

Original Sin and pagan gods

The Urth list — 21 messages, 8 voices, 06 Aug 2006

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4682>

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b sharp — 06 Aug 2006, 12:48

Continuing to try to interpret the subtext of BotNS in terms of Christianity replacing pagan religions:

The flood was meant to purify humanity from contamination while Jesus brought a different way of purifying sin. The contamination of humanity with nephilim and Original Sin were both products of people interacting with fallen angels or demons/devils.

What was Original Sin? Eating of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge was a disobedience of God's rule but what knowledge was gained? Adam and Eve's first act after eating the fruit was not to invent calculus or philosophy but to cover themselves with fig leaves. So the forbidden knowledge they gained was a sexual awareness of each other. Why would sex be forbidden when God gave us the equipment and later wanted the Earth populated with humans?

The anthropologist's "Universal Taboo" is incest. From a SF (and perhaps Wolfe's) perspective, using Adam's rib to create Eve would be a form of cloning. So Adam and Eve were really the closest of siblings, identical twins. Even if that weren't true, Adam and Eve's children were full siblings and their intercourse was all incestuous. Perhaps the Universal Taboo and Original Sin are the same thing and that's what God was trying to avoid in Eden.

The pagan competitors to Judeo-Christianity seem to condone incest. Their pantheons of gods and goddesses were all brothers and sisters or otherwise close family members and it was normal for them to mate with each other. Of course they didn't have a lot of choices of mates and this religious quirk was probably meant to justify the incestuous marriages of ruling dynasties which maintained royal blood lines. Monothesim allows God to remain pure, with no incest possible. This may be why monotheism was first popular among nomadic Hebrews and Arabs who didn't have an incestuous ruling class.

In Greek mythology it was common for the gods to go outside their incestuous marriages and mate with humans. Zeus was most notorious for this, though it infuriated his sister/wife, Hera. He had to hide his transgressions by appearing to human women in various forms, most notably as a bull, a swan and a shower of golden light. Wolfe mentions a beam of light, a bull and a swan in the Play and in a dream sequence after the battle of Orithyia. I think this is Wolfe saying that humanity and specifically, Severian's family, have been contaminated by a matings with the Urth equivalent of pagan gods.

I think this idea is supported by combining the 5HoC idea of shapeshifters who can imitate humans closely enough to mate and the direct interaction of Greek gods and humans we see in the Latro books. Moreover I was really struck recently by this Wolfe discussion about the Latro books in a James Jordan interview:

JJ: Which is another way of saying, do we have fallen angels here or some type of power that >really was operative in the world before the kingdom of

God?

GW: That is my personal belief. I think that the gods of paganism were real. But what I tried to do >was to write about that pagan world as the pagans themselves wrote about it. If we read modern >historians we are reading a very rationalistic viewpoint of this which says that all of these people >were absolutely wasting their time by building temples to Ares or Apollo or you name it. And by >offering sacrifices in worship and all that it was nothing there. Nothing at all there and that >whether it is true or not that certainly is not the way the people who were doing it felt. They were convinced that there was something there and they had all sorts of legends and so forth >about the appearances of the god and in fact there is one place in the Acts where Paul and >another one of the apostles are mistaken for Zeus and Mercury. Zeus and Hermes, we are mixing >the Latin and the Greek which is what I was trying to get away from. They are mistaken for Zeus >and Hermes in human form because people in those days expected that you could see Zeus and >Hermes in human form. I am not so sure they were wrong. I am not convinced that they were >wrong. We love to think how much smarter we are than people of ancient times or biblical times >or so forth but I am very dubious about that.

-bsharp

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 06 Aug 2006, 18:55 · in reply to b sharp

b writes:

The flood was meant to purify humanity from contamination

... ummm, not in any Bible I've ever read. God means to wipe out all life on Earth, then gives Noah & family a reprieve. Though Noah "walked with God" and all that, he is not "pure" -- first, because he's descended from Adam and thus subject to the taint of original sin (though that is not really a concept in the OT); second, because he's a drunkard. So reducing the human race to Noah isn't "purifying" by any means.

while Jesus brought a different way of purifying sin. The contamination of humanity with nephilim and Original Sin were both products of people interacting with fallen angels or demons/devils.

The idea that the serpent was "the devil," or even a devil, is decidedly a bit of latter-day retconning: in Genesis, he's just, well, a serpent. As for the nephilim ... nobody really has a clue what they were supposed to be.

What was Original Sin? Eating of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge was a disobedience of God's rule but what knowledge was gained?

It isn't "the tree of knowledge," it's the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil," which answers the question. What that means is a whole nother question. Charles Williams (the third of the fantasists who hung about with CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien in "the Inklings") suggested that we should consider it "the knowledge of good _as_ evil" -- the idea that all that was created was good, and sin allows us to see it as not-good. I'm not sure I agree with this, but it's interesting.

Adam and Eve's first act after eating the fruit was not to invent calculus or philosophy but to cover themselves with fig leaves. So the forbidden knowledge they gained was a sexual awareness of each other.

Uhhh... no. Adam covers himself with fig leaves because "I saw that I was naked, and I was afraid." The first "knowledge" gained from knowing good and evil is the knowledge of how vulnerable we naked apes are.

This kind of obviates the entire question of sex being forbidden, but let's look at this detail...

The anthropologist's "Universal Taboo" is incest. From a SF (and perhaps Wolfe's) perspective, using Adam's rib to create Eve would be a form of cloning.

Ummmm.... not so much. It's pretty clear that more than simple growth would be involved. You're thinking of miracles as scientific processes; what Wolfe does (viz the cathedral and the balloon) is to think of scientific processes as miracles.

So Adam and Eve were really the closest of siblings, identical twins. Even if that weren't true, Adam and Eve's children were full siblings and their intercourse was all incestuous.

No. While Genesis doesn't say where they came from, it's clear that there are other people in the world: Cain leaves home after killing Abel, and finds a wife _somewhere_ out there.

On the other hand, your point about the incestuous nature of the pantheons of the surrounding peoples is right to the mark. In particular, in Egypt -- which to the early Israelites was clearly Hell on Earth -- the incestuous relations between the gods mirrored (or was mirrored in) the incestuous marriages of the Pharaohs. The throne descended through the female line; to keep it, the Pharaohs would marry mothers, sisters, and daughters. This was justified by Osiris' marriage to Isis; but which came first? The primary cult of the Old Kingdom was the cult of Ra; the rise of the cult of Osiris (and Isis, Horus, and Anubis) came later.

So, yeah, that point is very well made.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

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

"Shovels are essential to the fantasy genre.

However, they are primarily used by the authors rather than the characters." -- Stephen R. Donaldson

b sharp — 07 Aug 2006, 11:49 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Regarding Dan'l's response (copied below), I'll have to express chagrin that Lilith wasn't mentioned which makes me think he didn't read my "E&G- the need for Ushas" post which was inspired by an earlier prompt from him (and duly noted ;-). I think some of the objections he makes were addressed there. Nonetheless...

Dan'l, you seem to agree with the main point of this thread, that the pagan gods, the competitors to Judeo-Christianity, were incestuous. Whether this is important to Urth and especially Severian remains to be seen, but I think it is. I have one or two essay-like posts left in me on this topic, then I'm done. So this next part is just hair-splitting, for fun.

Regarding your alternate interpretations of Genesis I can only note that the ones I used are certainly not my own. Seeing the talking serpent as representing the Devil, the flood as God's cleansing of evil from earth, and Adam and Eve as the parents of all humanity are all fairly standard interpretations I think. I find plenty of references, anyway. Your view of the fig leaf as a surrogate protective fur coat for a "naked ape" is pretty radical and anthropological (was that from Desmond Morris? or Carl Sagan, *Dragons of Eden*?). I think the interpretation of the fig leaf representing sexual shame is more mainstream. Other opinions on this, anyone?

But to me the main point isn't about finding true word of God or the majority Christian or secular scholarly opinion of the Bible but rather Gene Wolfe's interpretation. In the past, when I

read Dr. Talos' play I loved it but I didn't have much of a clue as to what it meant. Now, almost every line makes sense interpreted within the Genesis/Pagan god/Christianity framework I'm trying to build. If there is another way to interpret it, I am definitely interested and I hope it will be posted. But in 9 years of posts in here and in all the other potential sources out there I haven't seen anything notable. Maybe Peter Wright's *Attending Daedalus* has something about E&G but after reading excerpts from that book I haven't worked up the nerve to buy it yet :)).

I think Wright addresses BotNS from a socialist perspective, with a strong implied criticism of imperialism and colonialism. I am comfortable with this interpretation within my own framework, as I think BotNS might be implying that such evils of humanity are derived from the same source as all evil, that being interaction with fallen angels/demons/pagan gods. In the text, the corrupt Autarch of Eschatology and Genesis and the multi-world monarchy of Typhon are examples of social evil in contrast to more personal sins.

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Dan's Post:

b writes:

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No. While Genesis doesn't say where they came from, it's clear that there are other people in the world: Cain leaves home after killing Abel, and finds a wife _somewhere_ out there.

On the other hand, your point about the incestuous nature of the pantheons of the surrounding peoples is right to the mark. In particular, in Egypt -- which to the early Israelites was clearly Hell on Earth -- the incestuous relations between the gods mirrored (or was mirrored in) the incestuous marriages of the Pharaohs. The throne descended through the female line; to keep it, the Pharaohs would marry mothers, sisters, and daughters. This was justified by Osiris' marriage to Isis; but which came first? The primary cult of the Old Kingdom was the cult of Ra; the rise of the cult of Osiris (and Isis, Horus, and Anubis) came later.

So, yeah, that point is very well made.

>Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 07 Aug 2006, 18:30 · in reply to b sharp

B --

I certainly did read your post regarding "the need for Ushas"; I thought I had responded to it! Perhaps not. I'm having a kind of weird time right through here, between depression and lack of employment, and sometimes my mind wanders.

Dan'l, you seem to agree with the main point of this thread, that the pagan gods, the competitors to Judeo-Christianity, were incestuous.

Right, and that this is particularly true of Egypt, the single culture that Israel seems most to have defined itself _against_; indeed, much of the Mosaic "Law of Cleanliness" can be seen as reactions against the practices of Egypt and, to an almost-as-great extent, their nearer neighbors (Phoenicia, Philistia, Moab, etc.). I honestly think you can't understand ancient Israel without understanding ancient Egypt.

Whether this is important to Urth and especially Severian remains to be seen, but I think it is. I have one or two essay-like posts left in me on this topic, then I'm done. So this next part is just hair-splitting, for fun.

Understood and will respond appropriately 8*)

Regarding your alternate interpretations of Genesis I can only note that the ones I used are certainly not my own. Seeing the talking serpent as representing the Devil, the flood as God's cleansing of evil from earth, and Adam and Eve as the parents of all humanity are all fairly standard interpretations I think.

Talking serpent as representing (or possessed by, etc.) the Satan, absolutely, this is standard stuff.

Regarding the flood, a small distinction between what you just said here and what you said before, what I argued with: earlier, you said it was to "purify humanity from contamination." That's rather different from cleansing evil from the Earth, which I don't argue with at all. The difference being, of course, that the cleansing of evil from the

Earth would have involved wiping out all of humanity.

"I will rid the earth's face of man, my own creation,"
Yahweh said, "and of animals also, reptiles too, and
the birds of heaven, for I regret having made them."
Gen. 6: 7, Jerusalem Bible.

This isn't about purifying humanity; it's about removing humanity.

("You are a disease, Mister Anderson, and I am the cure.")

Adam and Eve as the parents of all humanity? No argument there, provided we take it to mean "all humanity is descended from them." But only from them? Again, I refer you to Cain, who seems to have found a wife in "the land of Nod, east of Eden." Yes, traditionalists insist that there were no other humans, but they kind of waffle on the whole idea that A&E's kids actually committed incest. The escape hatch they never seem to find is that Genesis describes creation twice, and one of these makes it clear that God created humanity in the plural (Gen. 1:26-30). Adam was special and set apart -- the one into whose nostrils God breathed ("breath" being "ruach," eq. to "pneuma" or "spiritus" -- in English, breath-wind-spirit) the breath of life.

I find
plenty of references, anyway. Your view of
the fig leaf as a surrogate protective fur coat for a "naked ape" is pretty
radical and anthropological

Sorry; I was borrowing a phrase, but didn't intend anything particularly radical or anthropological by it. What Genesis actually says is, first, "...they realized that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together to make themselves loincloths." Note that they didn't realize they were naked and start having monkey sex; being naked bothered them. Why? "I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid," Adam tells God. The key point here being that he was afraid, not ashamed. The knowledge granted by the fruit -- knowledge of good and evil, not biology -- brings fear.

I think the interpretation of the fig leaf representing sexual shame
is more mainstream. Other opinions on this, anyone?

Ummm. So, since when is Wolfe all that mainstream?

But to me the main point isn't about finding true word of God or the
majority Christian or secular scholarly opinion of the Bible but rather
Gene Wolfe's interpretation. In the past, when I read Dr. Talos' play
I loved it but I didn't have much of a clue as to what it meant. Now,
almost every line makes sense interpreted within the Genesis/Pagan
god/Christianity framework I'm trying to build.

Strangely, I think this is entirely likely. However, I don't see the necessity of
traditional-but-not-scripturally-based interpretations of Genesis to make this work.

I think Wright addresses BotNS from a socialist perspective, with a
strong implied criticism of imperialism and colonialism.

How very interesting ... Wolfe himself seems to be rather more conservative politically; but
then, I've seen socialist interpretations of "Atlas Shrugged."

I am comfortable with this interpretation within my own framework,
as I think BotNS might be implying that such evils of humanity are
derived from the same source as all evil, that being interaction with
fallen angels/demons/pagan gods.

Yesno. I'm good with saying that fa/d/pgs make suggestions that humans act on. But the evil comes from our own freely made choices, or we're automata, which I'm pretty sure my fellow-Catholic Wolfe would not wish to suggest.

In the text, the corrupt Autarch of Eschatology and Genesis and the multi-world monarchy of Typhon are examples of social evil in contrast to more personal sins.

Well, Typhon, at least, has his full share of personal sin as well...

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

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

"Shovels are essential to the fantasy genre.

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b sharp — 08 Aug 2006, 03:47 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Well some interesting discussion points Dan'l (and wishing for an immediate improvement in the employment situation! Someplace must soon discover the valuable mind they are missing). I'm not a Biblical scholar or really much of a scholar at all but I'll do my best to respond.

Dan'l writes:

Regarding the flood, a small distinction between what you just said here and what you said >before, what I argued with: earlier, you said it was to "purify humanity from contamination."

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This isn't about purifying humanity; it's about removing humanity. ("You are a disease, Mister >Anderson, and I am the cure.")

First thanks for The Matrix quote. Just saw it again recently. Agent Smith is easily one of my favorite movie characters ever. His "humans are not mammals but a virus" speech is so classic, imho. I love Hugo Weaving's performance

Next, (sorry I couldn't find Jerusalem Bible) the next verses after 6:7 say: 6:8 But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD. 6:9 These [are] the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man [and] perfect in his generations, [and] Noah walked with God.

Not sure where you got the part about Noah being a drunk but God seems to think Noah and his family are quite worth saving. "Perfect in his generations" to me says "uncontaminated by matings with fallen angels". The whole part about "Nephilim" comes right before the Noah section.

You said you don't think anyone understands what Nephilim are but how can that be? What sort of Bible is incomprehensible to all people at all times in history? Anyway I think Gene Wolfe agrees with the pundits who think the nephilim, the "great men of reknown", were giants,(and thus Nod, in the play). I like one analyst who suggested this might be reference to the well known Sumerian giant/heroes Gilgamesh and Enkidu. I think ancient Hebrews would know of them, since we do.

I should be more careful with my words, however, when describing the flood and WHICH flood I mean, (Urth or Earth). I really am more interested in BotNS than the Bible. I only study the Bible, currently, to try to see the source that Wolfe twisted into the BotNS.

So, anyway, in BotNS, humanity as a race doesn't seem to matter much with regard to purity. They did their part to produce the Hiero race, despite being contaminated. But as Apheta notes, humanity has already been strewn across the galaxy, too spread out to be dealt with as a whole. It is the planet Urth that matters and the Hieros will purify it (symbolic gesture?) one way or another. Freezing it would do the job (and they would evacuate the remaining humans, Master Ash says). Urth would be pure and lifeless. But Severian is willing to risk everything to have it purified, reborn and repopulated (not that he really understands what he is doing).

Isn't this the same choice God made? Destroy everything, or destroy almost everything, purify and repopulate. This makes Tzadkiel's ship like the ark and the sailors who repopulate Ushas like Noah and family, yes? (I know not everyone thinks it was the sailors who were landed on flood day).

Dan'I says:

Adam and Eve as the parents of all humanity? No argument there, provided we take it to >mean "all humanity is descended from them." But only from them? Again, I refer you to Cain, who seems to have found a wife in "the land of Nod, east of Eden." Yes, traditionalists insist that >there were no other humans, but they kind of waffle on the whole idea that A&E's kids actually committed incest. The escape hatch they never seem to find is that Genesis describes creation >twice, and one of these makes it clear that God created humanity in the plural (Gen. 1:26-30). Adam was special and set apart -- the one into whose nostrils God breathed.

I don't know that it is "Clear" but this "creating humanity twice" interpretation is exactly where the Lilith myth comes into play for the Kabbalists. Notice it wasn't just any old son of Adam who found a wife in Nod, but Cain the first murderer. So if Cain's wife was not a daughter of Eve, then she was someone like Lilith (or maybe Lilith herself). Not a special creation. No soul. Notice the Catch 22 God sets up here with human creation. Either you mate with your sister or mate with some soulless alternate, not really human, maybe a demon. In fact, Kabbalism suggests that Adam was mating with animals first then pleaded with God for a true mate and that's what produced Lilith, then Eve. There is just no way to avoid sin is there? Ah well, they say all successful religions are based on contradiction.

Dan'I quotes:

"...they realized that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together to make themselves loincloths." Note that they didn't realize they were >naked and start having monkey sex; being naked bothered them. Why? "I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid," Adam tells God. The key point here being that he was afraid, not >ashamed.

I still don't get this point about Original Sin not being sexual. He made a loincloth. Doesn't that show he was afraid of his penis and what it could do. If he was afraid of...I dunno,....snakes or lions or thunderstorms he would make a spear or a treehouse or a poncho wouldn't he? What good is a loincloth except covering sexual parts? (some tribal men just use a gourd and Red Hot Chili Peppers used only socks on stage ;-).

Lastly Dan'I says:

I'm good with saying that fallen angels/demons/pagan gods make suggestions that humans act on. >But the evil comes from our own freely made choices, or we're automata, which I'm pretty sure >my fellow-Catholic Wolfe would not wish to suggest.

I'm not sure of that. I know free will is a strong component of most Christian faiths but I am not sure Gene Wolfe fully believes that it dominates every decision in our lives. I found it excruciatingly, cringingly important in the Wolfe quote I put in at the end of my first "Original Sin and pagan gods" post, where Wolfe says he believes in pagan gods as real entities who interacted with humans. These beings are superhuman, they can fool us completely sometimes if we are not armed with the proper knowledge. So we can be tricked into doing evil through ignorance. And sometimes God allows this.

Take for example, Dorcas. Severian has sex with his own grandmother. Is that sort of incest an evil act or not? It has to be an evil act by any cultural definition, yet we really don't blame Severian do we? He didn't know at the time, and Dorcas was the most right and good thing ever in Severian's life. (I'll note that I think Severian did know Valeria was a family member and his consciously celibate marriage to her was a step toward his/humanity's salvation, but I mustn't get ahead of myself).

On the other hand, take Severian's decision on his Judgement Day. He has the choice to stay safe with the crew and let the big Zak personage take his place as Urth's Epitome. He is swayed by fear and by very rational arguments from his crewmates to just stay put. Zak is a better choice. But he knows he IS Urth's epitome and acts only on that knowledge, blocking all else out and accepting responsibility. So in this situation he was fully armed with the knowledge he needed and used it and did the right thing. Free will is only available in situations when we have the proper knowledge of right and wrong, yes? And then again, when Severian sees the destruction of Urth needed to create Ushas he doubts the rightness of his choice afterall. Is this Wolfe's further exploration of the ambiguity of The Path?

Peter Wright, (if I understand him) in his godless, Marxist, socialist glee ;-) takes that last part to mean that God (if he actually existed) is just as evil, self-serving and manipulative as Lucifer and Severian is caught in an evil web, pulled from all sides, too complex for him to see. I don't think this is Wolfe's view.

I think in leaving the angels and demons (Hieros and Megatherians in my interpretation) of BotNS very mysterious and hard to understand, Wolfe is saying that there are heavenly machinations; battles between good and evil which are above us and beyond our understanding. But in crucial situations, we humans will be given enough knowledge to make the right choice.

-bsharp

don doggett — 08 Aug 2006, 06:13 · in reply to b sharp

--- b sharp <bsharporflat at hotmail.com> wrote:

Ah well, they say all

successful religions are based on contradiction.

Dan'l quotes:

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=== message truncated ===

don doggett — 08 Aug 2006, 06:45 · follows don doggett

Hi all,

Sorry about the last post. I hit send instead of delete. Ah well, here's what I meant to send

--- b sharp <bsharporflat at hotmail.com> wrote:

Ah well, they say all

successful religions are based on
contradiction.

That and ambiguity, something Wolfe takes full
advantage of.

(much snippage)

Take for example, Dorcas. Severian has sex with his
own grandmother. Is
that sort of incest an evil act or not? It has to
be an evil act by any
cultural definition, yet we really don't blame
Severian do we? He didn't
know at the time, and Dorcas was the most right and
good thing ever in
Severian's life.

I am still not convinced that Dorcas is Sev's
grandmother. Perhaps I'm just blind and stubborn, but
it doesn't feel right to me at all. It makes no plot
sense, no mythic sense, no moral sense, and it hinges
on such an obvious and ham handed revelation. It's
just a dud to me.

(I'll note that I think Severian

did know Valeria was a
family member and his consciously celibate marriage
to her was a step toward
his/humanity's salvation, but I mustn't get ahead of
myself).

Yes. I am eager to read your take on Severian's family
tree. I myself see Typhon and Ymar somewhere at the
base of it but I've never been able to make it take
root and grow.

Peter Wright, (if I understand him) in his godless,
Marxist, socialist glee
;-) takes that last part to mean that God (if he
actually existed) is just as
evil, self-serving and manipulative as Lucifer and
Severian is caught in an
evil web, pulled from all sides, too complex for him
to see. I don't think
this is Wolfe's view.

Godless is right on the money. His argument is
basically that Sev is being cynically manipulated by
the Hierogrammates into believing he is a religious
savior. To Wright, god has no place at all in BotNS,
and all of the side stories, Eschatology and Genesis
included, are simply funhouse mirrors of the
narrative, pointing it back in on itself. It's a
pretty bleak and, to me, unconvincing argument.

Attending Daedalus is, however, a well written book.

Don

Roy C. Lackey — 08 Aug 2006, 07:00 · follows don doggett

b sharp wrote:

[snip]

So, anyway, in BotNS, humanity as a race doesn't seem to matter much with regard to purity. They did their part to produce the Hiero race, despite being contaminated. But as Apheta notes, humanity has already been strewn across the galaxy, too spread out to be dealt with as a whole. It is the planet Urth that matters and the Hieros will purify it (symbolic gesture?)

one way or another. Freezing it would do the job (and they would evacuate the remaining humans, Master Ash says). Urth would be pure and lifeless. But Severian is willing to risk everything to have it purified, reborn and repopulated (not that he really understands what he is doing).<< [snip]

I think in leaving the angels and demons (Hieros and Megatherians in my interpretation) of BotNS very mysterious and hard to understand, Wolfe is saying that there are heavenly machinations; battles between good and evil which are above us and beyond our understanding. But in crucial situations, we humans will be given enough knowledge to make the right choice.<<

I can only conclude, from these two paragraphs, that you are using "Hieros" where you mean "Hierogrammates". The Hieros were/will be in no sense angelic. They were the race of humans, cognates of our (and Severian's) race, who sinned on a grand scale in producing the race of beings known as Hierogrammates, of which latter group Tzadkiel is an example.

Tzadkiel's examination of the future found the probability high that the Hieros would develop from the strand of humanity left on Urth-come-Ushas (URTH, 160), and thus produce the Hierogrammates in Briah. It was Apheta's belief/hope that this was true (162).

-Roy

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 08 Aug 2006, 18:43 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On 8/8/06, Roy C. Lackey <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:

The Hieros were/will be in no sense angelic. They were the race of humans, cognates of our (and Severian's) race, who sinned on a grand scale in producing the race of beings known as Hierogrammates, of which latter group Tzadkiel is an example.

Yes. With the possible exception of "sinned on a grand scale" -- is producing the Hierogrammates actually a sin? It's clearly part of a huge _trap_, but that's another issue -- this is exactly how I understand the case.

The two "hiero" races, Hierodules and Hierogrammates, are trapped in a cycle of producing each other. Humans at the peak of their development are the Hierodules; they "uplift" (to use Brin's term) -- that is, interfere in and guide the development of -- the race that becomes the Hierogrammates. The Hierogrammates survive the Grand Gnab/Big Bang cycle and guide the development of humanity, thus resulting in the creation of the Hierodules, etc.

Unclear: how do the Hierogrammates survive across the GG/BB gap: is Yesod immune to it? If so, then why do they need to repeat the cycle; they already exist, they don't need to ensure their own creation again.

Equally unclear: if the HGs only exist because the HDs caused them to exist, and the HDs only exist because the HGs caused them to exist, then how did the whole damned thing get started?

But what's quite clear is that this is an exercise in self-perpetuating futility, like the cycle of clones in 5HC.

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"Shovels are essential to the fantasy genre.

However, they are primarily used by the authors rather than the characters." -- Stephen R. Donaldson

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 08 Aug 2006, 20:14 · in reply to b sharp

On 8/7/06, b sharp <bsharp@flat at hotmail.com> wrote:

Well some interesting discussion points Dan'I (and wishing for an immediate improvement in the employment situation! Someplace must soon discover the valuable mind they are missing).

Thank you.

I'm not a Biblical scholar or really much of a scholar at all but I'll do my best to respond.

I'm no scholar either; I'm a dilettante, an amateur in the very best (I hope!) sense of the word. But one of my aimees is Catholic theology, and it seems pretty clear to me that this is one of Wolfe's starting points.

This can be kind of confusing for people raised in Protestant- dominated American culture; the way Catholicism looks at some of the donees of Christianity is quite different from the way Protestant culture does: sometimes deeply different, sometimes subtly so. As a result what "everyone knows" is often wrong in dealing with a Catholic writer.

"I will rid the earth's face of man, my own creation,"

Yahweh said, "and of animals also, reptiles too, and

the birds of heaven, for I regret having made them."

Gen. 6: 7, Jerusalem Bible.

This isn't about purifying humanity; it's about removing humanity.

("You are a disease, Mister >Anderson, and I am the cure.")

First thanks for The Matrix quote.

Technically a misquote -- Agent Smith actually says that to Morpheus, but I love the way Weaving says "MISter ANDerson," and it does make the quote easier to place. Oddly enough, I just rewatched it on Saturday myself!

Next, (sorry I couldn't find Jerusalem Bible) the next verses after 6:7 say:

Jerusalem Bible is not necessary. Even a Catholic Bible isn't, though it can be of subtle help in understanding Catholic writers: it includes several books, and passages from a few other books, that the Protestant version of the Bible excludes or puts in the back of the book as "Apocrypha." (A bit of a misdesignation; the real Apocrypha are things

like the Gnostic Gospels, the Letter of Pilate, etc. These texts -- all of the Old Testament, incidentally -- are better referred to as "deuterocanonical.") At any rate, the text of the primary canon is going to be identical except for translation artifacts.

6:8 But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.

6:9 These [are] the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man [and] perfect in his generations, [and] Noah walked with God.

There's a great deal of argument among Christians about just what this _means_. Generally it's agreed that "perfect in his generations" is not the same as "without sin;" for it to mean that would entirely undermine the doctrine of Original Sin. Some Protestant churches reject the doctrine by that name, but I don't know any major church that would consider it possible for any human other than Jesus to be completely without sin.

Not sure where you got the part about Noah being a drunk

That would be the end of Genesis chapter 9. The first thing Noah does when the ark lands -- well, after making sacrifice to God (with what? There's only two of each animal!) is to plant a vineyard and get plastered.

but God seems to think Noah and his family are quite worth saving. "Perfect in his generations" to me says "uncontaminated by matings with fallen angels".

Call me stupid -- go on! -- but until right here I actually hadn't grasped the emphasis you were putting on the Nephilim. That is, the idea that Noah and his family are apparently the only humans without Nephil blood.

It's an interesting theory, but not one I've ever heard before, anywhere. (Note: I have _not_ studied Talmud, let alone the Kaballa.)

But there's certainly no clear indication in Scripture that the Flood was to clear out Nephil blood from humanity. You've got the bit about the Nephilim and their descendants, from 6:1 through 6:4, which reads as a mythical explanation of why the human lifespan is limited to "no more than a hundred and twenty years" -- note that this comes right after the generations of the patriarchs from Adam to Noah, all of whom live outrageously long times. The Nephilim passage ends: "These are the heroes of days gone by, the famous men," which seems to me to refer back to the long-lived patriarchs.

Then comes what certainly looks to me like a change of tone and subject at 6:5-6, where

Yahweh saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that the thoughts in his heart fashioned nothing but wickedness all day long. Yahweh regretted having made man on the earth...

You said you don't think anyone understands what Nephilim are but how can that be? What sort of Bible is incomprehensible to all people at all times in history?

Good question. Perhaps a Bible that has been accreted in layers over thousands of years, such that the meaning of some words was changed or simply lost over the generations?

As a Catholic, I (and Wolfe) am not dependent on the "divine dictation" idea of Scripture, the Protestant idea that the text as we have it is the exact Words of God. This doesn't deny that the texts are "inspired by the Holy Spirit," but it's a very different model of inspiration. A common Catholic description of this model calls the Bible "the Word of God in the words of men."

(One of my reasons for becoming a Catholic is that the "divine dictation" model is so brittle. It relies on the obviously untrue idea that the exact text is maintained generation after generation, and the very questionable idea of a translation that's so perfect and clear that anyone reading it can understand what the original writer intended, when the translators are often none too clear on the concept.

Two examples:

1. In old art, Moses is often portrayed with horns on his head. This is because the translation used by the Medieval Church -- the Vulgate Latin of Jerome, itself translated primarily from the Greek Septuagint, so there's two layers of translation right there -- said so. But somewhere in the generations of translation and copying, something had gotten munged: when people went back to the original Hebrew text, what it actually said was that after the encounter with God at Sinai, Moses' face shone so that nobody could bear to look upon it and he wore a veil afterwards.

2. This one really honks off a lot of literalists ... "Lucifer" is not a name of Satan. It's a kenning for Nebuchadnezzar. One of the major prophets -- I think it was Isaiah, but I don't have the reference in front of me and don't have the energy to dig for it -- says in a long prophecy against Babylon, "How you are fallen, oh Lucifer!" -- well: the original Hebrew refers to Venus as the Morning Star, with which Nebuchadnezzar, as King of Babylon, was associated. "Lucifer," "bearer of light," was a Latin translation of the Greek translation of the Hebrew name for the Morning Star, functioning as the forerunner of the Sun.)

Anyway I think Gene Wolfe agrees with the pundits who think the nephilim, the "great men of reknown", were giants,(and thus Nod, in the play).

Now, the idea that the Nephilim were giants is exactly the kind of translation artifact I'm talking about. The ancient translators had not a clue what Nephilim meant, but they had to put something. By the time you get to the King James, the phrase was: "There were giants in the earth in those days." But nothing in the original text particularly suggests that the Nephilim were giants.

Mind you, I'm not suggesting that GW doesn't take this point of view; it does explain Nod the Giant rather nicely ... and notice that Nod is also the name of the country "east of Eden" where Cain went to live after killing Abel.

I like one analyst who suggested this might be reference to the well known Sumerian giant/heroes Gilgamesh and Enkidu. I think ancient Hebrews would know of them, since we do.

I would not be terribly surprised if this were true; as I said, a lot of the OT seems to be written "against" the beliefs of the surrounding nations. But it seems simpler to me to suppose that the "heroes and famous men" were the patriarchs. I like simple. Simple is good.

But again, I should not assume that Wolfe prefers the simpler explanation...

I should be more careful with my words, however, when describing the flood and WHICH flood I mean, (Urth or Earth). I really am more interested in BotNS than the Bible. I only study the Bible, currently, to try to see the source that Wolfe twisted into the BotNS.

Okay, may I propose a model?

In The Silmarillion (and its sequel, The Lord of the Rings) JRR Tolkien, whom Wolfe clearly admires passionately, set out to create a pagan-like mythology that did not actually contradict

anything in Catholic belief. I am inclined to think that Wolfe follows a similar plan in his speculations -- Catholic doctrine always remains true, but anything not covered directly by it (including anything Wolfe invents out of whole cloth) is fair game. I've made the case that the _Whorl_ is a deliberate instantiation of a purely Gnostic (Valentinian) world into an orthodox universe; the pagan gods of the _Soldier_ books appear to be subject to the rule of the one God (presumably we will learn more about this in _Sidon_); and the seven worlds of TWK are all creations of the One God in the uppermost world, who is enough like the Christian God to have a winged humanoid messenger (angel) named Michael.

Furthermore, Wolfe's major works are replete with images of Catholic and Christian history and ritual. One can easily point to example after example of Eucharists and, especially, perversions of the Eucharist, in the Solar books. Severian's first (on his personal timeline) encounter with Typhon is a reenactment of Jesus' temptation by Satan in the desert. Etc.

If (as I believe) this is the case, then, while Wolfe's books are NOT works of Catholic theology, a knowledge of Catholic doctrine is essential as a sanity check for interpretation -- any interpretation that violates Catholic doctrine unambiguously is highly suspect.

I have nothing to say about the whole question of humanity strewn across the Universe and the possible sterilization of Urth.

Notice it wasn't just any old son of Adam who found a wife in Nod, but Cain the first murderer. So if Cain's wife was not a daughter of Eve, then she was someone like Lilith (or maybe Lilith herself).

Well, given the name of the giant Nod in E&G, I can't argue with this as a likely interpretation on Wolfe's part.

Not a special creation. No soul. Notice the Catch 22 God sets up here with human creation. Either you mate with your sister or mate with some soulless alternate, not really human, maybe a demon.

This is the strongest available argument against the idea that Adam and Eve were alone. It supposes that God would deliberately set up a situation where there were three choices:

1. Remain celibate, in disobedience to His command to multiply and fill the Earth.
2. Mate with a close relative, which God later describes as "an abomination."
3. Mate with an animal or demonic being, which is also an abomination.

So it involves God commanding humanity to commit "abomination," which seems to go against His character.

Ah well, they say all successful religions are based on contradiction.

Who says this? Not me. Paradox, yes, but not contradiction.

I still don't get this point about Original Sin not being sexual.

Yo: the original sin was _disobedience_. Plain and simple. God commanded "Don't eat that." A&E knowingly went ahead and ate it. Whether it was shame or fear that caused Adam to hide isn't relevant to this point; it was a result, not the sin itself.

He made a loincloth. Doesn't that show he was afraid of his penis and what it could do.

I think it shows that he was aware that, unlike other animals, he was vulnerable. He wasn't exactly in a position to make Kevlar armor. But the key point is "I saw that I was naked, and I

was afraid." ***NOT*** "ashamed."

I'm good with saying that fallen angels/demons/pagan gods make suggestions that humans act on. >But the evil comes from our own freely made choices, or we're automata, which I'm pretty sure my fellow-Catholic Wolfe would not wish to suggest.

I'm not sure of that. I know free will is a strong component of most Christian faiths

"Strong component?" It's the prerequisite for sin to be meaningful as a concept.

but I am not sure Gene Wolfe fully believes that it dominates every decision in our lives.

I'm sure he doesn't. Nor do I. The fundamental idea behind Original Sin is that our free will has been corrupted, so that we cannot, by our own power, avoid sinning. (The contrary position -- that we can -- is one of the most ancient heresies in Christianity, called Pelagianism, condemned at the Councils of Carthage, which are accepted as true "ecumenical councils" by most mainline Protestants.

And God bless Wikipedia!)

Wolfe says he believes in pagan gods as real entities who interacted with humans. These beings are superhuman, they can fool us completely sometimes if we are not armed with the proper knowledge. So we can be tricked into doing evil through ignorance. And sometimes God allows this.

OK, I've gone back and looked at that quote, and it's a perfect example of what I'm talking about: the pagan gods (a) were real, (b) weren't necessarily "demons" in the Christian sense, but (c) were clearly not gods in the God sense. In fact, they're a lot like the Overcyn in TWK.

If there's a "message" here, it might be: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth than humans, angels, and devils."

Take for example, Dorcas. Severian has sex with his own grandmother. Is that sort of incest an evil act or not?

Again, Catholic doctrine comes in handy here. It distinguishes between different kinds of "evil." There are "evils" that happen to us, objectively evil acts, and sin. There are conditions for an act to be a sin: you have to know it was wrong, and intend to do it anyway.

Clearly Dorcas and Severian did not know they were close kin when they were sleeping together. Therefore it was not sin. But it was still "an abomination," an objectively evil act, which has consequences for the agents.

It has to be an evil act by any cultural definition, yet we really don't blame Severian do we? He didn't know at the time, and Dorcas was the most right and good thing ever in Severian's life.

Agreed.

Skiping Valeria.

Deleting your discussion of Severian's judgment, but I agree with it. Severian's act in insisting on taking his own judgment instead of allowing Zak to stand in for him is an act of moral courage -- and is so precisely because he knows that "Zak is a better choice."

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

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"Shovels are essential to the fantasy genre.
However, they are primarily used by the authors rather than the
characters." -- Stephen R. Donaldson

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 08 Aug 2006, 20:17 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

A brief followup, a couple of things I meant to mention but didn't quite fit in.

Regarding the role of real pagan gods in a Christian world, consider what Lewis does with them -- he offers three very different takes in the Narnia books (Bacchus in Prince Caspian, and, more importantly, the Magician on the Island of Dufflepuds in The Voyage of the Dawn Treader); the Oyarsa in the Space trilogy; and (of course?) Eros in Till We Have Faces.

Regarding contradiction vs. paradox -- Wolfe has repeatedly stated his deep admiration for GK Chesterton, whose entire works, in a sense, form a vast meditation on this distinction.

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<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>
"Shovels are essential to the fantasy genre.
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characters." -- Stephen R. Donaldson

Roy C. Lackey — 08 Aug 2006, 21:02 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

b sharp wrote:

Not sure where you got the part about Noah being a drunk but God seems to think Noah and his family are quite worth saving. "Perfect in his generations" to me says "uncontaminated by matings with fallen angels". The whole part about "Nephilim" comes right before the Noah section.<<

[snip]

Isn't this the same choice God made? Destroy everything, or destroy almost everything, purify and repopulate. This makes Tzadkiel's ship like the ark and the sailors who repopulate Ushas like Noah and family, yes? (I know not everyone thinks it was the sailors who were landed on flood day).<<

[snip]

(I'll note that I think Severian did know Valeria was a family member and his consciously celibate marriage to her was a step toward his/humanity's salvation, but I mustn't get ahead of myself).<<

Wherever did you get the idea that the marriage was celibate?

But the bigger problem I have with this theory is carrying the Genesis flood analogy over to the Urth flood. I don't want to get bogged down in the "Original Sin is carnal knowledge" issue, still less in the morass of Severian's presumed familial inbreeding, but both those things figure into

your theory. Earlier you wrote:

I think this is Wolfe saying that humanity and specifically, Severian's family, have been contaminated by a matings with the Urth equivalent of pagan gods.<<

If this is true, how is Severian as Conciliator/New Sun an improvement, analogous to a righteous Noah? He went to Yesod and fathered a New Sun -- who was/is himself. (URTH, 145) You can't get much more incestuous than that. Further, he fathered himself on an insect from another universe, who was the larval stage of a god-like, angelic being. How is that any better than

Adam's tribe and the "Nephilim"? I would think it even worse, because the Hierogrammates were man-made to begin with.

Btw, the Lilith myth figures into Wolfe's story "Copperhead". Fwiw.

-Roy

James B. Jordan — 08 Aug 2006, 21:43 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

I don't have time to catch up on all this thread, but FWIW:

1. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is associated with rule. "Knowledge of Good and Evil" is a synonym for wisdom, and the phrase occurs repeatedly in connection with kings and with adults, as opposed to children. Adam and Eve, being newborn, did not have this. The serpent's job was to train them in wisdom, so that they could pass through a "good death" and enter the wider world as rulers. The serpent rejected his job, and Adam rejected God (Eve was innocently tricked says Paul, twice, the supposed woman-hater!). (Note the "good death" Adam passed through when Eve was made.) Similarly "opening of eyes" and "becoming like elohim" are both phrases having to do with elevation to kingly position.

Now, whether Wolfe knows all that or not is a question. He may have any number of speculative notions about the story, notions not based in the Hebraic usage of the terms employed.

2. The sons of God who married the daughters of men because they were "good" (same word used of the fruit Eve plucked) were the Sethites who married with the daughters of the Cainites. This is clear from the context. In Genesis 4-5, men of the Sethite line worshipped Yahweh, and carried that worship down. By the time of Noah, however, only Noah was left "mature in his times." Nephilim simply means "powerful men" "great rulers," and may be the origin of some ancient myths about Herculean characters. The notion that the sons of God were angels or some such is simply without context, and leaves unexplained what happened to the Sethite line of priests. True "son of God" means "ruler" in the Hebrew, and is used for angels once or twice, but it also means "believer" and that is what it means here. True, a few Jewish myths hold that they were angels, but most Jewish writers of ancient times do not. The alternative is to believe that the final redactor of Genesis, who gives us the only text we have of the book, was so stupid as to leave big loose ends in his narrative. But, of course, Wolfe may be educated to believe either (a) sons of God are powerful Cainite kings (check out the meanings of the names in Genesis 4) who seized and raped helpless women, or (b) sons of God are angels who screwed human women and bred supermen, or (c) not believing b, Wolfe may find it a useful fantasy to employ in his writing.

3. Cain did not "find" a wife in Nod. "Nod" simply means "wandering." The murder of Abel happened when Cain was about 128, since Seth was born as Abel's replacement when Adam was 130. There were hundreds of descendents of Adam by that time, and Cain and his clan, and his wife, and his children, and his grandchildren, etc., moved away from the land near the garden to a place farther east. There is no justification for importing any notion of pre-Adam proto-humans into the text. The author of Genesis knows of no such thing. But who knows what Wolfe may think about it.

4. The Flood does destroy and purge the old world. The Bible presents it as global: water 22 feet over the highest mountains for 6 months

is not some "local flood." But the Bible uses flood imagery later on many times, for invading armies usually. It is used later on for the final events of Jesus' coming: the destruction of Jerusalem, which is the navel of the old creation, and thereby symbolically ends the old world. Hence, I suggest that Wolfe's use of the Flood should not be pressed too far. And old, tired, fallen, and corrupt world is washed away to make way for a new one. Beyond that, I'd be careful.

5. The bottom line is that there are a number of fantasy interpretations of the early chapters of Genesis, and then there are readings that stick closely with text and context. Without interviewing him, there is really no way to know what Wolfe might be thinking about such things, hence no way to know what his allusions might be. Moreover, Wolfe may be alluding to fantastical readings of Genesis (e.g., Lilith) that he himself does not believe. So, be careful, and don't over-read.

FWIW

Patera Nutria

Daniel D Jones — 09 Aug 2006, 00:52 · in reply to James B. Jordan

On Tuesday 08 August 2006 17:43, James B. Jordan wrote:
So, be careful, and don't over-read.

One of the best piece of advice I've ever heard IRT Wolfe. Wolfe is deep, allegorical and full of allusions and puzzles. But every well has a bottom and the human brain is a machine that excels at finding patterns - even where there are none.

Roy C. Lackey — 09 Aug 2006, 05:24 · follows Daniel D Jones

Dan'I quoted and wrote:
The Hieros were/will be in no sense angelic. They were the race of humans, cognates of our (and Severian's) race, who sinned on a grand scale in producing the race of beings known as Hierogrammates, of which latter group Tzadkiel is an example.

Yes. With the possible exception of "sinned on a grand scale" -- is producing the Hierogrammates actually a sin? It's clearly part of a huge _trap_, but that's another issue -- this is exactly how I understand the case.

"These men encountered many beings on other worlds who had intelligence to some degree, or at least the potential for intelligence, and from them - that they might have comrades in the loneliness between the galaxies and allies among their swarming worlds - they formed beings like themselves.

"It was not done swiftly or easily. Uncountable billions suffered and died under their guiding hands, leaving ineradicable memories of pain and blood." (CITADEL, chapter XXXIV)

That sounds like sin to me, and it was certainly on a grand scale.

The two "hieros" races, Hierodules and Hierogrammates, are trapped in a cycle of producing each other. Humans at the peak of their development are the Hierodules; they "uplift" (to use Brin's term) -- that is, interfere in and guide the development of -- the race that

becomes the Hierogrammates. The Hierogrammates survive the Grand Ghab/Big Bang cycle and guide the development of humanity, thus resulting in the creation of the Hierodules, etc.

I assume you are using "Hierodules" in a figurative sense here, but even then there is a problem reconciling the usage with the text. The "holy slaves" (of which Barbatos and Famulimus are examples) were a race of beings created by the Hierogrammates to serve them in Briah. (URTH, 36) They are not humans, as their living quarters on Tzadkiel's Ship clearly shows. Though they are doing the donkey work for the Hierogrammates, and urge Severian to jump through hoops to satisfy Tzadkiel, they make it clear that their only master is the Increate. (ibid.)

Unclear: _how_ do the Hierogrammates survive across the GG/BB gap: is Yesod immune to it? If so, then why do they need to repeat the cycle; they already exist, they don't need to ensure their own creation _again_.

"I was not told what became of the Humanity of that cycle. Perhaps it survived until the implosion of the universe, then perished with it. Perhaps it evolved beyond our recognition. But the beings humanity had shaped into what men and women wished to be escaped, opening a passage to Yesod, the universe higher than our own, where they created worlds suited to what they had become.

"From that vantage point they look both forward and back, and in so looking they have discovered us. Perhaps we are no more than a race like that who shaped them. Perhaps it was we who shaped them - or our sons - or our fathers. Malrubius said he did not know, and I believe he told the truth. However it may be, they shape us now as they themselves were shaped; it is at once their repayment and their revenge." (CITADEL, chapter XXXIV)

Somewhere is a statement to the effect that with each cycle there is some slight improvement made. Maybe, given enough repetitions, something approaching heavenly perfection will be achieved. Eternity can't get any longer. <g>

-Roy

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 09 Aug 2006, 18:22 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On 8/8/06, Roy C. Lackey <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:

Text deleted, but ...

That sounds like sin to me, and it was certainly on a grand scale.

Certainly the grand scale. I'm not 100% on "sin," but it's certainly ugly.

I assume you are using "Hierodules" in a figurative sense here,

No, I just screwed up. There isn't really a term for uplifted humanity in the books; people here have taken to calling them Hieros without a suffix, which has managed to confuse me.

Somewhere is a statement to the effect that with each cycle there is some slight improvement made. Maybe, given enough repetitions, something approaching heavenly perfection will be achieved. Eternity can't get any longer. <g>

I don't recall such a statement, but I've often wondered about this. It implies a structure not unlike that in Stapledon's STAR MAKER, in which the Star Maker creates successively more complex and successful universes (ours being somewhere in the middle) until It creates one which achieves a level of universal sentience and perfection that allows that universe to

become, well, the Star Maker. Import that construct to the Christian framework and you get a Creator whose "practice" universes gradually get better and better until finally one is "good enough" for the Creator to be born in it as Christ.

I'm not saying this is what Wolfe has in mind, but it does fit the evidence.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

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

"Shovels are essential to the fantasy genre.

However, they are primarily used by the authors rather than the characters." -- Stephen R. Donaldson

b sharp — 10 Aug 2006, 03:16 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

There is a lot of good input lately on this subject I think. James B. Jordan, your gentlemanly responses and personal expertise are very welcomed, by me anyway. I don't see it as pulling rank.

Personally I hadn't ever heard of Nephilim a month ago. I just wanted to figure out what the giant Nod might mean in the play so I Googled Genesis + Giant and found all kinds of stuff about giants and demons and floods which fit the play quite neatly.

I hadn't heard of Sethites either before P. Nutria mentioned them. A Google search of Sethite+Nephilim conjures up a number of sites but almost all of them mention the controversy between a fallen angel interpretation and a human Sethite interpretation of the Nephilim.

The first search hit yielded this site: <http://www.khouse.org/articles/1997/110/> which is very critical of the Sethite view seeing it as revisionist. An excerpt:

It was in the 5th century a.d. that the "angel" interpretation of Genesis 6 was increasingly viewed >as an embarrassment when attacked by critics. (Furthermore, the worship of angels had begun >within the church. Also, celibacy had also become an institution of the church. The "angel" view of Genesis 6 was feared as impacting these views.)

This jibes with an observation about Judeo-Christianity which I've long noticed, that being that Monotheism as the defining theme came later in religious history. The early Bible actually seems to acknowledge there being other gods. I think Baal and maybe Astarte are depicted not so much as fake gods but as rivals to Jehovah. As a kid, I was always confused by the First of the Ten Commandments:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; >you shall have no other gods before me.

I used to think, "other gods? what other gods? I thought He was the only one" and "well, would it be okay to worship one of these other gods on the side if I always put the Big Guy first?" Seemed like it was allowable.

I really have to give credit to all those faithful monks who hand-copied and translated the Bible for 2000 years and resisted the temptation to do a little revising, to make the text more Monotheistic.

Anyway, I get the strong impression Gene Wolfe is more interested in the earlier parts and interpretations of The Bible, where the pagan gods and demons and monsters and such were not just dismissed as a mythology of primitives.

-bsharp

Roy C. Lackey — 10 Aug 2006, 04:45 · follows b sharp

Dan'l quoted and wrote:

Somewhere is a statement to the effect that with each cycle there is some slight improvement made. Maybe, given enough repetitions, something approaching heavenly perfection will be achieved. Eternity can't get any longer. <g>

I don't recall such a statement, but I've often wondered about this. It implies a structure not unlike that in Stapledon's STAR MAKER, in which the Star Maker creates successively more complex and successful universes (ours being somewhere in the middle) until It creates one which achieves a level of universal sentience and perfection that allows that universe to become, well, the Star Maker. Import that construct to the Christian framework and you get a Creator whose "practice" universes gradually get better and better until finally one is "good enough" for the Creator to be born in it as Christ.

The statement is one page earlier than the other quotes I gave from chapter XXXIV in CITADEL.

"Just as a flower blooms, throws down its seed, dies, and rises for its seed to bloom again, so the universe we know diffuses itself to nullity in the infinitude of space, gathers its fragments (which because of the curvature of that space meet at last where they began) and from that seed blooms again. Each such cycle of flowering and decay marks a divine year.

"As the flower that comes is like the flower from which it came, so the universe that comes repeats the one whose ruin was its origin; and this is as true of its finer features as of its grosser ones: the worlds that arise are not unlike the worlds that perished, and are peopled by similar races, though just as the flower evolves from summer to summer, all things advance by some minute step.

"In a certain divine year (a time truly inconceivable to us, though that cycle of the universes was but one in an endless succession), a race was born that was so like to ours that Master Malrubius did not scruple to call it human. It expanded among the galaxies of its universe even as we are said to have done in the remote past, when Urth was, for a time, the center, or at least the home and symbol, of an empire."

-Roy

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 10 Aug 2006, 05:25 · in reply to b sharp

B,

Yes, there is a definite development of monotheism in the course of the Bible, especially if you go through it in the order it was written rather than the order it appears in a bound volume. This involves dividing some books up in ways that sometimes seem almost arbitrary -- for example, Genesis seems to have had (at least) four major authors or base texts from which the book we have today was finally redacted. (That's why there are doublets of a number of passages, including the two creation accounts.)

In the earliest phase, other gods were seen as real beings and rivals to YHWH. The later redactors mostly edited this stuff out, but it still peeks through in places.

The main account of the Torah (the first five books, Genesis through Deuteronomy) seems to have been written at a time when other gods were seen as real, but not really gods, not on the same order of being as YHWH. A good example of this is the account of the plagues of Egypt: Pharaoh's "sorcerors" (who would most likely have been priests) were able to duplicate some of

the miracles God performed through Moses and Aaron, but not all of them.

By the time of the Prophets, they are seen as being either petty beings (who are mocked with names like "Beelzebub," baalzhavuv, "Lord of Flies"), impotent (as when the priests of Ba'al are unable to call down fire but Isaiah is), or nonexistent (the theme of mocking idolators as worshipping "gods" made by human hands, or "no-gods").

For what that's worth.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

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

"Shovels are essential to the fantasy genre.

However, they are primarily used by the authors rather than the characters." -- Stephen R. Donaldson

Iorwerth Thomas — 25 Aug 2006, 19:35 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

I'm a little late to the party, but the passages quoted below could be why I kept reading process theology into the BotNS when I first read it. I think there's some evidence that Stapledon was influenced by A N Whitehead, who's responsible for that movement.

-- Iorwerth

From: "Roy C. Lackey" <rclackey at stic.net>

Reply-To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>

To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>

Subject: Re: (urth) Original Sin and pagan gods

Date: Wed, 9 Aug 2006 23:45:40 -0500

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center,
or at least the home and symbol, of an empire."

-Roy

Bob Miller — 27 Aug 2006, 10:45 · in reply to Iorwerth Thomas

Interesting. Possibly both Heinlein and Wolfe, or Stapledon to Heinlein to Wolfe or
two-pronged--both Heinlein (Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag) and Stapledon having an
effect on the man I think of as the best living writer?

Bob

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