

The Morality of the Hierogrammates

The Urth list — 13 messages, 4 voices, 23 Jul 2007

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4889>

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Paul B — 23 Jul 2007, 22:06

I recently read the archive discussion about the theodicean aspect of BotNS, and the morality and necessity of the flood that accompanies the new sun. One thing struck me, and if it's old hat, then I've not been thorough enough in reading the archives. That thing is the precipitous pace of the flood, which apparently takes Urth in a matter of days and surprises those at the House Absolute by the time that Severian shows up. A flood of Biblical proportions, if you will.

Now, one thing that has been jokingly asked of that one, can be seriously asked of this: where does the water come from? Though Wolfe seems to be fond of supernatural means having scientific explanations, this one is puzzling if one only ties it to the new sun.

Firstly, if there is enough water to begin with in the form of ice, how does it melt so quickly? A warmer sun would seemingly also have to cook everything alive on the surface to provide enough energy to melt an amount of ice greater than Earth's in a matter of days. Secondly, assuming Urth has a similar amount of water, solid and liquid, as Earth does, it doesn't seem even possible that there's enough to flood the land to the extent Severian describes.

While saying "the powerful aliens did it" can be seen as something of a cop-out for explaining Urth's mysteries, in this case I can't come up with an endogenous, natural, explanation.

Thus, my hypothesis is that the flood accompanying the new sun wasn't necessary as an attribute of the sun's renewal, at least not on that epic a scale. However, it may have been necessary for the social engineering the Hierogrammates were attempting, the reboot humanity out of its torpor.

That sort of global upheaval is best presented with another, the coming of the new sun, and this may in fact be why they repeatedly inform Severian that there will be a flood, just so he doesn't get surprised and start thinking later. (This would also answer why they'd choose to save the billions of Ragnarok Urth, but not the billions of flooded Urth - things are going as planned on Ushas)

This isn't to say the aliens are malicious, I've read plenty of hypotheses that give reasons why they'd want a flood, possibly for humanity's long-term benefit as well as their own, that I agree with enough to not even repeat. The thing that might be potentially new in what I'm saying is they set up the flood as a totally separate matter from the new sun, but just passed the two off as being codependent.

If this isn't new, let me know if it's covered somewhere so as to save bother. My search didn't turn it up, at any rate.

Paul

brunians at brunians.org — 23 Jul 2007, 22:13 · in reply to Paul B

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The continents are drowned, new continents rise where the oceans are, the oceans move around. No new water required.

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Paul B — 23 Jul 2007, 22:22 · in reply to brunians at brunians.org

That's fine, but it's about as difficult to explain sudden global tectonic shifts than it is to explain a flood.

On 7/23/07, brunians at brunians.org <brunians at brunians.org> wrote:

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Bruce Hayles — 23 Jul 2007, 22:27 · in reply to Paul B

I'm not sure what the confusion is about. Baldanders says that the flood is caused by gravitational forces from the New Sun in Urth of the New Sun XLII.

On 7/23/07, Paul B <pb.stuff at gmail.com> wrote:

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Paul B — 23 Jul 2007, 22:46 · in reply to Bruce Hayles

Right you are, I'd forgotten about that bit. That said, Baldanders seems to mean that the heat generated by a stronger gravitational pull would heat Urth and melt the water. Baldanders isn't likely to lie, but again it's curious where that much water comes from.

He doesn't mention tectonic shifts, and I admit to not being physicist enough to challenge the idea, but it seems like gravitationally-motivated shifts would be even more catastrophic than what is described. (Incidentally, a change in centripetal force in newtonian mechanics would drastically change the equilibrium orbits of the whole solar system)

Furthermore, it's of possible interest that his scientific expertise has been supplied by the aliens, to a large extent.

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brunians at brunians.org — 23 Jul 2007, 23:56 · in reply to Paul B

There's this white hole moving through the solar system, see, before it hits the Old Sun. It's stellar sized gravity well causes the changes on Urth.

Who knows (or cares, particularly) if the physics is right?

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Paul B — 24 Jul 2007, 00:09 · in reply to brunians at brunians.org

As for who cares, perhaps Wolfe does.

A theme of his is natural explanations for the supernatural, such as the magic of Devil in the Forest, or the mystery of the Pelerine cathedral in BotNS. I contend that the feasibility of the flood is a deliberate puzzle. The event that is the culmination of the whole byzantine process is not something to be hand-waved away by scifi pseudoscience in a book this serious. I think it's purposely something that cannot be explained by physics in an endogenous system, but should be explained nonetheless.

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brunians at brunians.org — 24 Jul 2007, 01:54 · in reply to Paul B

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Well, you'll feel right at home here: this is pedant central.

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Paul B — 24 Jul 2007, 03:53 · in reply to brunians at brunians.org

Now now, no need for hostility. I'm merely proposing a puzzle that I think is interesting. Perhaps it isn't, or it isn't even a puzzle at all, but it bears noting that your arguments, such as they've been, haven't convinced me of that.

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Jeff Wilson — 24 Jul 2007, 07:14 · in reply to brunians at brunians.org

brunians at brunians.org wrote:

There's this white hole moving through the solar system, see, before it hits the Old Sun. It's stellar sized gravity well causes the changes on Urth.

If the White Fountain is indeed a white hole, intended to undo the effect of the "black beans", it need not be on the order of a star in gravity well, only on the order of the beans' total. Also, being a white hole, it may have an inverted or otherwise unusual distribution of gravity.

As for the flood, a mass as small as the moon can cause considerable tides on the earth, so that the White Fountain can be 1% of earth's mass, maybe smaller, depending on how close it comes.

"Additional" water can come from wrecked dams and reservoirs, from the wreckage of Abaia's tidal power devices, and such. Even today, enough water is kept from the ocean by man-made structures in the northern hemisphere to have a measureable effect on the earth's rotation; in a few chilliads, who knows how much could be waiting to burst loose?

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >

brunians at brunians.org — 24 Jul 2007, 08:04 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

It seems to me, though I couldn't quote chapter and verse, that there is a reference or more than one to the disruptive effects of the WF's gravity well.

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Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >

Paul B — 24 Jul 2007, 15:46 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

But the thing is that according to Baldanders everything will get submerged, for example mountainous Thrax will too (the two methods of escape being ship [maybe] and airship - from UotNS, ch LXII). If one makes the assumption that Earth and Urth are the same, there simply doesn't seem to be enough water on Earth to drown the Andes mountains.

If you assume Earth is Urth, then you can actually examine "scientific" Biblical flood literature (of which there's a surprisingly large amount), and there it's worth noting that no one has been able to suggest a scientific explanation for the flood, though not for lack of trying.

If Urth isn't Earth, then I suppose it's not a meaningful question to ask anymore.

Does Abaia really have tidal power devices? I have no idea what that guy is capable of.

For the record, I'm perfectly fine with calling the white fountain a miracle - it, its creation, and movement, are not physically explainable. What I'm trying to get at is that the flood is also a "miracle", and the two aren't tied together by anything necessary.

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Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
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Jeff Wilson — 25 Jul 2007, 05:36 · in reply to Paul B

Paul B wrote:

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Baldanders may be taking the pessimistic, worst-case scenario that the Fountain's tides will be strong enough to remake the land as well as the water. Or, Baldanders may be simply ignorant of the geophysical exactitudes, being primarily interested in researching more showy lost sciences.

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Does Abaia really have tidal power devices? I have no idea what that guy is capable of.

They are notional, springing from discussions Mantiss and I had years ago when he was writing a NEW SUN roleplaying game supplement. Presumably each of the great beasts have renewable resources native to their abode that figuratively if not literally feed off of the earth, that would be threatened by the coming of the New Sun. You'd think Abaia would welcome the flood from the New Sun, but there must be some danger to his/its interests for him/it to oppose it. Ergo, tidal power. (though being hung up to rot on the dry land of a newborn continent must be an unpleasant end as well._

Likewise, Erebus presumably has geothermal stations around his eponymous volcano on the Antarctic ice.

(<http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/newsun/> for those interested in a plain-English gazetteer of the New Sun setting.)

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >