

What's So Great About Ushas

The Urth list — 35 messages, 11 voices, 11 Jul 2008

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5099>

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b sharp — 11 Jul 2008, 14:01

If I understand Paul B correctly, he interprets BotNS without any sense of religious allegory. Perhaps Wolfe isn't even trying to address the Problem Of Evil? It is just a cool tale about a gothic hero and some weird aliens in robes and their winged, hermaphrodite leader?

I could be wrong, but I think that view is missing something. The bad guys have the names of pre-Christian monsters and the leader of the good guys has the name of an archangel. If there is no religion here, why not just name them Zork and Urg and Fred?

I think Jeff Wilson asks a key question:

Would you agree that it can be good for the Increate to do something that it would be evil to be done by a man?

It seems to me Wolfe is giving an affirmative answer to that question. For some reason this analogy popped into my head- an adult chances upon a small child who found a nest of new born mice in a field and is smushing them with a rock. The adult might tell the child that the action is wrong and cruel yet he/she uses a mousetrap in his/her home. Isn't the adult, with greater powers of perception of the future and of consequences, a superior moral agent to the child? I think the child would tend to think his/her field mouse smashing is morally equivalent to a mousetrap in a home while the adult (though not all adults) recognizes a difference.

Similarly, wouldn't aliens or angels with superior perceptive powers be superior moral agents to humans?

The hierogrammates are described as far away from the Increate but still far closer to Him than humans.

"Yours are a race of pawns" says Tzadkiel, meaning able to move only forward in time, usually one step

at a time. It would seem the Hierogrammates can move forward, backward, sideways and diagonally in

space and time and thus clearly have a superior understanding of consequences to humans and are thus

superior moral agents (in Wolfe's view).

Additionally, Tzadkiel is unwilling to take genocidal action without consent by a representative of the people.

Tzadkiel has the power and moral authority to do it without consent, so why does he/she feel the need for it?

I think Wolfe adds this to reinforce the moral superiority of Hierogrammates and the Increate (and by allegory

the superiority of God and angels in our world who have done some very destructive things) by

adding the very
human moral component of consent that almost all of us readers can agree is right.

I can see how cynical atheists might have a different interpretation. The consent Tzadkiel wants is just lip service.

Tzadkiel and his ilk had all the time in the world (er...universe..er....universes) to wait for a consent. Any human representative could seek audience with them but if they didn't give the right answer, they were sent home, with their balls cut off for their trouble. It seems to me (being something of an atheist myself) to be a reasonable argument.

But I don't think that view was Wolfe's intention. Severian seems imperfect yet still brave and heroic, a guy who is (almost) always trying to do the right thing. I think Severian is clearly Wolfe's literary avatar and I doubt this transcendent story could have been written by a guy who feels he is a dupe, someone who has spent his life worshipping a false, deceptive, immoral God.

(dupe to a kind, caring loving God? yeah, Wolfe might feel that way, like a child who sees through his father's attempts to trick him into doing the right thing)

-bsharp

Paul B — 11 Jul 2008, 15:49 · in reply to b sharp

The trouble with what Jeff says, and with what you're saying here, is granting the aliens higher moral freedom based on the assumption that they are closer to God (smarter, more flexible, even a little omnipresent) and therefore should get more exceptions.

It's not God that destroys Urth. Is there actual evidence that the aliens are even doing the will of God, or at least trying to? That would solve a substantial part of the problem. At the moment though, the only reason I recall is the need to have the humans become the Hieros so they can again create the Hierogrammates. Perhaps I've simply not been paying attention, but I actually can't find where God enters into that particular plotline.

However, granting them exceptions simply because they know more, or are more powerful, is silly. There are more and less powerful and wise humans too, but suggesting that one can get away with murder (for a good cause, trust me!) isn't something most can stomach.

Far be it from me to advocate a materialist reading of BotNS, I am simply advocating the evaluation of the spirituality of its characters.

Paul

On Fri, Jul 11, 2008 at 10:01 AM, b sharp <bsharporflat at hotmail.com> wrote:

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Jeff Wilson — 11 Jul 2008, 18:34 · in reply to Paul B

Paul B wrote:

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Jeff Wilson - [jwilson at io.com](mailto:jwilson@io.com)
< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >

b sharp — 11 Jul 2008, 18:46 · follows Jeff Wilson

Paul B I do think you are missing numerous hints that the Hiero-types are (as mentioned in my previous post) more omniscient and closer to the Increate in purpose than humans (and you shouldn't have tried to weaken my position by adding your own thought about power creating moral superiority ;-), I mentioned knowledge and foresight only).

In more general terms, it seems to me you are stubbornly clinging to a fallacy: that you are the equal in ability to make moral judgements to omniscient beings who can directly observe the

future.

You are not their equal. You and all of us other humans can only guess what the consequence of an action will be and make decisions based on judgement of statistical likelihood. I hope you are not trying to argue that a moral judgement can be made completely independent from the consequences of actions (making your moral framework very Beavisian in that cool stuff rocks and bogus stuff sucks).

A room full of 4 year olds might get together and decide they should be provided with loaded automatic weapons to scare away monsters. A philosopher child among them might argue that adults are bigger but possess no particular features that make them superior moral agents and the right thing to do would be to provide them with the monster protections they need. Paul, in the presence of God or Tzadkiel you are this child. As a human being, you (and I) just don't know enough to judge the actions of God and angels. And I suspect you won't be getting your guns (unless perhaps you share your daycare with baby Adolph? j/k j/k).

You might see the merit of this view in which an absolute certainty about the future is a tool which confers moral superiority or perhaps not (but please no more lectures about utilitarianism which is a merely human principle based on statistical likelihood of outcome).

But you might argue that you are the equal of any intelligence in making moral judgements about the past where outcomes are set. If we pretend that reading history is equivalent to directly observing the past it might seem that when we humans observe the past we can see with certainty the full consequences of an action.

However this also is false because, unlike Tzadkiel, we cannot see multiple threads and multiple outcomes based on many possible choices of action. We can only know what one choice was made, see the outcome of that choice and only guess whether that outcome would have been better or worse than if other choices were made. God can see all possible choices and all possible outcomes making Him the perfect moral agent. Tzadkiel's ability approaches this making him/her far, far more morally advanced than an adult is to a child. Thus our own moral judgement of Tzadkiel's or God's actions is of negligible importance.

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Well, there's a further point here: one can claim that **any** action, by **anyone**, is part of God's Plan. To do this is to create moral anarchy for humans -- "Yes, I killed six million Jews, but that was part of God's plan, so it's okay." No, I don't think so; the only way to theodiceize this is by assuming an extreme Calvinist-predestinarian stance.

The only way to say that the Hiero*s don't share the same moral burden as humans is to say that they have direct knowledge of God's will. This is the justification for the Israelites' slaughter of the natives of Canaan -- "God said so," which trumped "Thou shalt not murder."

So to justify the Hiero*s' actions, to say that their plan that involved the slaughter of Urth's billions, was morally OK, means that you have to present evidence that they have a direct knowledge of the will of the Increate, which I do not see in the text.

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

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>
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I once absend-mindedly ordered Three Mile Island dressing in a restaurant and, with great presence of mind, they brought Thousand Island Dressing and a bottle of chili sauce. -- T. Pratchett

Paul B — 11 Jul 2008, 19:03 · in reply to b sharp

Utilitarianism, which I defined rather than lectured about, is crucial to this despite what you may say. You base the argument for foreknowledge giving moral exemption on the assumption that since the immoral action will result in greater good, it is in fact moral. This is again a definition of utilitarianism.

Since we've come to silly examples, let me give you one as well then, it's so time-worn it's practically polished. You're a surgeon who can harvest the organs of a single worthless hobo to save the lives of great men, and you know this will work (you're a GOOD surgeon). Is your doing this moral? Like a fancy Hierogrammate, you have foresight in this one case, and killing this hobo will in fact produce greater good.

Does your foreknowledge give you the moral justification for murder?

A utilitarian, incidentally, would agree. This is why utilitarianism matters.

Paul

On Fri, Jul 11, 2008 at 2:46 PM, b sharp <bsharporflat at hotmail.com> wrote:

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Paul B — 11 Jul 2008, 19:13 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Took the words right out of my mouth, you did.

I did go back and read over the previous 60+ posts of "Ushas", about the only thing mentioned as evidence was Tzadkiel's statement that the agonies of Urth will be "offered to the Increate". (Doesn't that sound sorta barbaric, incidentally?) And here I was all set to ask whether the Hierogrammates even mentioned the Increate, heh. At least they also seem to believe he exists.

However, there's a leap between this and saying they're privy to his Plan, hey?

Paul

On Fri, Jul 11, 2008 at 2:54 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

On Fri, Jul 11, 2008 at 11:34 AM, Jeff Wilson <jwilson at io.com> wrote:

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Jeff Wilson — 11 Jul 2008, 19:21 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

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I don't subscribe to the usual free will/predestiny dichotomy. You can't escape God's plan because He's eternal and outside of time and space, any more than A. Square can escape the observation and intervention of three-dimensional beings hovering over Flatland. Your choices still make a difference in how you will fit into His plan, and His delivered wisdom as trickled down to you may influence those choices. Presumably, the closer one hews to righteousness, the less suffering all round.

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I move that we adopt my term "Yesodis" to mean the current and former inhabitants of Yesod during the period of the Book and their non-human servants, including the Hierodules, Hierogrammates, and Hieros. It's certainly easier to spell and shorter.

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I don't see much evidence that the Yesodis are the proximate cause. It's possible that they created the the White Fountain, but it seems to be Severian who draws it to Urth. They seem to work pretty hard to make sure he is there to keep it from striking Urth at the last second, too.

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

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I bet God didn't put a black hole in Urth's sun either. It's pretty likely he had little to do with the white hole, too. The personal power Severian holds in these matters seems to be uncertain at best, no? How did you get the conclusion that he's responsible for the white hole not striking Urth? Or directing it at all, for that matter.

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By confounding do you perhaps mean "compounding" or "conflating"? That's what "Yesodis" is intended to do, to refer to all of these higher beings as a group, and this is useful because they seem to share a cause in their existence. It can also mean the relevant subset of them in context, the way "Axis Forces" means the Germany, Japan, etc in WWII, but not necessarily all of them every time.

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Paul B — 11 Jul 2008, 20:10 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

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I still stand by "confounding", simply because the humans aren't the aliens, and then isn't now. What is the common purpose of "the Yesodis" - how are they alike, and who are they different from? Organizations of nomenclature like "Axis" have obvious commonalities and differences as regards others. If both humans and aliens are "Yesodis" then and now, who isn't one? If you like, you could call the humans (Hieros) Side A, and the aliens (Hierogrammates, Hierodules) Side B. That seems clearer.

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To write the BotNS, of course :-) His role can be purely symbolic, and still terribly important to Side B (har) plans.

--

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 11 Jul 2008, 20:13 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On Fri, Jul 11, 2008 at 12:21 PM, Jeff Wilson <jwilson at io.com> wrote:
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I agree with everything you say here, wiht the possible exception of the last sentence (God seems to like suffering and sacrifice an awful lot).

I was pointing out that there are two ways to say that the Hiero*s' (or Yesodis' or whatever) actions re: Urth are not morally wrong, or at least morally questionable. One is to say that they are privy to God's will; the other is to say that God predestined them to do it and that it is

therefore God's will.

Since I don't buy into either of these, at least pending some serious textual evidence that God is talking to them (or that Wolfe is a predestinarian), I regard them as morally questionable at best.

I move that we adopt my term "Yesodis" to mean the current and former inhabitants of Yesod during the period of the Book and their non-human servants, including the Hierodules, Hierogrammates, and Hieros. It's certainly easier to spell and shorter.

Eh. It sounds to me like a terrorist group.

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The source of the White Fountain is Severian's mating with Apheta. The H/Ys knew that would happen, and brought Severian to Yesod specifically to do this. Due to their freedom of time, they knew the results of creating it. Ergo, they bear moral responsibility for its effects.

One can argue that they also know that this is better than the alternative, but that still begs the question of not evacuating the planet when they have been shown to have the capability to do so. They choose to let billions die.

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

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Paul B — 11 Jul 2008, 20:19 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

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Really? I had always had a hard time picturing Severian literally giving birth to an astrophysical anomaly by having sex with an alien. I'd assumed it was something he was told or decided for himself since he spent his time in Yesod doing Apheta instead of asking some much-warranted questions.

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

Jeff Wilson — 11 Jul 2008, 21:24 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

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I agree with everything you say here, with the possible exception of the last sentence (God seems to like suffering and sacrifice an awful lot).

Loss is necessary, or at least unavoidable, and presumably loss in the name of God (sacrifice) is better than loss for no reason. I agree that whenever wrong is done there is a price to be paid (and usually one for doing right, for that matter), but I don't think gratuitous loss is righteous.

God also likes beetles, but I don't think 300000 varieties are strictly necessary.

I was pointing out that there are two ways to say that the Hiero*s' (or Yesodis' or whatever) actions re: Urth are not morally wrong, or at least morally questionable. One is to say that they are privy to God's will; the other is to say that God predestined them to do it and that it is therefore God's will.

Since I don't buy into either of these, at least pending some serious textual evidence that God is talking to them (or that Wolfe is a predestinarian), I regard them as morally questionable at best.

The disappearance/ascension of the Hieros leaves a suggestive gap. Wolfe may have borrowed a page from Teilhard De Chardin and had the Hieros join with the Godhead at the end of their bang-gnab and relay an utterance from the Increate before completion. The Hierogrammates would be working from this received wisdom ever since, and are eager to uplift humanity to Hieros-status so they can receive word from the Outsider if they have been successful or not.

I move that we adopt my term "Yesodis" to mean the current and former inhabitants of Yesod during the period of the Book and their non-human servants, including the Hierodules, Hierogrammates, and Hieros. It's certainly easier to spell and shorter.

Eh. It sounds to me like a terrorist group.

Not unintentional.

I don't see much evidence that the Yesodis are the proximate cause. It's possible that they created the the White Fountain, but it seems to be Severian who draws it to Urth. They seem to work pretty hard to make sure he is there to keep it from striking Urth at the last second, too.

The source of the White Fountain is Severian's mating with Apheta. The H/Ys knew that would happen, and brought Severian to Yesod specifically to do this. Due to their freedom of time, they knew the results of creating it. Ergo, they bear moral responsibility for its effects.

One can argue that they also know that this is better than the alternative, but that still begs the question of not evacuating the planet when they have been shown to have the capability to do so. They choose to let billions die.

I don't think there are billions left on Urth, millions perhaps. But where will they put the millions in a colonized galaxy?

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

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 11 Jul 2008, 21:46 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On Fri, Jul 11, 2008 at 2:24 PM, Jeff Wilson <jwilson at io.com> wrote:

The disappearance/ascension of the Hieros leaves a suggestive gap. Wolfe may have borrowed a page from Teilhard De Chardin and had the Hieros join with the Godhead at the end of their bang-gnab and relay an utterance from the Increate before completion. The Hierogrammates would be working from this received wisdom ever since, and are eager to uplift humanity to Hieros-status so they can receive word from the Outsider if they have been successful or not.

Certainly a possibility. This begs the question though: is there textual evidence that they have, in fact, had a Word from God?

Eh. It sounds to me like a terrorist group.

Not unintentional.

...heh...

I don't think there are billions left on Urth, millions perhaps. But where will they put the millions in a colonized galaxy?

South America alone has the teeming metropolis of Nessus, smaller cities, and North America has the hive-like Ascians. I would be surprised if Urth's population -- this is the "do-nothing" future -- is much less than that of our Earth today.

But, whether millions or billions, the question of "where to put them" is no greater here than it is in the Ice Future, where the HYs *do* evacuate Urth's population. If they can do it there, they can do it here. You played it for her, Sam, you can play it for me.

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

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

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

I once absend-mindedly ordered Three Mile Island dressing in a restaurant and, with great presence of mind, they brought Thousand Island Dressing and a bottle of chili sauce. -- T. Pratchett

Jeff Wilson — 11 Jul 2008, 22:03 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

On Fri, Jul 11, 2008 at 2:24 PM, Jeff Wilson <jwilson at io.com> wrote:

The disappearance/ascension of the Hieros leaves a suggestive gap. Wolfe may have borrowed a page from Teilhard De Chardin and had the Hieros join with the Godhead at the end of their bang-gnab and relay an utterance from the Increate before completion. The Hierogrammates would be working from this received wisdom ever since, and are eager to uplift humanity to Hieros-status so they can receive word from the Outsider if they have been successful or not.

Certainly a possibility. This begs the question though: is there textual evidence that they have, in fact, had a Word from God?

I'm hoping to gather some on my next, "Sister Juturna" read-through, as soon as I can gather new copies of the volumes.

Eh. It sounds to me like a terrorist group.

Not unintentional.

...heh...

I don't think there are billions left on Urth, millions perhaps. But where will they put the millions in a colonized galaxy?

South America alone has the teeming metropolis of Nessus, smaller cities, and North America has the hive-like Ascians. I would be surprised if Urth's population -- this is the "do-nothing" future -- is much less than that of our Earth today.

Nessus isn't exactly "teeming" as there are five buildings for each inhabitant. I'm skeptical of there being many Ascians in NA; what are they eating, cans of Dinty Moore left from the Age of Myth?

But, whether millions or billions, the question of "where to put them" is no greater here than it is in the Ice Future, where the HYs *do* evacuate Urth's population. If they can do it there, they can do it here. You played it for her, Sam, you can play it for me.

Some of the population, plus the ice future gives much more time to depopulate Urth in small, easy to settle bites.

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

Roy C. Lackey — 12 Jul 2008, 01:10 · follows Jeff Wilson

Paul Borochin quoted and wrote:

On Fri, Jul 11, 2008 at 4:13 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

The source of the White Fountain is Severian's mating with Apheta. The H/Ys knew that would happen, and brought Severian to Yesod specifically to do this. Due to their freedom of time, they knew the results of creating it. Ergo, they bear moral responsibility for its effects.

Really? I had always had a hard time picturing Severian literally giving birth to an astrophysical anomaly by having sex with an alien. I'd assumed it was something he was told or decided for himself since he spent his time in Yesod doing Apheta instead of asking some much-warranted questions.

Of course fathering a white hole on an insect is absurd. But so are Time Corridors, FTL ships, astral travel, aquastors, ghosts, blood-sucking shape-shifting reptiles that can fly high and fast enough to achieve escape velocity then travel through vacuum and land on another planet safely, werewolves, etc., etc., many of which have been used in the Sun Cycle by Wolfe. You just have to accept it, like vampires in a vampire story.

And you are right, Hieros and Hierogrammates can't be lumped together by one term; they are as profoundly different as cause and effect, and there ain't no damn Hieros who actually appear in the Urth Cycle--identified as such, anyway.

-Roy

b sharp — 12 Jul 2008, 04:30 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Paul B, I still think you are missing the crucial factor and thus missing some of the best of what science fiction and religious philosophy has to offer in regard to the superhuman (and sorry if my last post sounded testy, it wasn't meant to). Your example of a surgeon harvesting organs from a "worthless" bum to save "great" men demonstrates my position quite well, so I'll use it.

Despite your assertion that the surgeon has foresight in this situation you are wrong.

The surgeon is only guessing, making a judgement that the bum is worthless and that the men he saves are great and more worthy of life. The surgeon has no way to know with certainty whether the bum would become a world-saving saint if he had lived another year. Or if one of the great men he saves will become a genocidal monster within a year. He is gambling with people's lives and dealing out death based on his own limited value judgements. That is why utilitarianism is a bankrupt basis for morality; it involves gambling. Gambling with other people's lives but relying on less than perfect knowledge and judgement. Yep, the surgeon here is "playing God".

But God (or a god-like omniscient being) is not gambling or making individual value judgements in his/her/its actions. God knows exactly what the bum and the great men will become within a year and beyond. He not only knows that, he knows what the exact impact of a death or a life or even the flap of a butterfly's wing will have on every single other living creature on earth, yea the effect it will have on every quark and every galaxy in the universe through eternity. No gambling involved at all.

This sort of certainty of consequences places God in a moral position impossible to compare to your surgeon or Gandhi or any other human being. We cannot judge such a God or understand it because it is so far from human comprehension. But I will go out on a limb to suggest that God's omniscience in understanding of consequences is so complete as to offer no choices of action. All that is done must be done to provide the best possible outcome. In other words, God has no free will. And thus God has a moral position equal to a rock and the equivalence to a rock in being subject to moral judgement by humans.

-bsharp

Marc Aramini — 12 Jul 2008, 05:29 · in reply to Paul B

Society often works in just such a tiered moral fashion, with the good of the many (ie laws and government) justifying and assigning the taking of life, as any executioner would be able to argue.

Of course, I can stomach the idea without too many moral qualms.

--- On Fri, 7/11/08, Paul B <pb.stuff at gmail.com> wrote:

However, granting them exceptions simply because they know more, or are more powerful, is silly. There are more and less powerful and wise humans too, but suggesting that one can get away with murder (for a good cause, trust me!) isn't something most can stomach.

Jeff Wilson — 12 Jul 2008, 05:31 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

But, whether millions or billions, the question of "where to put them" is no greater here than it is in the Ice Future, where the HYs *do* evacuate Urth's population. If they can do it there, they can do it here. You played it for her, Sam, you can play it for me.

After further cogitation, it has occurred to me that the Botanical Gardens are the Yesodi evacuation plan for Urth. A fairly feeble one, but I realized they *are* resource limited, in fact VERY limited if you consider the machine planet, perhaps as big as a solar system, is split up into fairly small sections, each devoted to the salvation of an entire galaxy.

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

Roy C. Lackey — 12 Jul 2008, 09:13 · follows Jeff Wilson

b sharp wrote:

Your

example of a surgeon harvesting organs from a "worthless" bum to save
"great"

men demonstrates my position quite well, so I'll use it.

Despite your assertion that the surgeon has foresight in this situation you
are wrong.

No, he is not. It was a stipulated condition of his cited example: "Like a fancy Hierogrammate, you have foresight in this one case, and killing this hobo will in fact produce greater good." You may not like his example, but that's a different issue.

The surgeon is only guessing, making a judgement that the bum is worthless
and that
the men he saves are great and more worthy of life. The surgeon has no way
to know
with certainty whether the bum would become a world-saving saint if he had
lived
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it involves gambling. Gambling with other people's lives but relying on
less than perfect
knowledge and judgement. Yep, the surgeon here is "playing God".

But God (or a god-like omniscient being) is not gambling or making
individual value
judgements in his/her/its actions.

Wrong. That is exactly what god-like Tzadkiel did; gamble on probabilities:

"How is it that Tzadkiel could say my examination was
over, when the aquastors had to fight and die to save me?"
"The aquastors did not die," Apheta told me. "They live
in you. As for Tzadkiel, he spoke as he did because it was
the truth. He had examined the future and found the
chance high that you would bring a fresh sun to your Urth,
and thus save that strand of your race, so that it might
produce ours in your Briahmic universe. It was on that
examination that everything hinged; it was over, and the
result favorable to you." (URTH, XXII, 160)

God knows exactly what the bum and the great men
will become within a year and beyond. He not only knows that, he knows
what the exact
impact of a death or a life or even the flap of a butterfly's wing will
have on every single
other living creature on earth, yea the effect it will have on every quark
and every galaxy
in the universe through eternity. No gambling involved at all.

Maybe so, for the religious minded: It is also irrelevant. This is headed toward the freewill/predetermination issues I said just a month ago when this was last debated that I wanted to steer clear of because it leads nowhere, and ends all reasoned argument. God gets a blank pass on accountability in this discussion, but that's not what it's about. It is about whether or not the Hierogrammates get the same blank pass.

-Roy

b sharp — 12 Jul 2008, 20:34 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy thanks for your clarification. I misread or misunderstood Paul's qualification that the surgeon had foresight. I agree that the discussion should move on to its proper subject, the Hierogrammates, but I felt it was important to establish the ultimate moral superiority which comes with the God-like foresight that includes impact on every atom in the universe.

I get the impression Paul is sneering at the notion that some individuals have better moral judgement than others. Yet our entire way of life is based on the notion. We give no credence to the moral authority of invertebrate animals and very little to even the most intelligent animals. Children start with almost none and are gradually given more as they attain adulthood. Some adults are given more moral authority than others and some are even elected and paid to do nothing but make moral decisions that affect the lives of others.

As I see it, Wolfe, with this story, and religions which espouse angelic beings are proposing that there are individuals who have less moral authority than God but have more than any human. Thus if Paul B or Peter Wright feels justified in making moral judgement on Hierogrammates or angels, well, they are allowed to but (pretending Hieros and angels are real) they are not qualified. They are like the endangered mountain gorilla who judges the game warden who protects them and the poacher as equally "bad" because they both intrude on territory and drive noisy, scary metal boxes.

I don't know if angels really exist but I think Gene Wolfe thinks they do. And I think he intended Hierogrammates to represent them as beings much closer to God than humans and thus morally superior to us. They are not meant to be evil manipulative aliens though they might look like they are from a gorilla perspective ;-).

-bsharp

Lane Haygood — 12 Jul 2008, 22:38 · in reply to b sharp

It may not be that the Hierogrammates are "morally superior" to humans, in that we all have the same capacity for judging moral and immoral actions, but rather that their nature makes them able to perceive moral dimensions on acts that we cannot.

In Kantian philosophy, mankind's knowledge is necessarily limited by the structure of his experience. The linearity of time forces to understand the world in a causally-regular, temporally-ordered way. We arrange the manifold of experience according to definitive

A-then-B schema not because things really _are_ that way, per se, but rather because _we are that way_ and anything else would be unintelligible.

But consider the Hieros. They aren't so bound to live life in one direction, and indeed, may experience time and cause-effect in _reverse_. For humans, then, we judge death, even the deaths of millions, to be immoral or bad because we, bound up as we are in our linear thinking, cannot conceive that there might be something truly _after_ death. I think that most people hope for an afterlife, but none of us really knows, in the true sense of knowledge, that there is such a thing.

My problem, however, with viewing the flood as a "necessary evil" is that it attempts to define what is "good" or "bad" by its effects. It's consequentialist, and I object categorically to all forms of utilitarianism. Rather, if the flood has any moral dimension at all (which it might not) it must be good or bad in itself. The Kantian test for such a thing would be whether a rational being in Severian's stead, knowing all of the relevant details about his action, would have brought the white fountain and re-energized the sun. The effects of that, such as causing the deaths of all the Urthlings, are secondary to the question of whether the New Sun itself is moral. As to whether Ushas is preferable to Urth, I think that, at least in Wolfe's universe, that question isn't answerable by a human, because we would lack the sort of insight in to things that the Hierogrammates possess, being so unbound by time.

Lane

On Jul 12, 2008, at 3:34 PM, b sharp wrote:

Roy thanks for your clarification. I misread or misunderstood Paul's qualification that the surgeon had foresight. I agree that the discussion should move on to its proper subject, the Hierogrammates, but I felt it was important to establish the ultimate moral superiority which comes with the God-like foresight that includes impact on every atom in the universe.

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As I see it, Wolfe, with this story, and religions which espouse angelic beings are proposing that there are individuals who have less moral authority than God but have more than any human. Thus if Paul B or Peter Wright feels justified in making moral judgement on Hierogrammates or angels, well, they are allowed to but (pretending Hieros and angels are real) they are not qualified. They are like the endangered mountain gorilla who judges the game warden who protects them and the poacher as equally

"bad" because they both intrude on territory and drive noisy, scary metal boxes.

I don't know if angels really exist but I think Gene Wolfe thinks they do. And I think he intended Hierogrammates to represent them as beings much closer to God than humans and thus morally superior to us. They are not meant to be evil manipulative aliens though they might look like they are from a gorilla perspective ;-).

-bsharp

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Roy C. Lackey — 12 Jul 2008, 23:50 · follows Lane Haygood

b sharp wrote:

I agree that the discussion should move on to its proper subject, the Hierogrammates,

but I felt it was important to establish the ultimate moral superiority which comes with the God-like

foresight that includes impact on every atom in the universe.

The textual quote I made establishes conclusively that the Hierogrammates

do not have "God-like foresight that includes impact on every atom in the universe." Far from it. Tzadkiel was not only an admitted liar, he was a cheater as well. He peeked into the future to handicap his gamble that Severian would bring a fresh sun to bring about Ushas and the hoped-for goal of establishing the Hieros in Briah. He found the probability of success exceeded fifty-fifty odds, so he judged the destruction of Urth worth the gamble. Then, in a sop to freewill, Sev still had to win the fight with the sailors after the Trial--unless you are willing to concede that the outcome of the fight was rigged.

I get the impression Paul is sneering at the notion that some individuals have better moral

judgement than others. Yet our entire way of life is based on the notion.

We give no credence

to the moral authority of invertebrate animals and very little to even the most intelligent animals.

Children start with almost none and are gradually given more as they attain adulthood. Some

adults are given more moral authority than others and some are even elected and paid to do nothing

but make moral decisions that affect the lives of others.

Being elected to a given position is hardly a qualifier for the morality of the elected. History books and today's newspapers are replete with examples. The power of the state to impose its will on people does not confer right action. History books etc.

As I see it, Wolfe, with this story, and religions which espouse angelic beings are proposing that there

are individuals who have less moral authority than God but have more than any human. Thus if Paul B

or Peter Wright feels justified in making moral judgement on Hierogrammates or angels, well, they are allowed to but (pretending Hieros and angels are real) they are not qualified.

That is some very curious logic. You have presented a closed system that, by definition, not only excludes challenges from outside the system, it dismisses those challenges as down-right impertinent.

They are like the endangered mountain gorilla who judges the game warden who protects them and the poacher as equally "bad" because they both intrude on territory and drive noisy, scary metal boxes.

I don't know if angels really exist but I think Gene Wolfe thinks they do.

And I think he intended

Hierogrammates to represent them as beings much closer to God than humans and thus morally superior to us. They are not meant to be evil manipulative aliens though they might look like they are from a gorilla perspective ;-).

You must know by now that I happen to agree that the Hierogrammates worked directly for the Increate. But that opinion doesn't make me automatically right.

-Roy

b sharp — 13 Jul 2008, 18:11 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Lane, I think we do agree that capacity for moral judgement and capacity for moral behavior are different. But I think they are more related than you do. It seems to me that greater capacity for moral judgement confers greater moral responsibility. Thus animals are generally considered amoral (perhaps with the exception of rogue elephants or trained tigers who turn on their trainers, thus breaking an established moral code?). A small child who shoots and kills someone is not to blame, etc. A white collar embezzler who steals from millionaires is going to prison.

The more you know, the better you are expected to act and the worse you are when you transgress. Thus, Hierogrammates, or angels must be expected to be far more moral than humans. A human murderer is a bad guy but a fallen angel or demon (or megatherian?) is evil incarnate for ignoring God's commands, mating with humans, starting trouble on earth etc. They are supposed to know better.

Going back to my example from a previous post, we can't expect Hierogrammates to follow human morality any more than a human could be expected to follow gorilla society morality, whatever that might be. Hierogrammates seem comfortable with genocide, as long as there is consent from a representative who manages to pass some incomprehensible test. The Old Testament God didn't even bother with consent before the flood; just the ark was needed.

I get the impression there are those here who argue that genocide is always wrong, under all circumstances and it doesn't matter what degree of foresight the perpetrator has, genocide is always just plain EVIL. This is a very anthropocentric view but perhaps justified. Given that we don't seem to have any direct contact with superior beings at this time, perhaps a secular

humanist view is superior to the religious view which grants superior morality to God and His agents.

But, since we are dealing with a work of fiction I'll continue to play Angel's Advocate. I'll again state that we are unqualified to judge Hierogrammates and their actions because we don't have the depth and breadth of foresight to do so. Since Genesis is invoked I have to think that Wolfe has put fallen Hierogrammates in his story who have corrupted Urth and humanity and only drastic action by good, unfallen angels can provide salvation. Game wardens. Eliminating the diseased portion of a population so the healthy remainder has a chance to recover and re-populate.

So, as Angel's Advocate I am the gorilla trying to convince his fellows that the game warden is good because he is chasing away the poachers who kill us. And the anti-genocide secular humanists are the other gorillas who say, "it doesn't matter; not in the slightest. No matter how many of our lives are saved. Anyone who invades our territory with noisy metal boxes is EVIL"

I commend Lane who explained much better than I can why genocide might not be considered evil by superhuman beings:

But consider the Hieros. They aren't so bound to live life in one direction, and indeed, may experience time and cause-effect in _reverse_. For humans, then, we judge death, even the deaths of millions, to be immoral or bad because we, bound up as we are in our linear thinking, cannot conceive that there might be something truly _after_ death. I think that most people hope for an afterlife, but none of us really knows, in the true sense of knowledge, that there is such a thing.

-bsharp

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Paul B — 14 Jul 2008, 17:17 · in reply to b sharp

I see we haven't moved much farther.

Firstly, I would suggest that you stop calling the Hierogrammates "angels". They are created by humans (Hieros), and you have yet to provide convincing evidence of their ties to anything godly. Superior knowledge alone is certainly no such evidence (see Baldanders).

Secondly, denying their godliness doesn't make one a "secular humanist". It makes one a skeptical reader who doesn't add what he pleases to the text.

Finally, you seem to insist that knowledge and morality are proportional. God knows all, the Hierogrammates know less, the average Urthlings don't know very much, and an arctother knows even less than that. This you insist makes the Urthlings unable to morally judge the Hierogrammates, just as the arctother can't judge the Urthlings.

Even the Hierogrammates, however, are still making probabilistic guesses, as Roy's UotNS quote proves handily. Your system of "morality" thus suggests that whoever can make the most

informed guess in a closed system is the moral superior and not to be challenged.

Now again consider Baldanders, likely the most knowledgeable, and incidentally one of the more immoral, human characters on Urth. I presume you'll balk at the idea that he's the superior moral agent on all of Urth, but I'll look forward to your explanation why this isn't the case given the morality you advocate.

Paul

On Sun, Jul 13, 2008 at 2:11 PM, b sharp <bsharpoflat at hotmail.com> wrote:

Lane, I think we do agree that capacity for moral judgement and capacity for moral behavior are different. But I think they are more related than you do. It seems to me that greater capacity for moral judgement confers greater moral responsibility. Thus animals are generally considered amoral (perhaps with the exception of rogue elephants or trained tigers who turn on their trainers, thus breaking an established moral code?). A small child who shoots and kills someone is not to blame, etc. A white collar embezzler who steals from millionaires is going to prison.

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-bsharp

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Thomas Bitterman — 14 Jul 2008, 17:20 · in reply to b sharp

On Sun, Jul 13, 2008 at 2:11 PM, b sharp <bsharporflat at hotmail.com> wrote:
But, since we are dealing with a work of fiction I'll continue to play Angel's Advocate. I'll again state that we are unqualified to judge Hierogrammates and their actions because we don't have the depth and breadth of foresight to do so.

If we cannot judge somebody's actions, what basis do we have for saying the actions (or the person) are good?

Enamel

Paul B — 14 Jul 2008, 17:29 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

Good catch! Apparently this disturbing system of "morality" also defaults to a judgement of "good" in cases where a judgement can't be made.

Paul

On Mon, Jul 14, 2008 at 1:20 PM, Thomas Bitterman <tom at bitterman.net> wrote:

On Sun, Jul 13, 2008 at 2:11 PM, b sharp <bsharpoflat at hotmail.com> wrote:

But, since we are dealing with a work of fiction I'll continue to play Angel's Advocate. I'll again state that we are unqualified to judge Hierogrammates and their actions because we don't have the depth and breadth of foresight to do so.

If we cannot judge somebody's actions, what basis do we have for saying the actions (or the person) are good?

Enamel

O'Donnell, Tim BOSI — 15 Jul 2008, 08:37 · follows Paul B

Hi Paul,

The point that I took from this discussion, and I think it is valid, is that the Hieros have the ability to perceive more of the universe than humans; they experience time differently. So when someone talks about knowledge, I take it to refer to this aspect of their knowing and not their ability to produce technology, etc. (which is where the similarity with Baldanders comes in).

So, while the Hieros are still making guesses on the outcome of their actions (who isn't [apart from God] in a quantum universe?) they do have the advantage of having more knowledge of the outcome of events. And so, their moral code differs from the humans who are bound to A->B linear time. This seems a reasonable argument to me.

Tim

Message: 7

Date: Mon, 14 Jul 2008 13:17:23 -0400

From: "Paul B" <pb.stuff at gmail.com>

Subject: Re: (urth) What's So Great About Ushas

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

Message-ID:

<3e1fa2e9080714101703d51d1f205822ad1ba5d40de2 at mail.gmail.com>

Content-Type: text/plain; charset="iso-8859-1"

I see we haven't moved much farther.

Firstly, I would suggest that you stop calling the Hierogrammates "angels". They are created by humans (Hieros), and you have yet to provide convincing evidence of their ties to anything godly. Superior knowledge alone is certainly no such evidence (see Baldanders).

Secondly, denying their godliness doesn't make one a "secular humanist". It makes one a skeptical reader who doesn't add what he pleases to the text.

Finally, you seem to insist that knowledge and morality are proportional. God knows all, the Hierogrammates know less, the average Urthlings don't know very much, and an arctother knows even less than that. This you insist makes the Urthlings unable to morally judge the Hierogrammates, just as the arctother can't judge the Urthlings.

Even the Hierogrammates, however, are still making probabilistic guesses, as Roy's UotNS quote proves handily. Your system of "morality" thus suggests that whoever can make the most informed guess in a closed system is the moral superior and not to be challenged.

Now again consider Baldanders, likely the most knowledgeable, and incidentally one of the more immoral, human characters on Urth. I presume you'll balk at the idea that he's the superior moral agent on all of Urth, but I'll look forward to your explanation why this isn't the case given the morality you advocate.

Paul

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Paul B — 15 Jul 2008, 14:42 · in reply to O'Donnell, Tim BOSI

No, you misunderstand what I meant by invoking Baldanders, a scientist on a planet without scientists. He knows more than other Urthlings, and can make better guesses than them on a variety of subjects. He "perceives more of the universe".

Any society is comprised of individuals on a continuum of cognitive ability. To let this govern morality is unfair at best, and horrifying at worst. This is why letting the Hierogrammates off simply on the basis of their superior understanding is an abhorrent idea.

Paul

On Tue, Jul 15, 2008 at 4:37 AM, O'Donnell, Tim (BOSI) <Tim.O'Donnell@bankofscotland.ie> wrote:
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b sharp — 17 Jul 2008, 12:06 · follows Paul B

Roy says in regard to F, B and O:

Yet they knelt to Severian. I'm sure this must say something about the moral pecking order. One doesn't usually make obeisance to one's moral inferior.

Adam replies:

At the risk of being really snarky, have you ever held a real job?

Nah, that's a pretty funny commentary on bosses!

Brunians notes:

It's also reminiscent of the bit in the Quran where God creates Adam and orders the angels to bow to him (all do except Satan and his people).

Interesting, I didn't know that. Suggests the roots of Islam are more humanist than its Judeo-Christian cousins.

Anyway, I don't think these scenes reflect a moral hierarchy. In fact most of the time F, B and O tend to talk down to Severian. They only make obeisance when reminded he is the "head of his race, and saviour" (I think that was the title). And that race, while inferior, is the ancestor in some sense, of the Hierogrammates or at least responsible and necessary for their creation.

Even Tzadkiel is not the head of his race (and savior?). I guess it is implied that office is held by (archangel) Michael, and Lucifer previous to him.

b sharp — 19 Jul 2008, 02:53 · follows b sharp

Paul B, I'm not sure if your last post clarified things for me. I don't begrudge you dodging my nosy question about your faith but I am still not sure if you are saying you don't think Gene Wolfe intended Hierogrammates to be angels or if it is your opinion they are not a good representation of what angels should be like.

John Watkins explicitly states he intends to present arguments for Gene Wolfe's intentions and gives a list of pros and cons. I think there is a glaring omission in the list of pros and a mistake in the list of cons which is continually repeated in this discussion.

Missing in the list of pros is that the only Hierogrammate we see (Apheta and Venant and the other larvae are named Hierarchs) is named "Tzadkiel". This name, like Michael or Gabriel IS the name of a judeo-christian arch-angel. I don't see how much less circumstantial the evidence could be. I suppose Wolfe could have called them "Angels" all through the text instead of Hierogrammates but I can't think he'd ever stoop to hitting his readers over the head with such a blunt instrument as that. The name Tzadkiel seems already more obvious than his usual.

The mistake in the list of cons is to say that the Hierogrammates cannot be angels or connected to God because they engage in the "morally dubious, if not outright evil" behavior such as genocide (I presume). How can it be ignored that God and angels commit genocide left and right in the

Bible? The Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the 10th Plague, the Red Sea on the Egyptian army, Jericho, the Midianites, the Amorites, the Phillistines, the list goes on and on. How can God and angels be re-defined as being incapable of genocide when that's one of the main things they do?

I think only a secular humanist could redefine them as gentle caretakers of precious human life (which is why it would be more interesting if Paul B was Christian or Jewish). I see no evidence that Gene Wolfe is a secular humanist and I find it really hard to conceive that he meant Hierogrammates to represent anything but angels. They look like angels, they act like angels they are named like angels, they live in a higher, heavenly plane like angels..... ah well. Perhaps it's just me that sees it.

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I don't know about Paul, but I'd be more interested if we focus on the question of whether the Hierogrammates are intended to be (unfallen) angels by Gene Wolfe. Without my books at hand, the argument for this appears to be:

- 1) "Holy" is part of their name.
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- 3) Severian thinks Hierogrammates serve the Increate.
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The argument against the Hierogrammates being angels, as I understand it, is

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I think these are both colorable arguments, but I come down on the "not" side. The Hierogrammates are obviously *spoken of *as angels, but they are just as obviously not two things that are *essential *to the meaning of the word "angel.">

brunians at brunians.org — 19 Jul 2008, 03:28 · in reply to b sharp

Also, Hierogrammate means something like 'Holy Word-carrier' which is pretty close to the meaning of angel, which is (i believe) messenger....

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Jeff Wilson — 19 Jul 2008, 10:58 · in reply to brunians at brunians.org

brunians at brunians.org wrote:

Also, Hierogrammate means something like 'Holy Word-carrier' which is pretty close to the meaning of angel, which is (i believe) messenger....

angelos is Greek for messenger, but Hierogrammate was used in the 1600s to mean holy scribe - related, but not the same. It does however match someone who records the Increate's rescripts. If Omar Khayyam's most famous metaphor is in play then the holy scribes are also the controllers of destiny, or and those who record rescripts are the ones who *change* destinies - all very much the sort of things going on in the Book + Urth.

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

John Watkins — 19 Jul 2008, 14:28 · in reply to b sharp

At least one quibble--"Tzadkiel" is the name of an angel in the Jewish mystical tradition. That tradition, like the Kabbalah, is outside the Christian tradition. Catholics normally confine the list of archangels to the three named in Scriptural sources: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael. I feel this is significant because Wolfe, in his interview with James B. Jordan says in reference to the cabalistic material he used "I have the great disadvantage of not believing in it and so I can't get so caught up in it as cabalist really do. To me it was someplace that I could steal ideas and names from."

Interestingly, in that same interview, Wolfe calls Tzadkiel "an angel of justice," whereas according to Jewish tradition, Tzadkiel is an angel of mercy, identified with the "angel of the Lord" who stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. So that's part of my response to your point about what "angels" do in the Old Testament--to point out that according to tradition Tzadkiel, at least, rejects human sacrifice, the very thing Wolfe's Tzadkiel seems to delight in--"The death-agonies of the world you know will be offered to the Increate. And they will be indescribable."

The other part of my response is more complicated, so I'll just give it in brief--I would be very surprised if Wolfe turned out to be a literal believer in the Flood, but the Flood, at any rate, is God's work, not the work of angels. So to were the fall of the walls at Jericho and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Your other examples are not examples of genocide or of divine or angelic action--the Midianites lost a decisive military encounter after God gave Gideon some tactical tips, the Amorites were defeated by Joshua and show up later as a peaceful neighbor of Israel, the Philistines were eventually wiped out by the Babylonian Empire after several wars with the Hebrews, etc. You missed the Assyrian army wiped out by an angel, but it'd be a waste of time to explain how an angel destroy an invading army is a poor analogy to artificial lifeforms created by futuristic humans can drown an entire planet's population.

A further question. If Wolfe is so gung-ho about an allegedly bloodthirsty God with equally bloodthirsty angels, where are they outside the New Sun books? Is Michael in the Wizard Knight so bloodthirsty? Are the gods promoting war and human sacrifice in the Long Sun the Increate, or the false gods? Does SilkHorn's (who's fairly dialed-in the the Increate, what with the theophanies) approach to the inhum in Short Sun reflect the ethics of Jesus Christ, or the ethics of Tzadkiel of the Urth of the New Sun?

I do agree whole-heartedly with one of your sentences, however. "The name Tzadkiel seems

already more obvious than usual." Quite so--suspiciously so.

On Fri, Jul 18, 2008 at 10:53 PM, b sharp <bsharporflat at hotmail.com> wrote:

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