often shocking dimension of Jesus’ parables and create a new context in which the gospel is able to recover its piercing truth about the nature of Christian discipleship.

George MacDonald, the Victorian poet and theologian, observed this very process at work in Victorian society. It was a culture *saturated* with Christian jargon but often *void* of a profound understanding of the gospel for its own time and culture. The language of Scripture no longer penetrated people’s hearts, thoughts, and attitudes; it no longer transformed people’s lives. MacDonald, called to be a pastor, turned to story and more specifically the “parabolic” as a means of spiritual awakening. He created

1. MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 95.

fictive worlds in which the language of Jesus would find a new home and regain its revelatory power for his particular Victorian audience.

The following chapters explore the interface between the Bible and George MacDonald's fiction. The way Jesus uses language in the parables sheds light on our understanding of MacDonald's careful use of language in his fiction. Further still, many of MacDonald's stories are infused with the language of the Bible, often in rather surprising ways. While MacDonald was inspired by and well versed in the great Western literary tradition including Dante, Shakespeare, Herbert, Milton, and Goethe, the Romantics were the ones who challenged MacDonald to think more carefully about poetics and the imagination and their respective roles in Christian formation. He found great inspiration in the writings of Novalis, whose reflections on the priest as poet helped elicit MacDonald's own calling as a poet and theologian. Coleridge in turn challenged MacDonald to think about the far-reaching role of the imagination in human cognition, poetic creativity, and spiritual formation, albeit from a much stronger theological perspective.

In light of these influences, MacDonald developed a profoundly *theological rationale* for employing story pastorally that was based on his understanding of Scripture, language, creation, the imagination, and how Christ reveals the Father in and through creation. The purpose of this book is to consider MacDonald's theological rationale for writing Christian fiction and the ways in which his fiction might be invested with parabolic patterns reminiscent of Jesus' parables and the Romantic idea of the priest as poet. Once explicated in light of his theological rationale, *Lilith*, MacDonald's most complex and disputed work of fiction, is a fascinating theological reflection on the theme of participation in Christ's death and resurrection and its importance for Christian formation.

George MacDonald is *not* usually thought of as a theologian. He is most known for his far-reaching influence on C. S. Lewis and the Inklings. *Phantastes* played an important role in Lewis' conversion to Christianity. J. R. R. Tolkien read *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* as a child, and resonances of these stories are found throughout *The Lord of the Rings*.² The profoundly theological nature of MacDonald's fiction, however, has too often gone unnoticed and eclipsed MacDonald's pastoral concern to recover Scripture's transformative power for his time. The first chapter introduces the reader to George MacDonald as a poet *and*

2. See Kreglinger, "MacDonald."

theologian. What led MacDonald to consider story and the imagination as such central elements in spiritual formation when he grew up in a Scottish reformed tradition that tended to draw on a rather rigid theological system, focusing on the utter depravity of humanity and penal substitution as the primary metaphor for understanding the atonement? The second chapter immerses us in the world of Jesus' parables and discerns a decidedly biblical understanding of parable. What actually is a parable and how do metaphor and allegory work together in parable? These explorations shall provide us with some answers to the question of why Jesus spoke so prominently in parable and the importance of the "parabolic" for spiritual formation. Chapter 3 will then take us to consider the influence of German and English Romanticism on George MacDonald. Novalis, the early German Romantic poet, inspired MacDonald to think carefully about the role of poetry in drawing the believer more fully into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. Coleridge became an important conversation partner as MacDonald sought to come to terms with the imagination and human cognition. Coleridge sought to blend Idealism with Christian theology, but MacDonald went in a different direction.

In chapter 4 MacDonald's theological rationale for writing Christian fiction will be explored. MacDonald's perceptive response to the Victorian crisis of faith in light of scientific advancement and the encroachment of historical criticism upon the Victorian mindset sets the stage. It becomes apparent that he refused to embrace historical criticism with its naïve belief that historical investigation can provide direct access to reality. Instead, he points to Christ as the one who reveals the Father in and through creation. Jesus' use of symbols from creation becomes a primary inspiration for MacDonald's use of symbols in his stories and his understanding of the "parabolic." The final chapter offers a decidedly theological interpretation of *Lilith*, one of MacDonald's most complex and disputed works of fiction. MacDonald is far more than a writer of Christian fiction. The volume concludes by considering George MacDonald as a spiritual theologian whose holistic and creative view of spiritual formation in and through story offers a rich fountain from which to draw.