

TWK: The Aelf dilemma

The Urth list — 25 messages, 9 voices, 05 Dec 2005

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4520>

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Roy C. Lackey — 05 Dec 2005, 07:59

A few weeks ago I wrote:

At the end of the book, Odin asks Able if he is ready to return to Skai.

Able is speechless, so Etela speaks for him, "He's afraid she [Disiri]

won't

come with him." Odin responds, "She would not, child." [. . .] "She cannot."

He then goes on to demonstrate that Disiri is nothing but animated debris, and tells Able to pick one or the other, Skai or her. Able makes his choice,

giving Disiri enough of his blood to render her, apparently, completely human. Odin disappears, and with him goes Able's chance of ever returning to Skai.

[snip]

"She cannot" suggests that there is some sort of immutable, categorical prohibition against Disiri and/or her kind that would keep her out of Skai.

[snip]

Again, I overlooked the obvious. Able said, when he was speaking to Leort about Disiri and indirectly about his time in Skai, "it's where she can never go." (W, 102) The reason she can never go there is that the Aelf have no souls, no "spirit". (W, 46) When they die, they die dead, kaput, unlike humans. Those humans who get to Skai have to die, just as Able had to die, to get there.

Given that the Aelf are not spiritually immortal, they have no hope of eternal reward (still less the denizens of Muspel). So why the hell should they worship humans -- or anyone or anything else? If there's no "pie in the sky when they die", where's the payoff for whatever passes as righteous living for an Aelf?

-Roy

Andy Robertson — 05 Dec 2005, 08:21 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey writes:

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-Roy

Worship isn't primarily a matter of seeking supernatural reward.

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 05 Dec 2005, 11:14 · follows Andy Robertson

On Sun, 04 Dec 2005 23:59:55 -0800 "Roy C. Lackey"
<rclackey at stic.net> wrote:
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hope of
eternal reward (still less the denizens of Muspel). So why the
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living for an Aelf?

Humans have at least some God-like powers with respect to the Aelf. For example: Toug's healing of <whichever one it was>. They can also be "supernaturally" powerful warriors in Aelfrice - why else would Garsecg & the Aelf groom Able for the role of champion?

In fact, I suspect that humans are probably God-like to the Aelf in pretty much the same way that Overcyn are God-like to humans.

The God-like powers we see in action as far as I can recall are:

- Healing. Toug => Baki (?); Able-as-Overcyn => a bunch of people at the end of Wizard.
- Summoning. Able => Aelf (I think this is a human power of Able's, given Micahel's comments at their first meeting); Michael => Valfather; Loki => eastern dragon warriors (maybe).
- Weather stuff: Able-as-Overcyn in Mythgathr; can humans do the same kind of thing in Aelfrice?
- Promotion: Valfather etc => human heroes; I believe this is paralleled by Able => Dsiri

The last surely indicates that Aelf are not eternally & necessarily soul-less. That would go against all of my understanding of Wolfe's metaphysics. With "divine" assistance, all creation can rise through the spheres and meet the One True God. We certainly have multiple indications that Able expects this for himself, and I believe the ending of Wizard is intended to indicate that it will happen - for Dsiri as well, despite her lower origins.

As always with Wolfe, Love is the force which propels and drags everything higher.

James Wynn — 05 Dec 2005, 12:45 · in reply to Andy Robertson

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eternal reward (still less the denizens of Muspel). So why the hell should
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This is true. It believed that until around the 3rd or 4th century BC (after the books of the Bible were written), the Jews had no clear understanding of an afterlife. The Sumerians believed that

the afterlife consisted of eternal darkness where people only ate mud. As for the Greeks, except for a very few who had become deified, all people went to dark and gloomy Hades.

stilskin — 05 Dec 2005, 13:16 · in reply to James Wynn

Worship isn't primarily a matter of seeking supernatural reward.

It's a matter of seeking to avoid supernatural punishment.

<http://www.sff.net/people/stilskin>

Bob Miller — 05 Dec 2005, 14:11 · follows stilskin

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And in the Wolfe multiverse, people can lose and regain status. I well remember reading in the BotNS where Severian was telling about learning that people could lose their humanity and become monsters and others could regain their humanity after being monsters. Next step, Overcynhood here we come. And with Michael telling Able Disiri could come with him, I think, though it is not absolutely defined, that you are right. And this does indeed demonstrate now and forever the power of Love.

Another couple of very bright people wrote:

Given that the Aelf are not spiritually immortal, they have no hope of eternal reward (still less the denizens of Muspel). So why the hell should they worship humans -- or anyone or anything else? If there's no "pie in the sky when they die", where's the payoff for whatever passes as righteous living for an Aelf?

and

Worship isn't primarily a matter of seeking supernatural reward.

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This is indeed true for some people re the punishment. But in Wolfe's universe, as we could see in Soldier of Arete (and in dealing with humans in this one), worshiping someone or something else is always advisable. This is because someone who does not is apt to "place himself above all others" and so "become a monster" judging all around them and blind to their own faults. (Examples in the last century would include both Uncle Joe in the CCCR and little Adolf in Deutschland) So even if we do not "know" there are others truly better than we are, we should act that way for our own protection and so that we may continue to become (Joycean from The Dead), to grow and to live. For is it not true that any living thing that ceases growing commences dying.

Bob

transient — 05 Dec 2005, 14:16 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On Dec 5 2005, at 2:59 AM, Roy C. Lackey wrote:

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-Roy

Why does it follow that they have no hope of eternal reward? For the Aelf, the eternal reward would be to gain a soul, to become human. Baki is explicit about wanting this when she is helping Toug get around the castle in the beginning of _Wizard_.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 05 Dec 2005, 17:44 · in reply to transient

Worship isn't primarily a matter of seeking supernatural reward.

It's a matter of seeking to avoid supernatural punishment.

Don't parade your arrogance. There are those who simply seek to serve something they perceive as higher, better, or more important than themselves, whether it be a god or a nation or a cause.

There are, of course, those who seek to avoid penalties by following the rules of a god or a nation. And there are those who seek to gain rewards by ditto. But -- "the fact that a thing can be used in illegitimate ways, does not illegitimate its legitimate uses." Religion, like patriotism, is not _necessarily_ about gaining rewards and/or avoiding punishment.

That said: there is definitely the possibility of "supernatural reward" for inhabitants of Aelfrice who worship inhabitants of Mythgarthr. Able proves this when he gives his blood to Disiri and so "raises" her to humanity and, so, ensouls her.

In Wolfe's Catholic-Christian terms, this is precisely what the Christ does by giving his body and blood in the Eucharist
-- enables humans to gain some of the nature of the divine.

--Dan'l

I do not fear Satan half so much as I fear those who fear him.
-- St Teresa of Avila
<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

Roy C. Lackey — 05 Dec 2005, 18:44 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Andrew wrote:

- Promotion: Valfather etc => human heroes; I believe this is paralleled by Able => Dsiri

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soul-less. That would go against all of my understanding of Wolfe's metaphysics. With "divine" assistance, all creation can rise through the spheres and meet the One True God.

And Cliff wrote:

Why does it follow that they have no hope of eternal reward? For the Aelf, the eternal reward would be to gain a soul, to become human.

It was not my deduction that the Aelf have no eternal existence; it's a textual given. In the scene where Toug healed Baki, Able said the Aelf were long-lived, and goes on to say: "Much longer-lived than we are. But short-lived as we are, we're immortal. Our spirits don't die. It's not like that for the Aelf. Dead, they're gone completely." (W, 46)

Baki then gives a synopsis of the Seven World creation myth, and Mani concludes with, "The gods of each world are the people of the next one up. That's Skai for us, and us for Aelfrice." (49) The Aelf are in a situation much like Mani, whose ninth death will mark the absolute end of his existence.

-Roy

stilskin — 05 Dec 2005, 19:06 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Worship isn't primarily a matter of seeking supernatural reward.

It's a matter of seeking to avoid supernatural punishment.

Don't parade your arrogance.

I fail to see any arrogance in my statement, Dan'I, just an attempt at humor. The same cannot be said of your reply, however.

Paul

<http://www.sff.net/people/stilskin>

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 05 Dec 2005, 20:46 · in reply to stilskin

On 12/5/05, stilskin <acronus at yahoo.com> wrote:

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I fail to see any arrogance in my statement, Dan'I

That is a sign of the arrogance I'm speaking of.

I mean the arrogance of assuming that you can make broad statements like that about worship, as if all worshippers worship for the same (rather craven) reason and you, in your superiority, have diagnosed it. It really isn't all that different from seeing a black guy walk into a restaurant and assuming he's going to order chicken and watermelon. It is bigoted, and bigotry is always arrogant.

--Dan'l

I do not fear Satan half so much as I fear those who fear him.

-- St Teresa of Avila

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

Chris — 05 Dec 2005, 21:45 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy replied:

Andrew wrote:

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Something happened, though, when Able "promoted" Disiri. She attained a sort of reality she did not have before. There is not direct statement along the lines that she had gained a soul, but it isn't unreasonable to infer this, especially since Michael does allow that Disiri can come with him on his next assignment.

Another interesting thing that I am surprised nobody has pointed out: isn't it kind of striking that Able can be so bold as to presume that she *would* come with him? This is a major departure from their relationship early in the series.

That's Skai for us, and us for Aelfrice." (49) The Aelf are in a situation much like Mani, whose ninth death will mark the absolute end of his existence.

This is a bit misleading. Perhaps the "absolute end" of his existence *as Mani*, but recall that Mani is a composite entity. There is in fact an eternal spirit in Mani that will go its own way; this is not really terribly unlike some doctrines of the human soul.

stilskin — 05 Dec 2005, 21:49 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

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Dan'I, you're the arrogant one around here. You don't know me from Adam, yet "in your superiority" presume to diagnose my soul from a flippant remark of nine words in which I conveyed no disrespect for anybody's position or beliefs, just attempted to interject some levity into the discussion. And then, on top of it, you arrogate to yourself the right to judge me and attempt to smear me as a racist -- once again failing to realize that you are only holding the mirror up to yourself.

--- Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:
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Chris — 05 Dec 2005, 23:32 · in reply to stilskin

I suggest you take a step back and reflect on this for a second. You threw out a one-liner to a mailing list which was either meant to make a point (the one that Dan'I criticized) or else contentless. It does not make a lot of sense to throw out a contentless one-liner to "interject" some levity in the discussion when you know that it's going to offend a sizable portion of readers with any religious inclinations at all. It's like going to a mixed gathering with people you don't know and breaking the ice by saying "How many single mothers does it take to change a light bulb?" - any even remotely observant person will know that this is not likely to lighten the mood, even if there happen to be no single mothers at the table.

In a way I think Dan'I was being generous by assuming that you actually *meant* something.

Stiltskin said:

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James Wynn — 05 Dec 2005, 23:34 · in reply to Chris

From: "Chris"

Another interesting thing that I am surprised nobody has pointed out:
isn't it kind of striking that Able can be so bold as to presume that she
would come with him? This is a major departure from their
relationship early in the series.

Yes, Able's relationship with Disiri changed during the final battle when he summoned and her
people to fight and she came. Until he was able to do that, Michael implies, he will not be the
great knight "Sir Able of the High Heart" that Michael is seeking.

J

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 05 Dec 2005, 23:41 · in reply to stilskin

1. If the remark was intended as levity, I apologize; there was nothing in the context that
caused me to think so. In context - as a response to this statement:

Worship isn't primarily a matter of seeking
supernatural reward.

which was clearly meant seriously, this statement:

It's a matter of seeking to avoid supernatural
punishment.

certainly _looked_ like it was intended at face value. With no tone of voice, no emoticons as a
poor substitute for tone of voice, no markers at all -- well, humor in email is pretty hard to carry
off. As I'm sure you're aware.

Nonetheless, if it was meant as a humorous remark, I
do apologize.

2. Nonetheless: I did not "diagnose your soul." I interpreted a specific remark.

I'll be honest: the remark got under my personal skin. I'm not
(I hope) a religious bigot; I run with a crowd that includes atheists, agnostics, Muslims, a
Buddhist, several pantheist/ neopagan/Wiccan types... But I _am_ sensitized to anti-religious
bigotry, because there's a lot of it in intellectual circles, and
especially in SF fandom; people who think that if you believe in any kind of religion, and
especially Christianity, you must be
mentally defective.

So I maybe took a remark as meaning more than it did. Again: my bad.

3. But perhaps you can see how, thinking the remark to be meant seriously, I would indeed see "disrespect for anybody's position or beliefs," in it.

4. Whoa. Waitaminnit.

And then, on top of it, you arrogate to yourself the right to judge me and attempt to smear me as a racist -- once again failing to realize that you are only holding the mirror up to yourself.

I most assuredly did not call you a racist. I drew an analogy from one kind of bigotry (okay, perceived bigotry) to another. Read it again:

It really isn't all that different from seeing a black guy walk into a restaurant and assuming he's going to order chicken and watermelon.

One more time I'll apologize: if you can somehow interpret that as smearing you as a racist -- well, then I apologize for that. I did not intend such a smear. I was pointing at the "all-ism" (to use a general-semantics term) of bigotry, the way it assumes that "all" blacks like chicken, "all" Trek fans are get-a-lifers, "all" religionists are mentally defective, etc.

There. Several apologies in one note. In return, I hope you can look at what you wrote and see how it might have been interpreted differently from how you intended it.

--Dan'l

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 05 Dec 2005, 23:44 · in reply to Chris

On 12/5/05, Chris <rasputin_ at hotmail.com> wrote:

...

In a way I think Dan'l was being generous by assuming that you actually **meant** something.

Chris,

Thanks for your support. It's good to see that I'm not the only one who can see what I saw in that remark.

Nonetheless, because I did not see the possibility that it was a humorously-intended remark, I was uncharitable to Paul; and even if it was intended as I first read it, my initial response was decidedly intemperate.

--Dan'l

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Bob Miller — 06 Dec 2005, 02:32 · in reply to Chris

Did the bit with Able sacrificing his blood to/for Disiri and then being able to take her with him to serve Michael remind anyone else of the Velveteen Rabbit? If you're really really good and do your duty no matter what, you'll become really real. I cried when I first read that story to my wife and her face literally glowed. We both lost our breaths and were gaping (gasping without the breath?) when I read her the ending of the Wizard Knight. I find a great deal of Christianity in Gene Wolfe's work and am embarrassed at how much more, as my own limited education progresses, I find in rereading. Probably covered years ago, but I only this year found out that, traditionally, Thecla was the name of the female companion who travelled with Paul on his missionary journeys. Ignorance prevents understanding.

The other thing is that I am sorry that the misunderstandings about religion anger people. I'm sorry now and will continue to mourn the losses to their richness of life of those who do not, by whatever path, have the peace that passeth all understanding, who are not travelling a well lighted path as opposed to the slog I have spent so much of my life doing. Is it wrong to mention Holly Lisle's bit about the devil being allowed access to North Carolina, and losing an archdemon to God and the youngest recording angel saying to God that He must be ready for a great celebration after such a victory and God (Michael's boss?) saying, "No. No. God can never celebrate until All my children have come home." Hmmm, wonder if it's their rejecting and attacking of Kulilli that prevents/insures the Aelf do not become more/already have souls as part of the natural progression of life-awareness-apprehension/ambition-pilgrim's progress/odyssey-promotion and repeat as long as needed?

Roy replied:

Andrew wrote:

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Something happened, though, when Able "promoted" Disiri. She attained a sort of reality she did not have before. There is no direct statement along the lines that she had gained a soul, but it isn't unreasonable to infer this, especially since Michael does allow that Disiri can come with him on his next assignment.

Another interesting thing that I am surprised nobody has pointed out: isn't it kind of striking that Able can be so bold as to presume that she *would* come with him? This is a major departure from their relationship early in the series.

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Roy C. Lackey — 06 Dec 2005, 19:45 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

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I've said as much, twice, including the first post in this thread. But Disiri's lot is unique; the rest of the Aelf remain soulless. Her uniqueness is furthered by the fact that Able was not simply a human god with respect to an Aelf, as Toug was to Baki; he was two levels above her. It's unclear how much or whether or not that was a determining factor. After all, that was not the first time Able had given her his blood. But he had been a mere human when he did it the first time, just as Toug was with Baki. On neither of those occasions did the recipient gain a human soul.

If it is objected that the *quantity* of blood given on those two occasions was insufficient to confer humanity, then the entire concept begins to become absurd. Is a pint enough? A quart? Toug gave Baki a full drinking cup. It healed her, but didn't give her a soul. Why not, if blood is all it took?

-Roy

James Wynn — 07 Dec 2005, 02:30 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

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I don't see why it should be absurd. However much it took. it was *nearly* enough to kill Able. Able didn't know if it would require enough to kill him, and didn't care if it did. If one assumes that actual *blood* is required and not merely the *ritual* of the offering, then the quantity is obviously important. Anyone who has baked a cake knows that quantities are important for real recipes. A small person would probably not be able to offer enough, and an average sized person could not survive having offered enough. Reasonably the precise amount of blood required would depend on the Aelf, but clearly it is so much that even if all humans knew that it could be done (which apparently none of them did except for Able), few would do it.

But it is probable that it is not *merely* the physical act of giving blood that is significant, but also that the blood be freely given. Otherwise, I presume, some Aelf would have discovered the process and drained a human host with sufficient blood. I don't think there is any evidence that that has happened.

So, the quantity matters and so does the ritual.

J

transentient — 07 Dec 2005, 02:49 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On Dec 6 2005, at 2:45 PM, Roy C. Lackey wrote:
Chris wrote:

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Also, what are the implications of the "up-giving" of blood? It is clear that, for a human, the blood of an Aelf has terrific healing properties. But both Baki and Uri were so eager to have Able drink from them that it must confer some desirable benefit to the Aelf as well. My guess was that it served to bind the human to them somehow, but I don't think I saw any clear evidence that Able was compelled to do anything for Baki.

James Wynn — 07 Dec 2005, 03:44 · in reply to transentient

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This seemed pretty obvious to me. It was a sacrifice. All worshippers desire to have their sacrifices accepted by their gods. What is the benefit to humans to chop up an ox and burn it on an altar?

J

transentient — 07 Dec 2005, 04:18 · in reply to James Wynn

On Dec 6 2005, at 10:44 PM, James Wynn wrote:

Also, what are the implications of the "up-giving" of blood? It is clear that, for a human, the blood of an Aelf has terrific healing properties. But both Baki and Uri were so eager to have Able drink from them that it must confer some desirable benefit to the Aelf as well. My guess was that it served to bind the human to them somehow, but I don't think I saw any clear evidence that Able was compelled to do anything for Baki.

This seemed pretty obvious to me. It was a sacrifice. All worshippers desire to have their sacrifices accepted by their gods. What is the benefit to humans to chop up an ox and burn it on an altar?

Well, that makes some sense. Though humans only do this if there is a living covenant with their gods. Uri and Baki were Garceg's, so they had rejected humanity as their gods. So it seems curious to me.

Also, they didn't seem to treat the blood-gift as a holy thing. They seemed downright lusty and eager to have Able and Toug drink from them. Now, maybe lusty is just how the hot-blooded salamanders were, but I kind of feel undersatisfied by your answer. I feel that the Aelfs must have been after some kind of interpersonal alchemy.

Roy C. Lackey — 07 Dec 2005, 07:31 · follows transentient

Cliff quoted Crush and wrote:

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Well, that makes some sense. Though humans only do this if there is a living covenant with their gods. Uri and Baki were Garceg's, so they had rejected humanity as their gods. So it seems curious to me.

Uri and Baki **should** have been gods to Garsecg, but the worship seems to have gone the other way. Btw, if the Aelf had little (if any) hope of sanguinary salvation, the dragons were really screwed. If the quantity of blood matters for promotion upwards, the Aelf were little and the dragons big. I can't see an Aelf giving a dragon enough blood to matter. Maybe that's why dragons want to eat people (Morcaine), but those people don't usually give willingly. Stalemate.

The people in and around Toug's village were said to perversely worship the Aelf. The Aelf scared the hell out of them -- scared Ravd, too. Most of the Aelf who appear in TWK want humans to give them blood, if only "a drop". Given the dynamics of the situation, that village should have been a mecca for every Aelf in Mythgarthr. With willing blood givers and greedy recipients, it seems to me that sooner or later some theoretical 'critical volume' of blood ingested by some Aelf must be achieved and a new "soul" born -- provided that a finite quantity of blood given willingly by mere humans can do the trick. I remain unconvinced.

-Roy

Andy Robertson — 07 Dec 2005, 08:48 · in reply to James Wynn

James Wynn writes:

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This seemed pretty obvious to me. It was a sacrifice. All worshippers desire to have their sacrifices accepted by their gods. What is the benefit to humans to chop up an ox and burn it on an altar?

We keep talking about blood, but what about semen? The (female) Aelf are even more eager to fuck than to give blood, and presumably semen would be even more "life giving" than blood, though available in smaller quantities. Half Aelf/human characters are common and don't seem to be made of rubbish and illusion. There's more than one sort of uplift, and this one seems rather simple/obvious.

- hartshorn