

**Speaking of Mysteries:
Atonement in Teenage Fantasy Books.**

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Abstract

The question of how we can speak of a transcendent God and God's relationship with creation has been pondered for millennia. Today particular difficulties arise when communicating Christian atonement theories to a generation for whom the world of the Bible is increasingly foreign, and in a time when theologians and philosophers are questioning both the violence of some atonement theories and the existence of "superior transcendence." This study explores the presence of biblical motifs in the stories of atonement in young adult fantasy works. It suggests that the use of these motifs to make sense of atonement within fantasy worlds may assist readers to make sense of the same motifs when they are used to portray the Christian story of atonement.

The investigation begins by discussing the place of imagination, reason and transcendence in religious language and argues for the centrality of metaphor and myth in religious expression. It suggests that young people today still seek intermediaries—"priests and prophets"—between themselves and the unknown, but they now find them in the fantasy authors who continue to use imaginative language to communicate transcendence.

A central trope in contemporary fantasy fiction is that of a death that saves the world. Contrary to the expectations raised by René Girard's work, these are not the violent deaths of a helpless scapegoat. The biblical mythologems incorporated in these works allow the authors to explore instead ideas of divine and human self-giving. This is demonstrated by tracing how mythological understandings of blood, victory and covenant in the Bible are incorporated into the atonement process of three fantasy series: the *Old Kingdom Chronicles* by Garth Nix (1995-2003), the *Mortal Instruments* trilogy by Cassandra Clare (2007-2009), and the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling (1997-2007).

The thesis proposes that the presence of biblical mythologems in contemporary fantasy stories of atonement means that a better understanding of their use in each domain can both enrich our appreciation of this kind of literature and provide teenagers with an imaginative language with which to consider aspects of Christian atonement. The prevalence of atonement ideas within recent fantasy books suggests that, by attending to the mythologems of atonement drawn from

the Bible, the church might both rediscover the imaginative power of her own story and convey it meaningfully to young readers of fantasy literature today.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

If you take a lift in the Ministry of Magic to the lowest possible level, which very few people do, you will come out at the Department of Mysteries.¹ It is a place of silence, of dark, featureless doors which swirl and change positions at unexpected times. We know that behind one door is a room containing minds: brains carefully preserved in a tank of green liquid, able to inflict lasting wounds if touched.² Another room has shelves of misty prophecies: evidence of the rare times when true insights into present actions and future possibilities have been discerned and captured. Another is filled with clocks and a tiny bird that repeatedly hatches and is re-enclosed in its egg.

The only room to be kept locked at all times, we are told, “contains a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than the forces of nature,” a force constantly underestimated and dismissed by Voldemort who can neither understand nor accept it.³ Dumbledore calls it, simply, “Love.” And in yet another room, on a stone dais at the base of something like a stone amphitheatre, there is an ancient archway with a veil hung across it. Some can hear faint voices beyond it; some are strangely attracted to it as the veil moves gently. We are never told directly what it is, but when Sirius passes through it, there is no coming back. Those who work in the Department of Mysteries are called *Unspeakables*.

“For of that work that falleth only to God, dare I not take upon me to speak with my blabbering human tongue,” said the mystic who wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing*.⁴ It is an ancient problem. How are we to speak of “mysteries,” of things that are, by definition, difficult or impossible to explain? How are we to speak of religious mysteries which are not only beyond rational explication but include belief in transcendent realities? The mystics of many traditions urge silence in the face of religious mystery, but however well that advice may convey the depth and

¹ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 681-88.

² *Ibid.*, 746.

³ *Ibid.*, 743.

⁴ Anonymous, *Cloud of Unknowing*, 61.

limitlessness of a mystical experience, it is not helpful in communicating with others. Nor does it account for the existence of written scriptures in many faith traditions which claim to mediate insight into mystery. In the Christian tradition, Jesus, the Word-made-flesh, did not live in a constant mystical silence but evidently believed it was possible to use the “blabbering human tongue” to speak of God. His followers, tasked with communicating the mysterious meaning of his death and resurrection—the atonement—had no choice but to use words: words that have been the subject of exhaustive scrutiny for two thousand years.

Consider, too, the scene just described, set in the Department of Mysteries in the Ministry of Magic. Few recent fantasy books claim a religious focus, yet scenes such as this illustrate how mysteries that have long been the province of religion are being explored within these stories. Fantasy works question the meaning of death, time and being; they search for purpose and may draw on some “Other World” in order to find it. They also frequently wonder how a world gone wrong can be saved or atoned for—so frequently that Joseph Campbell described the story of a hero going on a journey to bring about atonement as a “monomyth.”⁵ The connections between the Christian understanding of atonement and the atonement portrayed in a number of recent young adult fantasy works go further than the monomyth’s basic structure, however. Many writers who appear to have little or no interest in Christianity still create stories that have, at their core, powerful retellings of particular atonement stories which the contemporary, Western Christian church often battles to communicate.

In particular, death plays not only a large role but an efficacious role in these stories. When one of the main characters dies (or appears to die), he or she frequently saves the world in the process. This is not straightforward heroism, such as leaping in front of a bullet to save a friend. When an important character accepts death, it achieves something on a large scale: evil is defeated, a kingdom is saved, peoples are reconciled. Jonathan Stroud's *Bartimaeus* trilogy, for example, culminates in the self-sacrificial death of the protagonist, who thereby saves the world

⁵ Joseph Campbell coined the term “monomyth” in 1949. Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. “Monomyth” is the title of the prologue, and is referred to throughout.

from being taken over by evil Djinn.⁶ Garth Nix, in *The Old Kingdom Chronicles*, has one key character set out to bind the universal Destroyer, knowing that in doing so she will die, and then has another key character die in her place.⁷ In Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series, Percy, the narrator, believes he will have to die to save the world, but discovers that he "is not the hero."⁸ There is another hero, and that hero does die, thus destroying the evil Titan who has possessed him and is about to take over the world.⁹ Time and again, heroes and heroines of fantasy face the possibility (and, sometimes, the actuality) of their own death in the belief that to do so is to save or redeem their world.

In this thesis, I wish to probe the connections that exist between a selection of New Testament expressions of Christ's atoning act, and the portrayal of atonement in the works of three recent fantasy writers. In order to understand the contemporary background against which both fantasy novelists and theologians are writing, I start by highlighting recent philosophical directions inasmuch as they impact on the expression of "mysteries". I then turn to the sacred writings from which the New Testament writers drew much of their imagery and myth: the Hebrew Scriptures and, to a lesser extent, other writings known now as the Pseudepigrapha. After exploring how certain ancient mythologems are used and adapted in the New Testament, I shall trace how contemporary authors have woven them into the fabric of their fantasy worlds, whether knowingly or not.¹⁰ My central claim is that there is a profound and important kinship between the intent and character of the religious or mythical language and imagery employed by the New Testament authors to communicate the atoning impact of the Christ-event, and the language engaged by some recent fantasy writers to tell their stories of conflict, death and deliverance. This kinship means that a better understanding of the mythologems at work in each domain can both enrich our appreciation of this recent fantasy literature and, potentially, enable teenagers,

⁶ Stroud, *Ptolemy's Gate*.

⁷ Nix, *Abhorsen*.

⁸ Riordan, *Last Olympian*, 261.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 315-17.

¹⁰ Mythologems are the fundamental, core elements of a myth. This term will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

whether they are Christian believers or not, to better grasp the meaning of Christian atonement theology, something often assumed to be increasingly foreign to our so-called Secular Age.¹¹

1. Christian atonement: an overview

In Christian terms, the salvation or redemption of the world involves a process or act of atonement. Atonement is that which brings the world back into its proper state of “at-one-ment.” In Christianity this refers primarily to at-one-ment with God, and consequently at-one-ment with creation. The English word “atonement” was first used in application to the relationship between humanity and God by Tyndale, who used it to translate the Greek word *katallage* (also translated as “reconciliation”), and later for the Hebrew word *kipper*, with its overtones of cleansing, purification, healing and ransom.¹² It is therefore a broad term. The plot of a world saved by a self-sacrificial death, which the New Testament shares with numerous fantasy books, is, in the Bible, multi-layered. It draws on numerous images, stories and analogies to give the Christian believer a variety of ways to understand the mysterious efficacy of Christ’s death and resurrection.

These ways of understanding atonement have, over the centuries, been formulated into theories. Although never completely distinct from each other, these theories have nevertheless acquired labels which imply they can be treated individually. They can also, thus, be debated, and the history of Christian thought reflects the intense and complex theological discussions to which they have given rise. Recently, such writers as Paul Fiddes, Stephen Finlan, Colin Gunton, and Peter Schmiechen have offered overviews of what they understand to be the key atonement theories.¹³ The fact that each covers different theories and theologians and draws different conclusions, however, indicates just how wide this field is and how selective any such historical survey must be.

¹¹ For a definitive study of this concept, see Taylor, *Secular Age*.

¹² Fiddes, *Past Event*, 4.

¹³ Fiddes, *Past Event*, Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, Schmiechen, *Saving Power*.

In shaping an overview here, I will follow the general outline taken by Fiddes, who traces the way various theories of atonement have been favoured over the centuries.¹⁴ He starts with “sacrificial atonement.” Fiddes suggests that during the time of the New Testament church, sin was predominantly associated with ritual uncleanness, and therefore Christ’s atonement was understood in terms of the cleansing power of sacrifice. “Images of washing, sprinkling, bathing and fresh clothing cluster around this idea of salvation.”¹⁵ One image central to this theory will be examined at length in Chapter 6 where I trace the significance and power of blood in the Scriptures. As theological thought moved into the realm of the Latin Church Fathers such as Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine, sacrificial atonement moved from being primarily an issue of purification to one of satisfying God’s law. I will return to this in my discussion of “satisfaction,” below.

In the three centuries following the time of the New Testament, a second, complex atonement theory gained preeminence over sacrifice. The human predicament was seen in terms of a battle between supernatural powers, with atonement meaning victory over sin, death and the devil.¹⁶ This will be examined in Chapter 8, but for now it is important to understand that the means of this victory were debated for centuries. Two of the most important theories were those of “ransom” and “recapitulation.” Ransom theories, in turn, developed in three different directions: that God paid a just ransom to Satan; that God tricked Satan into accepting a ransom; that the ransom was paid to God.

The theory of a just ransom was based on the belief that the devil has an objective existence, and that he becomes Lord over and thus enslaves people who follow him.¹⁷ Irenaeus (died 202 CE) argued that humans were “by nature” God’s possession, and that Satan therefore “unjustly held sway over us.”¹⁸ Yet God had to act justly even with respect to Satan, and thus paid a ransom to free us.

¹⁴ Fiddes, 7-11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 26.

¹⁸ Irenaeus, *Ad. Haer. Vi.I*, in Bettenson, ed., *Documents*, 30.

Therefore the Word of God, mighty in all things and not lacking his own justice, acted justly even in the encounter with the Apostasy itself, ransoming from it that which was his own, not by force, in the way in which it secured the sway over us at the beginning, snatching insatiably what was not its own; but by persuasion.¹⁹

It was Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35 – 90 CE or 50 – 117 CE) who first hinted that Satan was somehow deceived into accepting Christ as a ransom. He wrote, “Mary’s virginity was hidden from the prince of this world; so was her child-bearing, and so was the death of the Lord. All these three trumpet-tongued secrets were brought to pass in the deep silence of God.”²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa famously developed this idea of God working secretly against Satan with the image of Christ as a fish-hook: an image which was taken up again by Rufinus of Aquileia (ca. 340 – 410 CE).

The purpose of the Incarnation ... was that the divine virtue of the Son of God might be as it were a hook hidden beneath the form of human flesh ... to lure on the prince of this age to a contest; that the Son might offer him his flesh as a bait and that then the divinity which lay beneath might catch him and hold him fast with its hook.²¹

Gregory of Nyssa’s friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, disagreed with both these approaches, as well as the third suggestion that the ransom was paid to God, not to Satan. The deeper complexity that this debate gave rise to will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Irenaeus coined the term “recapitulation” to refer to the idea that Christ’s victory came about through his progressively reliving, correctly—or “recapitulating”—every stage of human life and death. At each point he conquered sin, death and the devil through the perfection of his life and resurrection.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, in Radice, ed., *Early Christian Writings*, 81.

²¹ Rufinus, *Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed* in Bettensen, ed., *Documents*, 34-35.

[The Word] has been united to his own workmanship and has been made passible man. ... When he was incarnate and made man, he recapitulated in himself the long line of the human race, procuring for us salvation thus summarily, so that what we had lost in Adam, that is, the being in the image and likeness of God, that we should regain in Christ Jesus.²²

As Finlan puts it, “Irenaeus sees Christ rescuing humanity by rescuing human nature itself.”²³ Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) clarified how Christ’s actions could be imputed to humanity, thus “undoing” humanity’s sinful nature. He used the image of the church as Christ’s body.

Therefore the works of Christ have the same effect, with respect both to himself and to his members, as have the works of another man, established in grace, with respect to that man. Now it is clear that any man, established in grace, who suffers for righteousness’ sake, merits salvation for himself by that very suffering. ... Hence Christ through his passion merited salvation not only for himself but for all his members.²⁴

The theory of recapitulation is strongly linked with what became known as *theosis*, or “divinisation”: the transformation of humanity into the image of God. While Fiddes attributes the development of *theosis* to the influence of Greek philosophy, which undoubtedly did play a part, the emphasis of writers such as Athanasius (ca.29 – 373 CE) is not so much on the philosophical dualism of flesh and spirit, as on the transformation of the believer.²⁵ Athanasius argues that, as the initial creator, Christ is also able to recreate, “restor[ing] the corruptible to uncorruption” by “surrender[ing] his body to death instead of all ... that by dying in him the law touching the corruption of mankind might be abolished.”²⁶

²² Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III.xviii, in Bettensen, ed., *Documents*, 29-30.

²³ Finlan, *Problems*, 67.

²⁴ Aquinas, *S.T.* iii. *Q. xlvi. Art.i.* in Bettensen, ed., *Documents*, 145.

²⁵ Fiddes, *Past Event*, 8.

²⁶ Athanasius, *De incarnatione VII-VIII*, in Bettensen, ed., *Documents*, 33.

By the time of the Latin Fathers, the idea of *theosis* was still current but had become steadily less important. It did not die out completely, however. Even in Luther (1483 – 1546), who wrote mainly of penal substitution, one can hear overtones of *theosis* when he likens the work of the Word on the human soul to fire causing iron to glow like itself.²⁷

There were three major factors in the development of what is known as the “satisfaction” theory of atonement. The first was the growing use of Roman legal terminology in Christian theology. The term “satisfaction” was used in relation to atonement by two legally-minded church fathers, Tertullian (ca. 160 – 225) and Cyprian (ca. 200 – 258). Tertullian used it in terms of our obligation to satisfy God’s requirements, and Cyprian in terms of an angry God needing to be propitiated.²⁸ As Gunton points out, this marks one of the major differences between the Western and Eastern churches. The West’s emphasis on legal obligations to God “mystifies” the East.²⁹

The second factor was one of the most heated theological debates of the fourth century, led by Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430) and Pelagius (ca. 390 – 418) over whether or not humanity was capable of fulfilling God’s commands. Augustine declared that all people were sinful from conception and could never hope to live lives worthy of God alone. Pelagius argued that humans must be capable of fulfilling God’s commands, or else

he hath laid upon men commands which they were unable to bear. And at the same time (God forgive us!) we ascribe to the Just One unrighteousness and cruelty to the Holy One; the first, by complaining that he has commanded the impossible, the second, by imagining that a man will be condemned by him for what he could not help; so that (the blasphemy of it!) God is thought of as seeking our punishment rather than our salvation.³⁰

²⁷ Finlan, *Problems*, 77.

²⁸ Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Pelagius, *Ep. Ad Demetriadem*, 16, *ad fin.*, P.L. xxxiii. 1110, in Bettensen, ed., *Documents*, 52.

For Augustine, unless we were utterly incapable of escaping evil ourselves, Christ need not have died for us. He insisted, therefore, that all people were “hopelessly sinful,” deserving of God’s wrath, and could only be saved through Christ’s intervention.³¹

Augustine does not tie this belief to a particular understanding of how God intervenes in atonement, choosing rather to draw on a range of images and metaphors.³² Pope Gregory the Great (ca. 540 – 604), however, takes Augustine’s teachings and uses them to argue that since, according to Roman justice, there had to be a penalty for every sin that matched the severity of the sin, and humanity was incapable of offering a payment great enough to balance humanity’s sin, Christ had to pay the penalty himself.³³ This is closer to what we now call the theory of penal substitution than “satisfaction,” and is also the point where the third factor in the development of these theories enters. Sacrificial atonement is reinterpreted here to refer not to vicarious cleansing, but vicarious punishment. Sacrifices are now understood to be payments made to appease God, with Christ’s sacrifice the only one great enough to fully propitiate his wrath.³⁴ The enduring nature of this understanding of sacrifice can be seen in the Roman Catholic Eucharistic liturgy, which at the Council of Trent (1562) was described in this way:

Christ is contained in a bloodless sacrifice who on the altar of the cross once offered himself with the shedding of his blood. ... This sacrifice is truly propitiatory, and through it it comes about that if with true hearts and right faith, with fear and reverence, with contrition and penitence, we approach God we ‘attain mercy and find grace and help in time of need.’ ... For God, propitiated by the oblation of this sacrifice, granting us grace and the gift of penitence, remits our faults and even our enormous sins.³⁵

³¹ Finlan, *Problems*, 70.

³² McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 29.

³³ Finlan, *Problems*, 70-71.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ The Council of Trent, Session XXII, *C.Tr.* viii, 699, in Bettensen, ed., *Documents*, 265.

It is Anselm of Canterbury (1033 – 1109) who is most closely associated with the satisfaction theory of atonement, and it is possible in his writings to differentiate between satisfaction and penal substitution. Gunton presents a sympathetic portrayal of Anselm, arguing that Anselm’s theory of satisfaction “has to do with the divine action in setting right that which has been thrown out of kilter by human sin. Anselm’s belief is that unless there is some objective righting of the balance, there can be no restoration of human life.”³⁶ It is not that God is an oppressive, angry ruler; rather it is God’s responsibility, as it is that of the feudal lords, to keep order and uphold justice or else the beauty of the universe itself will be destroyed.³⁷ Such order and justice requires that restitution be made for anything that dishonours the “lord.” By satisfying God’s honour, Christ removes the need for punitive action.³⁸ Finlan, however, rightly points out that the order for which Christ pays is “feudal” order, and that it is a “retaliatory medieval justice” that is being maintained. He argues that the theory of “satisfaction” still attributes violence to God; it is “a structured form of vengeance.”³⁹

While Anselm was teaching that Christ suffered for us to satisfy God’s honour, Peter Abelard (1079 – 1142) was developing an atonement theory that had been present throughout the centuries as a component of other atonement theories. It emphasised the example of Christ’s life for the believer and is now known as the “moral influence” theory. As Cartwright notes in his introduction to Abelard’s *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, “Abelard rejects two well-known theories of redemption in favour of his view that not only Christ’s death, but his entire life as well, was a demonstration of divine love that provokes the response of human love.”⁴⁰ Over the preceding centuries, Pelagius’ arguments that humanity must be capable of both choosing and achieving God’s will had continued to rise, be debated, and fall again. Here they provided an opening for the idea that humanity could, through meditation on Christ’s life and death, be inspired to repent and act justly. Abelard was himself accused of Pelagianism later in life, although, like Pelagius, his understanding of atonement was never completely subjective. He

³⁶ Gunton, *Actuality*, 91.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Finlan, *Problems*, 70, 72.

⁴⁰ Cartwright in Abelard, *Commentary*, 30

simply believed that the demonstration of God's love through Christ's life was part of the redemptive process.⁴¹

Abelard's teaching became anathema for the Reformers, however, who desired a more robustly objective theology. As Fiddes points out, "In an age of political turmoil and social upheaval it seemed that the only security lay in the absolute claims of law to guard rights and punish offenders."⁴² In the hands of Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) and John Calvin (1509 – 1564), the satisfaction theory of Anselm became the theory of "penal substitution", as it has since been understood. Luther himself began with an understanding of justification that involved humans recognising their weakness and turning to God for grace, but later came to insist, in a more Augustinian fashion, that a human cannot even will to turn to God without God's intervention, and is "incapable of attaining righteousness unaided by divine grace."⁴³ The righteousness of God, however, demanded righteousness from the very humans who were incapable of producing it, and the justice of God demanded that injustice be punished. Yet the mercy of God demanded that his chosen people (another contested concept during the Reformation) be saved. Luther's conclusion was that the destitution of humankind had to be met by the fullness of Christ, and the full punishment for humanity's sin had to fall on Christ. Luther understood this in terms of grace and mercy, though critics today often construe it as "divine violence restrained by a divine mercy, but a mercy that had to be mediated through violence."⁴⁴

By the time of the Enlightenment, philosophers and certain theologians had begun to reject the ideas of the complete helplessness of humanity and its reliance on an act of God for salvation. Instead, "The human problem ... was seen as a falling short of those ethical standards to which the mind bore witness, and salvation lay simply in repentance; the real need was a change in human beings, not the placating of any supernatural authorities."⁴⁵ The roots of this can be found both in Pelagianism and in the medieval idea of natural law: "that unaided reason was able to

⁴¹ Ibid., 38.

⁴² Fiddes, *Past Event*, 9.

⁴³ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 192-3.

⁴⁴ Finlan, *Problems*, 75.

⁴⁵ Fiddes, *Past Event*, 10.

discover universal moral truths.”⁴⁶ It was an insult to the Enlightenment mind to suggest that humans needed divine intervention in order to realise their own redemption. Reason could encompass all things. Atonement, therefore, veered back to being something that was within the reach of humanity with (at least in Kant’s writings) God operating within us.⁴⁷ Gunton writes, “Traditional terms like satisfaction and justification are also used, but to describe not the act of God in the cross of Jesus, but the human moral struggle and rebirth symbolised by the cross.”⁴⁸

The influence of Enlightenment thought can be perceived through to the present day, where there has been renewed interest in, and criticism of, classical atonement theories. It is impossible to know at this point which of the contemporary directions will have a lasting impact. That is why in Chapter 2 I delve into movements in contemporary philosophy in order to discern a general trend of thought rather than review the arguments of specific theologians. I discuss the rise of a new “absolute” against which all atonement theories, and even God, are increasingly judged: that of non-violence. I also explore the postmodern willingness to look beyond reason and embrace symbol, metaphor and myth. As Kevin Vanhoozer puts it, “Postmoderns might say that we need to recover the scandal—the paradox, the “aporia—of the cross through a “sacrifice” of the intellect, acknowledging that conceptual thinking has here reached its limit, its death.”⁴⁹ While my analysis certainly does not abandon conceptual thinking, it is in keeping with the intellectual mood of our day that I should explore the complex issue of atonement through the lens of fantasy.

2. Myth, metaphor and religious language

The connection I intend to highlight between Christian atonement theology and contemporary fantasy works may not be warmly welcomed by some Christians. After all, no-one is expected to believe fantasy books, whereas confident belief is considered essential to religious adherents. Why then would religious believers want to accept the possibility that religious truths may be

⁴⁶ Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁹ Vanhoozer, *Atonement in Postmodernity*, 369.

expressed in a fantastic guise? Are not truth and fantasy mutually exclusive? I will argue it is simplistic to set up a dichotomy between fantasy and religious language. Religious believers may want their religion to be understood as “true,” but, as I have intimated, there are inherent difficulties in communicating *any* mysteries that are, by definition, beyond reason, ineffable. The way in which stories of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures have often been carefully distinguished from the “mythologies” of the Ancient Near Eastern and Classical worlds indicates that for some, religion must shed all mythological trappings and speak in terms of “history” if it is to be considered “true.” Yet whether the mysteries to be communicated are believed by the writer to be truth or fantasy, the language used will, of necessity, stretch the bounds of reason, and it is likely that there will be at least some similarities in the way it does so in both cases. This does not necessarily cast doubt on the truth of one or the fantastic nature of the other.

The difficult question of how we can talk of religious mysteries, therefore, lies behind this investigation of the images and stories that are used by biblical and fantasy authors to portray atonement. It is important, then, to place this question in the context of recent philosophical and theological debate. In chapter 2 I will look at some contemporary understandings of “religious language.” Those who study religious language ask how it is possible to talk of mystery, of the transcendent, of God, and whether the difficulties in doing so are such as to suggest there is nothing “other” there to talk of. As we will see, Gianni Vattimo and Slavoj Žižek are recent champions of the death of transcendence. Their distinct philosophies agree at one point: the virtue of Christianity, they say, is that it tells us God has died. The transcendent has become human and died in that human state, leaving nothing behind.⁵⁰ “Mystery” no longer signifies a reality beyond purely rational apprehension, but is rather what is yet to be known—but soon *will* be known—about material or psychological realities.

Paul Ricoeur, writing in the build-up of this period of scepticism, recognises this erosion of a sense of mystery in Western thought. He believes that we have objectified existence: instead of

⁵⁰ Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 11; Depoortere, “End of God’s Transcendence,” 497-523.

mysteries to be pondered, we have problems to be solved.⁵¹ He argues that such objectification creates a sense of meaninglessness, since with the loss of mystery comes an inability to live deeply. As a counter to this, he proposes “imagination” as a tool whereby the deeper layers of existence can be rediscovered and re-expressed.⁵² While I will refer to a range of key theological and philosophical thinkers in the area of religious language, Ricoeur’s philosophy provides particular insight into the New Testament’s use of imagination to communicate a mystery the writers were convinced was true.

After this brief survey of religious language, I turn my attention to the specific language we find in the New Testament texts on atonement. Recent discussions on atonement imagery have noted the importance of metaphor. Colin Gunton’s book *The Actuality of Atonement* opens with a detailed discussion of rationalism, and the role of figurative language—in particular metaphor—in conveying truth. He then approaches a series of atonement theories by interpreting them as metaphors. Gunton’s work was ground-breaking, but is limited by his focus on this one form of imaginative language. It leads him to see metaphors where none were intended, and enables him to read as metaphor passages that comprise openly mythic material.⁵³ This does make such language more palatable to modern readers, but is problematic if it means that elements of those myths which were originally meant literally are ignored. Demons could well have been understood *as* demons rather than metaphors for evil, for example, and this shapes our understanding of the passages that refer to them.

Henri Blocher expresses reservations about applying the term “metaphor” to atonement theories. He suggests that emphasising their metaphorical nature allows us to discard any difficult or fashionably distasteful aspects of the theories, a danger I will consider.⁵⁴ But despite such scruples, the metaphorical dimensions of atonement language are now a “given” for many recent theologians. Stephen Finlan tackles the more disturbing aspects of atonement theories from their metaphorical basis, and Paul Fiddes, although more interested in the doctrines that developed

⁵¹ Ricoeur, “Language of Faith,” 225.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 231.

⁵³ Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, 62-74.

⁵⁴ Blocher, “Biblical Metaphor,” 630.

from the “wide range of images and metaphors created through the ages to explain [atonement]” than in the metaphors themselves, does, nevertheless, accept their metaphorical expression.⁵⁵ The drive of postmodern theology in general suggests that theologians must be wary when substituting concepts and theories for metaphorical language.

The challenge for theology is to “theorize” the cross (i.e., in a doctrinal formulation) while simultaneously respecting it (i.e., as an “other” that eludes our conceptual grasp). The problem is that theologies of the atonement seem unable to articulate a theory that explains the saving significance of Jesus’ death without betraying the rich testimonies to the event of his death. This, in a nutshell, is the aporia of the atonement in postmodernity.⁵⁶

Metaphors are key tools for expressing mystery. The inherent tension within them caused by bringing two unlike things together and claiming equivalence between them forces the imagination beyond reason. However, metaphor is not the only vehicle for these “rich testimonies.” Like metaphor, typology, metonym, and parable all tap into something else: shared imaginative understandings of ancient stories. They are not clever linguistic tricks, pulled out of the air, but images and ideas that already had for their readers a wealth of imaginative associations.

Consider the reaction that a well-read teenager today would have if you told her that her fear was “only a boggart.” Immediately she would bring in all the associations, feelings and imaginative connections she had made when immersed in stories of boggarts within the *Harry Potter* series. She would know that the fear was real to her, but also that it was able to be conquered if laughed at, and, once conquered, would reveal itself as insubstantial. She could identify with the bravery of a normally timid Neville Longbottom, knowing that if he could conquer his dark fear, so could she. She has available to her a wealth of meaning shaped by all the impressions her imagination

⁵⁵ Finlan, *Options on Atonement*; Fiddes, *Past Event*, 4. For another who understands metaphor as secondary to the more important task of doctrinal formation, see Schmiechen, *Saving Power*.

⁵⁶ Vanhoozer, “Atonement in Postmodernity,” 369.

had formed while reading those books. Such meaning cannot be duplicated by even the most sensible of rational arguments. Equally, such meaning could not be drawn from the metaphor of a “boggart” without the speaker and the teenager sharing an imaginative understanding of one particular rich, mythic story.⁵⁷

By drawing on a common store of ancient literature in communicating the new mystery of Christ, the New Testament writers were able to trigger imaginative connections in their readers. This is not to say that they looked at their history in the way we look at fantasy books; the word “myth,” as I will discuss later, is not used here in simple contrast to “truth” or “history.” Rather than making the intended truth of the writers’ words doubtful, the use and reinterpretation of culturally important images and stories from the depths of the past confirmed for them how the life and death of Jesus fulfilled ancient hopes and promises.

3. Biblical atonement and fantasy writing

This practice of drawing on ancient stories to communicate truths in new ways is not peculiar to the New Testament writers. Michael Fishbane shows that the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures took shared myths and retold them in new guises, and that some branches of rabbinic exegesis continued this process.⁵⁸ I will show that others have continued this practice to the present day in unexpected ways. It is not surprising to find story-tellers reshaping elements from ancient myths in order to create new stories, nor even Christian story-tellers drawing on elements from pagan and Christian myths with a consciously Christian intent (such as in C.S. Lewis’ *Narnia* series). What is significant for this project is the way certain mythologems from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are brought together to form a vital underlay for otherwise secular fantasy books. They supply, not just a skeletal plot line of “atonement,” but also more complex symbolic meanings and associations.

⁵⁷ If, for example, the teenager had not read *Harry Potter* but had read the *Septimus Heap* series, she would envisage a boggart as an appealing, gentle, hairy, water-dwelling creature who would be far less helpful as a metaphor for fear. Sage, *Magyk*, 160-72.

⁵⁸ Fishbane, *Biblical Mythmaking*, 15-16.

In order to recognise scriptural mythologems as they appear in today's fantasy books, we need to be familiar with their use in the Bible. From chapter 6 onwards the thesis traces key atonement motifs as they appear in Hebrew writings prior to the New Testament, and how they are reclothed in the story of Christian atonement. My focus is on mythologems that can be traced both back into the traditions the New Testament authors inherited, *and* forward into the teenage fantasy books of today. From numerous possibilities, I have selected six from the biblical writings on sacrifice, victory and covenant. With respect to sacrifice, I focus on two connected motifs that convey a mythic understanding of blood—that blood is life, and, that blood is a cleansing or reparative agent. With respect to victory, I consider the mythic idea that evil can be personified in a particular being, such as Satan, while the resulting conflict can be construed as a war between Light and Darkness. With respect to covenant, I examine the motif of covenant's role in controlling chaos and the significance of the covenant curse.

After tracing each pair of mythologems through the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, I turn to their use in a selection of teenage fantasy works. The works chosen for analysis come from the subsection of the genre that is most obviously “fantasy,” since it involves magic and secondary worlds to our own. I have chosen fantasy works specifically for young adults primarily because the teenage years are the period during which many probing questions are asked for the first time. Kath Filmer suggests that given the increased secularity of the West, many teenagers are looking for answers to these questions from new “priests and prophets,” the writers of fantasy.⁵⁹ The popularity of the fantasy genre has risen rapidly amongst this age group, indicating it is supplying something that teenagers today are seeking. This makes the prevalence of atonement themes in these works particularly interesting. The question of how “atonement” is achieved is one of those key, “deep” questions that are still being explored today.

The works that will be examined are Garth Nix's *Old Kingdom* trilogy (1995 – 2003), Cassandra Clare's *Mortal Instruments* trilogy (2007 – 2009), and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1998 – 2007). I have chosen to work with series rather than individual books because series give authors the opportunity to develop particular mythologems more deeply. Rather than there being

⁵⁹ Filmer, *Scepticism and Hope*, 16-19.

one act of atonement to prepare for, series frequently provide “small” examples of atonement in each book and culminate in a “major” act of atonement at the conclusion of the series. This is particularly evident in the *Harry Potter* series, where each book shows Harry pitted against Voldemort (or his followers) and defeating him temporarily, while the series as a whole leads to the conclusive victory in the final book. In the case of Clare’s *Mortal Instruments* series, I have focused on her initial trilogy that contains in itself a complete story of atonement. She has since written a trilogy prequel and a trilogy sequel, but the original atonement story may stand alone.⁶⁰ Similarly Nix’s *Old Kingdom Chronicles* were originally a trilogy, and I have treated them as such. He has subsequently written a short story and a prequel set in the same world, but neither add significantly to the original atonement themes.⁶¹

The British *Harry Potter* series has been included both because of its popularity and because of the complexity of the imagery and mythology which Rowling draws on in the construction of her fantasy world. Clare’s books, set in America, are one example of the paranormal romantic fantasy which has lined bookshop shelves for the past decade, but her works combine this with an enthusiastic use of Jewish and Christian mythological figures and a fascinating portrayal of a modern Satan figure. Nix is an Australian author whose *Old Kingdom Chronicles* are a recent example of high fantasy: the creation of a world separate to our own, with its own mythology. Each series, then, is drawn from a different part of the English-speaking world and from a different sub-genre of teenage fantasy writing.

Neither of the latter two works has been the subject of extensive scholarly research up to this point, whereas Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series has been scrutinised by Christian and secular critics alike. Even in Rowling’s work, however, no previous scholar has focused on these particular mythologems. Francis Bridger came close. He began his defence of the *Potter* series

⁶⁰ Clare’s trilogy sequel is made up of *City of Fallen Angels* (2011), *City of Lost Souls* (2012) and *City of Heavenly Fire* (2014). Her prequel, set in the Victorian era, is made up of *Clockwork Angel* (2010), *Clockwork Prince*, (2011), and *Clockwork Princess* (2013).

⁶¹ Nix, *Clariel*; Nix, *Nicholas Sayre and the Creature in the Case*.

before it was completed, seeking to uncover “some of the new ways people have found for expressing and exploring the kind of key spiritual issues (justice, judgement and the debilitating effects of evil) that, a century ago, were clustered around established views of heaven, hell and eternal damnation.”⁶² As such, his work approaches my own interests. He even raises the questions of the theology of self-sacrificial love and the power of blood within the books, but because Rowling was yet to complete the series, he could not follow the themes through to their culmination.⁶³

John Granger is a self-styled “Hogwarts Professor.” He has written extensively on the theological underpinning of Rowling’s work, exploring in particular her use of alchemical symbolism, and uncovering remarkable parallels between intricate details of her work and Christian teaching.⁶⁴ Kath Filmer is an important writer in the more general area of fantasy and religion, exploring both the quasi-religious role of contemporary fantasy authors and the language of hope communicated even within the pervading scepticism of the works.⁶⁵ William Gray has also studied in depth the relationship between fantasy works and religious concepts.⁶⁶ Both Filmer and Gray include a few secular authors in their studies (Gray using Philip Pullman as a contrast to the normal list of Christian fantasy authors), although neither refers to Nix or Clare.

Unlike that of William Gray, my focus in the thesis is not on how the books reflect the religious or psychological states of their authors.⁶⁷ Nor am I interested in “cracking the codes” hidden in the work, as are many of the critics of J.K. Rowling.⁶⁸ Nor will I explore all the myriad connections with and allusions to Christian mythology that pervade these books. I am solely interested in how fantasy writers, of whatever religious persuasion or none, approach the serious question of atonement, and how, deliberately or not, they use ancient Jewish and Christian myths to forge answers within the terms of their imaginary worlds.

⁶² Bridger, *A Charmed Life*, 5-6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 89-102.

⁶⁴ Granger, *How Harry Cast his Spell*; Granger, *Deathly Hallows Lectures*; Granger, “The Hogwarts Professor.”

⁶⁵ Filmer, *Scepticism and Hope*.

⁶⁶ Gray, *Death and Fantasy*; Gray, *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth*.

⁶⁷ Gray, *Death and Fantasy*.

⁶⁸ For an example of this, see Solon Villaluz, *Does Harry Potter Tickle Sleeping Dragons?*

There are some surprising results from this investigation. Aspects of biblical myths that have faded from prominence in theological thought are revived in contemporary fantasy works. Complex atonement questions that are debated endlessly by theologians and philosophers are made meaningful in the fantasy worlds of these books by means of these ancient stories. How is it that an individual's death could be necessary for atonement, that a single death could be efficacious for all? The alleged necessity of Christ's cruel death is increasingly hard for people today to understand or accept in view of the violence involved and our awareness of the dangers of coercive power. Yet atonement mythologems are woven into the stories of these fantasy works in such a way that self-sacrifice is given unusual powers at the same time as violence is condemned. Some of these stories, indeed, provide remarkable insights into the subversive nature of the biblical myths.

These are by no means the first works to combine fantasy and religious thought, nor is teenage fantasy the only genre in which atonement themes emerge. English classics such as John Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown* (1933), or William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) make clear allusions to the atoning power of sacrifice, for example, while Neil Gaiman's more recent *American Gods* (2002) is also heavily influenced by religious atonement themes. C.S. Lewis followed his literary mentor, George Macdonald, in celebrating the particular ability of fantasy to communicate religious truths, and his *Chronicles of Narnia* (1949 – 1954), while not strictly allegorical, are unmistakably Christian. The writings of Lewis and Macdonald, and the work of other Christian fantasy writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien, have long been studied for the Christian themes and images within them.

What sets this study apart is that the authors of the fantasy works under consideration here are not overtly Christian, yet their works make use of the rich resources found in the biblical language of atonement when addressing questions of purpose and hope in the face of evil and death. This study will trace the roots of the mythological themes of blood, victory and covenant in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and examine how they have been used in contemporary fantasy works to shape new stories of atonement. Recognising this mythological heritage can deepen our appreciation of the fantasy works themselves. Yet also, by re-clothing these biblical

elements in an imaginative language that is alive and familiar to today's teenagers, fantasy authors are making them accessible and meaningful to that audience once again. I will explore the significance of this in the final chapter, where I ask whether the conventional theological language that many teenagers today find to be foreign and dry could not be enlivened and deepened by what this literature is communicating through the rich and, for teenagers, familiar language of fantasy.

Chapter 2

Reason and Religious Language

A recent study of popular religion amongst the youth of the USA found that although many identified themselves as “Christian,” the religion they followed could more accurately be called “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”¹ Its two key elements are the moral standards it requires of its adherents and its therapeutic benefits. Its deity is a distant and disinterested being whose existence is relatively unimportant.

Such a deistic religion is functional and potentially profitable to market, but is markedly different to one that contemplates with awe the possible implications of a transcendent God, and indicates the pressure the church is under when it attempts to promote belief in such a God. Popular atheism has developed a powerful voice in recent years, and there is a strong strain in philosophical thought which denounces the power that grand narratives and metaphysical claims have exerted through history. Those who want to preserve a language that speaks of transcendence in the face of these pressures need to ask how such language can be effective given the powerful processes of rationalisation, systemisation and secularisation that bear on it. Much religious language involves metaphor and myth: forms of language that do not stay within the bounds of reason and—particularly with myth—are rooted in a sense of something beyond the material world. Yet it is significant that Western youth still flock to find such myths and mysteries in the fantasy books that replace themselves on bookshop shelves at a bewildering rate. The reasoned discomfort many feel towards the transcendent can be at odds with an irrational desire for it.

In this chapter I first look briefly at the philosophical background against which the Church seeks to speak of God, of transcendence, of faith. I explore how religious language can interact effectively with reason, imagination and experience by drawing on the work of a selection of contemporary philosophers and theologians. Understanding the distinctive traits of religious

¹ Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, passim.

language and its concern to speak of transcendence enables us to build a bridge that connects religious language and the language of fantasy.

1. Reason and transcendence

Transcendence and reason are not easy companions. What Ricoeur terms a “problems to be solved” approach to the world was proposed as long ago as Democritus (ca 460 - 370 BCE) who reduced even the soul to “soul atoms” in an effort to conceive of a completely materialist world.² Democritus’ materialist mission has frequently been revived, and our language reflects this. It is significant that we have come to favour the descriptive mode over the poetic, rhetorical and even dialectical modes when it comes to signifying “facts,” expecting things spoken of via other modes to justify their basis in reality before we will accept them.³ This trend reached a peak in the early 20th century with the logical positivists. Despite the fact that their verificationist principle—that something can only be held to have objective truth if it can be logically or empirically verified—soon proved to be too extreme even in the natural sciences where it began, its influence has lingered.⁴

Contemporary philosophers and theologians have explored alternative theories of knowledge in relation to the transcendent. One strand of thought focusses on the interaction of subjectivity and objectivity in knowledge, which has led to an increased interest in hermeneutics. Another approaches the question of how we can know the transcendent with an intriguing mixture of ancient ideas viewed through postmodern sociological, psychological and philosophical lenses. The Christian doctrines of the incarnation and crucifixion, for example, have proved to be of central importance to the discussions of key contemporary thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek, René Girard and Gianni Vattimo. The resurrection has not. This is significant, given the essentially transcendent nature of that latter claim. As varied as these approaches are, they are united by a new “absolute”: a desire to reject all forms of violence, and therefore to critique concepts of transcendence in the light of justice and peace.

² Ricoeur, “Language of Faith,” 225.

³ For a discussion on these modes, see Frye, *Words with Power*, 3-29.

⁴ Alston, “Religious Language,” 223.

Justice has come to epitomise that which we must seek at all cost, and violence that which we must avoid with equal energy. Even “being” must negate itself before these demands. If, for example, we conceive of transcendence as a “being,” as “God,” it is said we are positing unity as more originary than diversity. This leads to “ontological violence” as we seek to enforce that unity on each other.⁵ The same desire for unity also underlies rationally-based ideas of knowledge, driving us to think in terms of concepts: structures which force everything to fit within our conceptual reach and thus replace any sense of the “other” with that which is already known (“the same”).⁶

Emmanuel Levinas has sought ways of talking about the transcendent that do not involve a concept of being. He suggests that we find the transcendent through the filter of the infinite nature of our neighbour, specifically in the infinite need of the poor. We glimpse the infinite in the excess, the surplus of responsibility or need in the neighbour. In Levinas’ words, “At no time can one say: I have done all my duty. ... It is in this sense that there is an opening beyond what is delimited; and such is the manifestation of the Infinite.”⁷ A sense of transcendence is preserved since we cannot *experience* or express this transcendence directly, as it is not “there” as such, and neither is it a being. Yet we are attached to it through the responsibility that is “incumbent” on us through the Other, the sympathy that is drawn from us.⁸ For Levinas, then, transcendence must escape both “being” and our conceptual reach if it is to escape violence and to become instead the means to compassion and justice.⁹

Gianni Vattimo goes further in that he believes that all ideas of transcendence are inherently and inescapably violent.¹⁰ Included under his heading of transcendence are all great metaphysical systems: anything that claims ontological truth, including the idea of there being a “natural law” guiding our ethics.¹¹ He argues that as soon as something claims to have this metaphysical truth

⁵ Svenungsson, “Transcending Tradition,” 66.

⁶ Vanhoozer, “Atonement in Postmodernity,” 368.

⁷ Levinas, “Ethics and Infinity,” 197.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 194; Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” 124.

⁹ Min, “Naming the Unnameable God,” 101.

¹⁰ Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 6.

¹¹ Vattimo, “Ethics without Transcendence?,” 402.

it has an inbuilt right and responsibility to force that truth on others, so whether the ‘system’ is overtly religious or apparently secular or purely philosophical, it can yet be a source of violence. He writes, “I would say indeed that sin (that which an ethics must disapprove) is definable as: falling into metaphysics.”¹² He believes the nihilism of Nietzsche was a positive step because it destroyed the idea that being and reality are “objective data” that need to and should be studied.¹³ In other words, nihilism should mark the end of metaphysics and the *recognition* of the end of transcendent truth, and lead to the end of violence.¹⁴ He finds support for this in the Christian story, from which he understands that the power of transcendence ended 2000 years ago. In the incarnation, God himself “undid” transcendence; God unravelled the structures of divine power, emptied himself, and died, setting an example of how we, too, should weaken any structures of power that could lead to violence.¹⁵

In Slavoj Žižek’s work, the secularization of religion is made so complete it is able to work with and blend with atheism. He can open a book with the uncompromising statement, “One of the most deplorable aspects of the postmodern era and its so called ‘thought’ is the return of the religious dimension in all its different guises,” and go on to claim an unexpected ally in Christianity.¹⁶ There is, he argues, a vital kernel in the Christian message, vital if people are to escape the dangers connected with a belief in transcendence. What the Hebrew people knew, and the reason why they forbade images of God, was that God is almost indistinguishable from humanity. Christianity proved this is indeed so: in the Christ story, God appears as God really is, in human form, and then dies, killing the last vestige of transcendence.¹⁷

Yet Žižek argues that humanity had historically always set up God, or the Transcendent, as a “Thing” which humanity would forever seek and desire yet never reach. This is what sets humans apart from animals: that “drive” which pushes them to seek after something even when a

¹² Ibid., 404.

¹³ Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 10.

¹⁴ Vattimo, “Nihilism as Emancipation,” 20.

¹⁵ Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 11.

¹⁶ Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 1.

¹⁷ Depoortere, “End of God’s Transcendence?,” 505.

substitute is available and the thing they seek is *not* available. It is a drive that creates both problems (and is therefore controlled by laws) and all progress.¹⁸ By revealing God to be almost indistinguishable from humanity, Christ showed us that there is nothing in that transcendent “Thing” to desire and seek after; nothing except that “indefinable x” which changed Jesus into God. And that “indefinable x” is, in fact, the very drive that differentiates humans from animals. “The Divine, in other words, is nothing more and nothing less than that which makes us human beings instead of mere animals. This is what has been revealed by Christ.”¹⁹ There is no transcendence. The “divine” is within humanity and should not be sought beyond it.

The interaction between transcendence, reason and religious language is therefore complex. On one hand, we have the branch of thought represented by Levinas that preserves the concept of transcendence, that battles to maintain a sense of “otherness” in the face of reason’s desire to reduce everything to conceptual, rational control, and that sees that reductionist process in itself as violent.²⁰ However, the language with which Levinas can *speak* of transcendence is severely limited through the very process by which he *preserves* that transcendence: a process which removes it from our conceptual grasp and renders it inexpressible. This is problematic for religious language which must seek to speak of the transcendent, however inadequately, or else cease to exist.

On the other hand, we have the essentially rationalistic approaches of Vattimo and Žižek. Vattimo views secularization as the positive working-out of the task Christ began. “Interpreting” the scriptures means re-understanding them in the light of this secular fulfilment of Christ’s purpose, and includes removing from religious language anything which is “incomprehensible” or “mysterious”—or transcendent.²¹ Secularisation is also important for Žižek, for whom Christianity is a necessary stage on the path to true dialectical materialism because it removes the transcendence that would otherwise get in the way.²² There is no religious language for Žižek, for ultimately there is no transcendent religion.

¹⁸ Ibid., 506.

¹⁹ Ibid., 512.

²⁰ Vanhoozer, “Atonement in Postmodernity,” 368.

²¹ Depoortere, “End of God’s Transcendence?,” 13.

²² Svenungsson, “Transcending Tradition,” 67.

The question of the relationship between reason and transcendence is a key factor in the struggle to maintain some form of religious language today. Rationalism has not ended with the death of modernism, despite the best efforts of many philosophers. Rather than be supplanted, it has expanded. Paul van Buren argues that this is to be expected, since both language and reason continually evolve to express our experiences more fully. Their borders are not static—not a “cage”—but rather an ever-broadening “platform” around which we can move.²³ Reason and language, he claims, are at least potentially capable of encompassing all that is.

Yet Peter Jonkers wonders if this indicates simply that reason has an “inherent craving for power.”²⁴ He argues that if philosophy refuses to allow any truth beyond that which can be rationally apprehended, it is effectively destroying everything outside its own field in order to be “king” of all that remains—which is another form of “violence.”²⁵ In the interactions between reason and transcendence, reason does not ask whether religious language is capable of holding truth, but rather whether the things of which religious language speaks can be conceived of rationally, since the correlation of rationality and truth is the foundational assumption. If, however, that foundation is wrong, if the non-rational or supra-rational, the non-sensical or supra-sensical, is actually capable of bearing transcendent truth, that will not be discovered in a strictly rationalistic manner.

2. Reason and imagination

Paul Ricoeur is a philosopher whose wide-ranging interests brought him eventually to focus on hermeneutics as a way of understanding the human person. Basic to his philosophy, as opposed to that of Sartre, is that humanity seeks “to be.”²⁶ The human being is one who is able to break through limits, specifically limits of rational thought and limits of finitude. Ricoeur also believes

²³ Schlamm, “Numinous Experience,” 540-41.

²⁴ Jonkers, “Illusory Imagination,” 7.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 315. Sartre is an important foil to Ricoeur because both started in the school of phenomenology. Sartre, unlike Ricoeur, concluded that all our actions are ultimately futile, that existence is absurd, and that humanity struggles constantly against the attraction of death. Ricoeur’s conclusions were very different.

that despite postmodernism's recognition of the role of subjectivity in hermeneutics, our culture has become *objectified* to the point where questions of mystery have become non-questions. We live in the belief that everything is, or should be, or will shortly be, "available" to us, and that anything we do not understand will one day be explained or solved. We expect even mysteries basic to our life, such as birth and death, to occur at the time, place and means of our choosing.²⁷ But with that availability comes a loss of meaning—a theme explored at length in art and literature of the mid to late twentieth century. He gives as an example the changing attitudes to sexuality. "To the degree that sexuality becomes more available, it loses its value as an expression, as an engagement of the entire person."²⁸ He notes that whereas psychoanalysts once treated people for the repercussions of sexual prohibition, they now do so for "lack of affectionate contact."²⁹

This objectification of the world removes our ability to go deeply into ourselves and understand our place within creation. Ricoeur understands this process to be inextricably linked with the objectification of language. If we cannot express deeper things because we no longer have the language to do so, we lose them. "It is the struggle against this central, nuclear forgetting which gives me the task of preserving beside scientific language, which objectifies, the language which understands; beside technological language, which disposes, the language which awakens possibilities."³⁰ It is this language which "understands" and "awakens possibilities" that has the capacity to speak of mystery, of transcendence, of God, and it is this language that Ricoeur fears is being "forgotten." As long as our language remains on the surface level of rationality and availability, it is not so much that people may reject Christianity or other "deep" faiths as that they may simply not connect with them at all. They are strangers to the language.

How may people rediscover this deeper language? Imagination is a tool of exploration that can work on the level of ontology. Ricoeur gives the example of watching a tragedy and *understanding* the extreme jealousy or evil of one of the characters. We may never have

²⁷ Ricoeur, "Language of Faith," 225-26.

²⁸ Ibid., 226.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 231.

experienced that emotion ourselves, but we can still “read” it by a process of “existential decipherment, by the centre of my existence, which is imaginary; ... imagination, here, is the organ of a veritable ontological exploration.”³¹ According to Kant, imagination’s function is to take diverse sensory inputs and imagine them into the categories of universality or unity that enable us to understand them.³² Ricoeur suggests that the “understanding” imagination can provide may work on deeper levels than the sensory. This will have important implications when we come to consider the power of fantasy books.

But imagination is also notoriously fickle. Even the mystics warn us of it:

There is one thing in our day that ought to make us afraid: people who have hardly begun to make their meditations, if they seem to hear anything in a brief recollection, pronounce it to have come from God; and so imagine, saying, God has spoken, and it is not so: these people have been speaking for themselves, out of a longing for such communications.³³

St John of the Cross advises his readers, rather, to be “guided in all things by the teaching of Christ and his church”—in other words, to have some accepted limits against which imagination can be tested. Kant gives a secular version of this: “We play with the imagination frequently and gladly, but imagination (as fantasy) plays just as frequently with us, and sometimes very inconveniently. ... Ruleless fantasy approaches madness.”³⁴ Religious imagination, without any bounds around it, can go wild. We are alert today to the very real dangers of people imagining irrational “real” or “direct” words from God. Jonkers points out that the same German word, *Schwärmerei* translates as both “fantasmatism” and “fanaticism.”³⁵

There may be, then, a necessary tension between reason and imagination which shapes all our efforts to talk of God. Without imagination we remain on the surface level of rationality and

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jonkers, “Illusory Imagination,” 3.

³³ St John of the Cross (attr.), “Spiritual Maxims,” 349.

³⁴ Kant, *Anthropology*, 68, 75.

³⁵ Jonkers, “Illusory Imagination,” 6.

availability, gradually losing our ability to connect with or understand things of depth or mystery. Without boundaries around that imagination, we run the risk of meaningless fantasmatism or dangerous fanaticism.

3. Reason and experience

A traditional approach to speaking about the transcendence of the Christian God is to follow the connected paths of “perfections,” “negative theology,” or “analogy.” These paths start by accepting that to attribute anything to God is problematic. Does that attribute mean the same when we talk of God as when we talk of a person, or an animal? To talk of “God’s anger” and imagine slamming doors and shouting would clearly be anthropomorphic. However, if we allow too great a distance between what we experience as anger and what we attribute to God as anger, the word would eventually lose all meaning.

Following Aquinas, many Christian thinkers have pursued the idea of “analogy.”³⁶ Speech about God is not univocal with speech about creatures, but analogous. When we speak of God being angry, what we are saying is that “as we are to angry, God is to x” where “x” is beyond our expression. “Angry” is our closest approximation. However, when we speak of a “perfection” such as “holy,” “good,” or “being,” then we are saying what God *actually* is, to which our understanding of it is analogous.

This cerebral understanding of analogy gives the comforting impression that it is based in and controlled by reason. Yet it cannot claim too much. As yet it only speaks of similarities; it is what Denis Donoghue calls an “experimental or heuristic rather than a cognitive act.” It appears to be “a play of similitudes, not identities. The ground of it is a community of intelligibles which can be correlated without filling in the syntactical gaps.”³⁷ Analogy of this sort, in trying to describe God, is never free from that to which God is being compared analogically. It is uncertain whether it says anything positive about the actual being of God, which would perhaps not be a problem if that were not its aim.

³⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, Q.13.

³⁷ Donoghue, “Analogical Imagination,” 8.

The experimental, heuristic side of analogy can also, however, be embraced as a strength by approaching God through the experiential mode rather than the descriptive mode.³⁸ In his study of the numinous, Rudolf Otto asserted that there was much in religion that could be taught and “handed down,” but that “what is incapable of being so handed down is this numinous basis and background to religion, which can only be induced, incited, and aroused.”³⁹ This is done through the way “all other moods and feelings are transmitted, to a penetrative imaginative sympathy with what passes in the other person’s mind.”⁴⁰ This may seem a far cry from the analogical approach of Aquinas. Yet what Otto means is that experiences which are *analogous* to the experience one has before God can be the means by which one progressively moves to an understanding and experience of the God-experience itself. One experience (which may, in itself, be purely rational) may, by analogical association, or “contagion,” allow another, and so on down a “chain of stimuli,” culminating in an awakening consciousness of the numinous.⁴¹

Such an experienced-based consciousness may be no more than a description of an essentially subjective state with no necessary referent outside ourselves. However, there are two points to consider here. First, Otto argues we have reasonable grounds to believe that the experience of the numinous *is* the experience of something “other” than ourselves. We gain a sense of awe before a mountain because the mountain is there. We are terrified by thundering water because the water is there. Likewise, the sense of the numinous that may overwhelm us is a perception of “something there.” This is less an argument for the particularity of any one religion than for the existence of something holy and other. When the reality of some transcendent other is under discussion, the universality of this experience of the numinous is an important consideration.

Secondly, there are elements of “participant,” or experiential, knowledge that are unavailable to those who have only “spectator,” or theoretical knowledge.⁴² The language a music teacher uses to move her student beyond the technicalities of a piece of music to involvement in the work

³⁸ Alston, “Religious Language,” 237.

³⁹ Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 60.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴² Macky, *Centrality of Metaphor*, 8.

itself may make little sense to a detached observer. It may, in fact, make little sense to the student until he has begun to experience the music for himself, from the “inside.” It does, nonetheless, refer to a reality: the indefinable “something” that makes the difference between two equally note-perfect performances. It is reasonable to suggest that there are aspects of religious knowledge and its expression that can only be understood by a participant. It is difficult for one outside that participation, for whom the language may be meaningless, to judge its effectiveness.⁴³

It seems, then, that religious language builds something three dimensional around van Buren’s expanding platform of reason and language. The language stretches into heights, depths and breadths of transcendence, imagination and experience that go beyond the edges of that platform, yet remain built upon it. In order to perform such stretches, religious language will behave in some unusual ways. Many of these were explored by Ian Ramsey’s 1957 book entitled *Religious Language*. Ramsey’s formative arguments have considerable relevance to the task at hand.

4. The oddness of religious language

Ramsey suggests that religious language is based on a deep level of knowing and being and committing which is common to everyone. It is experienced, for example, the moment a routine situation becomes personal: when a judge finds his son in the dock, or a surgeon finds her husband on the operating table. At such times, we are jolted onto a new level of being and knowing and commitment within our situation. Or there is the moment when logic is over-ridden by a decision which is driven by a commitment deeper than logic; for instance, when a poor swimmer jumps into a river to try to rescue a drowning child. Everyone experiences or can understand that level of being. It is non-rational or supra-rational. It stems from “a commitment which is based upon but goes beyond rational considerations which are ‘matters of speculation’; a commitment which sees in a situation all that the understanding can give us and more.”⁴⁴ Religious language functions on this level, which is not the level of everyday discourse.

⁴³ Note this comment from Russell with regard to knowledge, experience and understanding: “Understanding is not an accretion of external information but an assimilation or integration of knowledge into your experience as a human being.” Russell, *The Devil*, 37.

⁴⁴ Ramsey, *Religious Language*, 17.

Ramsey calls the jolt caused by the oddness or unexpectedness of a situation the “disclosure moment.” Suddenly things are seen differently, they take on a different quality. To illustrate a disclosure moment he describes someone imagining a many-sided polygon. The person continues to imagine polygons with ever increasing numbers of sides, until at some point, he suddenly conceives a circle. At that point everything is different. The very geometry of the circle is different to that of the polygons.⁴⁵ Something utterly new, yet still conceivably connected to all that came before, has been grasped.

Such disclosures in language are enabled when key words (the “model”) are “qualified.” In a model, we have “a situation [or word] with which we are all familiar and which can be used for reaching another situation with which we are not so familiar,” such as when the word “Father” is used for God.⁴⁶ The qualifier is “a directive which prescribes a special way of developing those ‘model’ situations,” such as attaching the word “eternal” to “Father.”⁴⁷ These qualifiers give to the model “logical strain and impropriety” which indicates to us that we are thinking of something outside the normal use of the word.⁴⁸ In an effort to reconcile the qualifier and model, we may reach a moment of disclosure that is not simply a moment of insight, but a moment in which the logical behaviour of the language changes as well. To return to the illustration of the circle, it is by pushing the model (“a polygon with many sides”) further and further along the qualifier (“with ever-increasing sides”) that the concept of a polygon with an infinite number of sides, a circle, is grasped as something which is both the culmination of that process and something completely, logically, and (in this case) mathematically, *different*.

In the example of “eternal Father,” “eternal” should cause us to take our model or understanding of the word “father” and stretch it until disclosure happens and we are left with a picture as unlike, yet connected to, our original model as “circle” is to “polygon.” The qualifier has a vital role as a “directive” which can both “move us in the right direction along a series of father-

⁴⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 70.

situations” and “think away inappropriate features.”⁴⁹ As Ramsey puts it, delightfully, “If by assimilating Father Almighty to Father Christmas we have grown accustomed to thinking of God with a beard, here is a directive that we should shave it off.”⁵⁰

The power of oddness can move beyond the level of individual words or sentences. It has long been noted that many of the parables of Jesus contain some extreme notion which disquiets and unsettles the hearer. How ludicrously extravagant it would be to sell everything for a pearl (Mt 13:44)! What slave could possibly owe his master 10,000 talents, when one talent was as much as a labourer would earn in fifteen years (Mt 18: 24)? The presence of these qualifying oddnesses should force the reader to keep the parables alive, continually pushing the familiar “model” they provide towards disclosure, rather than solidifying them into formulaic meanings.

Ricoeur also points out that the parables as a whole work as qualifiers of each other. One parable alone may give us a clear concept of some aspect of the Kingdom of God, but the next will unsettle, challenge, and qualify that concept, indicating that the whole truth is yet to be found.

If you isolate the Parable of the Lost Coin, if you interrupt the dynamism of the story and extract from it a frozen concept, then you get the kind of doctrine of predestination which pure Calvinism advocated. But if you pick the Parable of the Prodigal Son and extract from it the frozen concept of personal conversion, then you get a theology based on the absolutely free will of man, as in the doctrine that the Jesuits opposed to the Calvinists. . . . Therefore it is not enough to say that the Parables say nothing directly concerning the Kingdom of God. We must say in more positive terms, that *taken all together, they say more than any rational theology*. At the very moment that they call for theological clarification, they start shattering the theological simplifications which we attempt to put in their places.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 175.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ricoeur, “Listening to the Parables of Jesus,” 242-43.

“Oddness” can be the trigger for disclosure moments on the level of a sentence or on the level of a broader story. Either way, it is central to religious language. The irony emerging here is the way in which critics and religious apologists alike have sought to remove or smooth over embarrassing oddities from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. If it is when something odd arises (there is some “logical impropriety”) that there is a possibility of disclosure, removing such improprieties makes disclosure increasingly unlikely and potentially cripples the text in its attempt to talk of the things of God. This will be an important consideration when we begin to examine Christian atonement theories. We would expect there to be a certain oddness about the language used to communicate the message of atonement: something shocking or more suited to a fantasy story than a religious text. It also reminds us that, rather than favouring one atonement theory as most appealing or most important, we should hold the range of atonement images and ideas together in a productive tension.

In this discussion we have seen how there are essentially three approaches to dealing with the inherent difficulties involved in speaking of “mysteries” that truly *are* mysteries and not simply problems awaiting solutions. One response is to argue that there are no mysteries because there is nothing transcendent, or that transcendence is “dead.” In this case religious language has no referent beyond our own minds. For those who want to preserve the possibility of transcendence, a second option is the *apophatic* response, which accepts that we simply cannot talk about the transcendent, particularly God. In this case, religious language must dissolve into silence. The third possibility is the *kataphatic* approach, the belief that meaningful speech about God is possible. When the third option is pursued, those who seek to speak of mysteries use language in unusual ways. Imagination and experience may be given increased credence in the quest to explore, understand and express transcendent truth. Words and images may be juxtaposed in unusual fashions in order to force our minds beyond the immediate and literal. Religious language may seem, in Ramsey’s terminology, “odd,” but is necessarily so.

Chapter 3

Metaphor and Myth

Metaphor and myth have many of the key qualities of religious language discussed above. They are also central to fantasy writing and provide a launching pad from which connections between fantasy and religious language can be explored. Both “metaphor” and “myth” are complex terms, however, and need to be addressed carefully.

1. The Nature of Metaphor

There has been a wealth of literature published on metaphor since, in 1962, Max Black reinvigorated the debate started by I. A. Richards in 1936.⁵² In its early form, going back to Aristotle, it involved substituting a proper name with the name of something different or “borrowed” because of a perceived similarity.⁵³ Today debate centres on whether metaphors create reality or merely point to it, whether they manage “re-creative imagining” or merely provide decorative rhetoric, what their relationship is to models, similes or analogies, and whether or not they can be essentially reduced to paraphrases if we are determined enough, or whether all language is inescapably metaphorical.⁵⁴ Although any discussion involving metaphor requires consideration of these questions, for present purposes it is less important to define metaphor—to establish what it “is” in its essence—than to explore some of the qualities that make metaphor a powerful vehicle of religious language. The two qualities that are particularly relevant in this respect are their *oddness* and their *imaginative* content.

Common to all understandings of metaphor is that something odd is happening. Two sets of words are brought together, surprisingly, and forced to interact. A tension is created by suggesting that one thing both “is” and “is not” another. This defies reason, yet has given rise to moments of “disclosure” even in the rational area of science—intuitive bursts of insight that are

⁵² Black, *Models and Metaphors*; Richards, *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 87-112.

⁵³ Ricoeur, “Metaphorical Process as Cognition,” 143.

⁵⁴ For examples of some of these questions, see Macky, *Centrality of Metaphor*, 12; Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 42; Martin, “Metaphor amongst Tropes,” 64; Blocher, “Biblical Metaphor,” 637-38; Abrams, *Glossary of Literary Terms*, 156.

subsequently tamed into models for exploration and teaching.⁵⁵ In the case of religious metaphor, the experience of enlightenment and resolution that Ramsey illustrates with the conception of a circle may only come to a few at some moment in their lives. What religious metaphor ensures is that concepts of God should never stabilise into anything less than the revelatory equivalent of that circle.

There are two reasons for this. The first is illustrated in theological terms by the mixture and wealth of metaphors in the Bible. Readers learn that they are God's slave in Romans 6 and 7, yet find they are God's child in Romans 8. They are invited in 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 to imagine themselves as a field that God has cultivated, yet from verse 9 on they are God's temple. When Paul describes the resurrection of the body in 1 Corinthians 15, he moves easily from images of seeds to planets to dust within the space of a few verses. Each gives rise to its own potential insight into the same truth; each must maintain its sense of "is" and "is not" so as not to claim absolute truth status for itself alone. Macky suggests that metaphors are like windows into a misty garden. No two windows into that garden will give identical views, and even the view through the same window may change over time.⁵⁶ If you cannot see through one window, it is best to try another, but the more windows you use, the more you will gather of the garden.

The second reason why religious metaphors need to maintain an "is/is not" tension is to prevent resolution being reached mistakenly. This is where the tension is not resolved into a new, creative disclosure, but where the "is" or the "is not" aspect of the tension takes precedence. When this happens, problems arise. Henri Blocher, for example, is concerned that some theologians use the idea of metaphor as a "missile" to attack atonement doctrines. They take such advantage of the "is not" aspect of the metaphor that little is left behind.⁵⁷ It is easy to understand why one might want to remove ideas of God's wrath, judgement and blood sacrifice from contemporary religion. But to emphasise the "is not" to the point of removing its tension-producing role is to castrate the metaphor. There may be social, moral and even theological arguments for removing the difficult tensions of biblical metaphors, but it would then be disingenuous to attempt to study

⁵⁵ Gerhart and Russell, "Metaphor and Thinking," 13.

⁵⁶ Macky, *Centrality of Metaphor*, 24.

⁵⁷ Blocher, "Biblical Metaphors," 630.

them *as* metaphors. Following Ramsey, what we should be asking is, “What is *odd* about this metaphor? In what way does each part qualify the other, or force us to stretch our understanding of it?” There is, for example, an oddness about the image of God putting forward a “sacrifice of atonement” in order to “justify . . . as a gift” (Rom 3:24, 25). To whom is God sacrificing? There is an illogical richness about the metaphor that can be explored within the tension of “is” and “is not.”⁵⁸

On the other side, over-emphasising the “is” part of a metaphor is to turn the metaphor into a model. Of the many possible definitions of “model,” Macky’s is the most helpful here: “A model is a symbol that is established enough in its use with a particular subject (e.g. father with God) for some of the parallels to have been worked out and become conventional.”⁵⁹ The tension between vehicle and tenor that keeps a metaphor “alive” and full of potential meaning is reduced in a model. Potential meaning is replaced by accepted meaning, as particular interpretations of the model become established. Unlike a metaphor, a model is something quite solid and stable that can be viewed from various angles and employed in different situations. Ideally those who use a model will remember that it is not “a ‘literal picture’ of reality.”⁶⁰ However, if a model with its basis in a religious metaphor loses its metaphorical base—loses its sense of “is not”—it can take on the status of complete truth. The “parallels” which have “become conventional” are all that is considered when the model is used. The “is not,” the “oddness” factor, fades from consciousness. Freed from that unsettling tension, the model can be used to extrapolate further “truths” that suit our taste and to engage in debates over intricate details which were never called for by the initial metaphor. As we will see, such a process is evident in the atonement language of ransom and victory.

There are two other ways in which the oddness of metaphors is important. The first is the process by which metaphors “die” through overuse: an extreme version of the modelling process described above. The metaphor is reduced to a conventional understanding of *one* possible

⁵⁸ All biblical citations, unless otherwise specified, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁵⁹ Macky, *Centrality of Metaphor*, 55.

⁶⁰ Alston, “Religious Language,” 240.

meaning. The only way to reinvigorate such metaphors is to be reawakened to their extreme oddness. This may be achieved either by a deeper examination of the metaphor's origins, or by the reappearance of the metaphor in a strange setting, such as biblical metaphors reappearing in contemporary fantasy works. This will be studied in more depth in later chapters.

The final problem is where the social world evoked by the metaphor is so unfamiliar that the oddness of the metaphor itself is obscured. When it comes to the language used of atonement in the Bible, we are at a severe disadvantage. However much we steep ourselves in a scholarly way into first-century Palestinian life, we have not grown up breathing in and living with temple sacrifices, the slave trade, or the histories, justice systems and myths of the Greco-Roman and Hebrew cultures. These elements of first-century life may, then, carry such oddness for us that we miss the intended oddness caused by bringing two unlike elements together.

Our distance from the biblical world also impacts on the second key aspect of metaphor: its imaginative content. Blocher misses the point when he asks, "Leaving aside the matter of vividness, of aesthetic pleasure, can a literal paraphrase replace a metaphor as far as cognitive function is concerned?"⁶¹ Those things cannot be left aside when considering the majority of metaphors, any more than rhythm can be left aside when considering the majority of music. One might as well ask if a Hopkins' poem could be paraphrased as prose. The meaning and power of the poem is far more than its cognitive elements; its "vividness and aesthetic pleasure" can only be grasped and communicated through the imagination.

The effect of the loss of the imaginative element of metaphor becomes clear whenever a metaphor is paraphrased. In differentiating between types of biblical metaphor, Macky identifies some as "subsidiary" because they *are* able to be adequately paraphrased. He suggests, for example, that the metaphorical statement "Evil may not sojourn with Thee" can be literally rendered as, "You will do nothing evil."⁶² Yet where in this paraphrase are the imaginative associations of personified Evil setting up a tent with you, sharing your meals, seated with you in

⁶¹ Blocher, "Biblical Metaphors," 637.

⁶² Macky, *Centrality of Metaphor*, 61.

the evenings? Which of the two, the metaphor or the paraphrase, is more likely to engage and discomfort the hearer?

When the two elements of a metaphor are brought together, all the imaginative associations each aspect holds are also brought together. Meaning is formed not just on the cognitive level but also on the imaginative level. It is in bringing together these two spheres of imaginative associations that we have the greatest chance of letting the metaphor “work” while preserving its oddness, since imagination allows incongruence to remain with congruence, incompatibility to remain with compatibility. Reason wants to find a way around the differences and build a kind of “conceptual peace” between them, whereas imagination, in Ricoeur’s words, “is this ability to produce new kinds [of likeness] by assimilation, and to produce them not *above* the differences, as in the concept, but in spite of and through the differences.”⁶³

If the biblical language of atonement involves metaphors, we must do all we can to recapture its imaginative as well as cognitive power. Yet imagination is a dangerous tool as well as a valuable one. Perhaps this is why analogy, with its closer associations with reason, has a far deeper theological history than metaphor. Donoghue comments:

I think I understand why theologians want to distinguish analogy from metaphor. ... [Metaphor] is often wilful and audacious. ... If a question of good taste arises ... the poet is indifferent to the charge, he claims that the vehemence of his passion requires for expression every reach or exorbitance. He does not keep his decorums in their separate places. These metaphors may have started with analogical propriety, but at some point they seem to have gone wild or frantic.⁶⁴

We rarely think of biblical atonement language as “wild or frantic.” Yet that which gripped the first hearers and readers of the Bible was not an account of dry facts, but a flood of images communicated with a “vehemence of ... passion” that required “every reach or exorbitance” of

⁶³ Ricoeur, “Metaphorical Process as Cognition,” 144.

⁶⁴ Donoghue, “Analogical Imagination,” 14.

expression from its communicators. The metaphors used tapped into the imagination as well as the intellect of those who listened.

Before moving on to discuss myth we should pause to consider the use of metaphor specifically with regard to atonement. In speaking of the atonement, language that is “customarily used of religious, legal, commercial and military relationships is used to identify a divine action towards the world in which God is actively present remaking broken relationships.”⁶⁵ When atonement is the subject, metaphorical language abounds. This is not to say that whole systems of atonement thought can be encompassed under the heading “metaphor,” such as “the victory metaphor” or “the sacrificial metaphor.” Metaphorical language is certainly involved but they are not necessarily metaphors without remainder. Many other tropes are involved as well.

Typology is perhaps of most interest here. To speak of a “type” in biblical terms is to think of an “imprint.”⁶⁶ Something significant that happened in history is understood as an “imprint” of a greater thing to come later in history, through which its true significance is both revealed and fulfilled. The sacrifices of the temple, for example, were significant in themselves but are viewed in the New Testament as types of the one true sacrifice of Christ. This differs from allegory. In allegory, the details of a story serve as allegorical referents, whereas in typology the fulfilment does not detract in any way from the importance of the original event.⁶⁷ Typology is also different to metaphor and analogy in that it is *essentially* rooted in the larger story of the people; it is not merely a means of illuminating the existential present. Much of the biblical writing on atonement could be more accurately described as an “extended typological correspondence” than as “a metaphor” although, within that typological structure, metaphorical language is used.⁶⁸

It is important to recognize that metaphor is only a part of atonement language, not its full expression, because it pushes us back to where the New Testament writers continually grounded their own writings: in the depths of their collective history and mythology. What binds together

⁶⁵ Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, 46.

⁶⁶ Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*, 126.

⁶⁷ Barker, “Allegory and Typology,” 193-209.

⁶⁸ Hays, *Conversion of the Imagination*, 8. Hays uses the phrase in a different context.

all the language used of atonement, from metaphor to typology to reasoned debate, is its basis in something started long before. Sacrificial language, for example, had deep roots in temple practices, which in turn were thought to obey the ancient commands of God. Victory language presupposes a cosmic conflict, with its origins in the depths of time. C.S. Lewis describes such mythic ideas as “deep magic” when they are transposed into a fantasy realm.⁶⁹ It is in the realm of deep myth we find the closest links between biblical atonement theories and recent fantasy.

2. The Character of Myth

Abrams notes that the term “myth” may be used in a “bewildering” variety of ways, from common parlance where it may refer to stories believed only by the primitive or gullible, to scholarly fields of psychology, sociology or literary criticism where the value, power and pervasiveness of myth is widely recognised.⁷⁰ Some definitions of myth turn on their content, others on their function, others on their epistemological dimension. In this thesis, my interest is primarily in the literary rather than psychological, sociological or ethnological meaning of myth. As a starting point, I will adopt Ian Barbour’s designation of myth as “*a story which is taken to manifest some aspect of the cosmic order.*”⁷¹ This definition allows for stories that have no overtly divine protagonist, but still evoke some “cosmic” dimension, some sense of a world or power beyond our own.⁷²

Myths are typically seen as archetypal: story patterns that are re-clothed in various forms across time and cultures. While a particular account of the myth may be well known, a myth is not tied to any one expression of it. As C.S. Lewis writes:

Myth does not essentially exist in *words* at all. We all agree that the story of Balder is a great myth, a thing of inexhaustible value. But of whose version—whose *words*—are we thinking when we say this? For my own part, the answer is that I am not thinking of anyone’s words. ... What really delights and nourishes

⁶⁹ Lewis, *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 148.

⁷⁰ Abrams, *Glossary of Literary Terms*, 171.

⁷¹ Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 9. Italics his.

⁷² But see Frye, *Words with Power*, 22.

me is a particular pattern of events, which would equally delight and nourish if it had reached me by some medium which involved no words at all—say by a mime, or a [silent] film.⁷³

Northrop Frye notes the recurrence of broader story patterns when he discerns six “species” of myth that occur across Western literary history, all of which can be found within the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.⁷⁴ Although the time, place and the characters involved change, myths remain recognisable by their basic pattern of events.

The central myth of Christianity is the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, “represented as a cosmic drama of redemption.”⁷⁵ John Macquarrie differentiates between this “big” myth and the smaller stories that comprise it: the virgin birth, the miracles, the empty tomb and the bodily ascension.⁷⁶ Macquarrie suggests that each of these smaller stories could be called “legends,” but that they can also be “loosely included under the heading of ‘myth’ because their function is to illustrate and apply the central myth.”⁷⁷ The story of the calming of the storm, for example, could have appeared in the *Arabian Nights*, but its role in helping to illustrate the myth of redemption gives it cosmic significance, and therefore a mythic quality.⁷⁸

In addition to an over-arching myth and to component stories with mythic qualities, there are smaller ‘units’ of myth called “mythologems.” This term refers to key narrative fragments, images, objects, themes, motifs or character-types that are the building-blocks of myth. These elements can also be re-clothed in different ways. Take the Holy Grail as an example. In one story it is a cup, in another a plate, in another a stone, but the essential portrayal of it as

⁷³ Lewis, *George Macdonald*, xxix.

⁷⁴ Frye, *Words with Power*, 23. More recently Christopher Booker posited seven such “plots.” Booker, *Seven Basic Plots*, 5.

⁷⁵ Macquarrie, *Scope of Demythologizing*, 209.

⁷⁶ Note that these stories are not referred to specifically in the Epistles, which concentrate on the key myth rather than the illustrative stories.

⁷⁷ Macquarrie, *Scope of Demythologizing*, 210.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

something holy that provides blessing remains the same.⁷⁹ It is a mythologem that has been taken up many times and woven into new stories, with new characters and new personalities involved, while its essential meaning remains unchanged.

This way of distinguishing myth, mythic and mythologem is functional rather than definitive. It does not exhaust the full semantic range of the terms, but is sufficient to enable us to explore key aspects of the place of myth in the religious language of the Bible and its use for speaking of mysteries.

Ricoeur draws attention to the distinctively theological nature of the biblical narrative:

Not just any theology whatsoever can be tied to the narrative form, but only a theology which proclaims Jahweh to be the grand Actor of a history of deliverance. Without a doubt it is this point that forms the greatest contrast between the God of Israel and the God of Greek philosophy. The theology of traditions knows nothing of concepts of cause, foundation, or essence. It speaks of God in accord with the historical drama instituted by the acts of deliverance reported in the story.⁸⁰

Inasmuch as the biblical writings relate to “cosmic order,” they include myth. The mythic elements, however, are built into a narrative that speaks of divine actions taking place in history. The biblical authors take diverse sources (both mythic and mundane) and join them together in a large historical story, investing characters with personalities and events with moral meaning. Robert Alter likens the “historical prose” of the Hebrew Scriptures to Shakespeare’s historical plays. Shakespeare could not change who won any particular battle, but he could fill his story

⁷⁹ The platter is found in Chrétien de Troyes’ *Conte del Graal* in 1190, and also in the tale of unknown authorship, “The Quest of the Holy Grail.” The chalice is found in Robert de Borron’s “Joseph d’Arimathie”, and the stone in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s “Parzival.” See, for example, Matarasso, ed. *Quest of the Holy Grail*, 12, 13, 276.

⁸⁰ Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” 77.

with invented characters and dialogue and create personalities for his historical figures.⁸¹ In the Bible, myth and received history are woven into a narrative that exhibits “the particularizing imagination of the individual author.”⁸²

Within this narrative, myth has a particular role. The Bible narrative takes into account human freedom and the “refractory nature” of reality, yet still conveys a mythic sense of “man’s eternal place in an absolute cosmic scheme.”⁸³ Narrative shows the artistic nature of the biblical writers, enabling them to

liberate fictional personages from the fixed choreography of timeless events and thus ... transform storytelling from ritual rehearsal to the delineation of the wayward paths of human freedom, the quirks and contradictions of men and women seen as moral agents and complex centers of motive and feeling.⁸⁴

In contrast, myth does give us a sense of “timeless events” and its source is unlikely to be traceable to a particular author or artist.

According to Northrop Frye, the way in which myths shape the biblical narrative distinguishes the canonical Scriptures and the Gnostic gospels and Pseudipigraphic writings. The latter devote much space to justifying or “rationalising” their stories “in mythical terms”⁸⁵ (making them fit within a particular “pattern”), whereas the canonical Gospels and much of the Hebrew Scriptures frequently speak of realistically imperfect events and outcomes. Despite this, he believes the presence of myth in the Bible is as important and valuable as the presence of historical accounts and, crucially, that one is not in opposition to the other.

⁸¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 36.

⁸² Ibid., 42.

⁸³ Ibid., 29, 33.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁵ Frye, *Words with Power*, 144.

Myth is neither historical nor anti-historical: it is counter-historical. Jesus is not presented as a historical figure, but as a figure who drops into history from another dimension of reality and thereby shows what the limitations of the historical perspective are.⁸⁶

Frye is not here claiming the historicity of the Incarnation. He is speaking of how, at a literary or imaginative level, the New Testament “presents” Jesus incarnated. It assumes that there is another reality beyond the material world and that in the Incarnation, these two realities overlap.

Such myths outline, as broadly as words can do, humanity’s sense both of inclusion in and exclusion from an infinitely bigger order. So while nothing ontological is asserted by literature as such, the imaginative or poetic mode of ordering words has to be the basis of any sense of the reality of non-human personality, whether angels, demons, gods or God.⁸⁷

This “infinitely bigger order” is the stuff of religion, and if it is to be spoken of, it requires the use of the “imaginative or poetic mode.” Myth’s role in religious scripture is to speak of “domains that are inaccessible to observation”⁸⁸ and to evoke some impression of their reality: a role that historical narratives, which claim to speak of earthly events, cannot fulfil alone.

Joseph Campbell provides a secular understanding of myth. He maintains it is not necessary for myths to be instruments of religious expression or insight in order to be of value. Humanity needs “myths to live by,” and as long as such myths are recognized as myths and are carefully constructed in the light of science and psychological discoveries, they help to preserve civilization.⁸⁹ There is contemporary evidence of what happens to a society when its myths are destroyed.

⁸⁶ Frye, *Double Vision*, 16.

⁸⁷ Frye, *Words with Power*, 23.

⁸⁸ Grelot, *Language of Symbolism*, 67.

⁸⁹ Campbell, *Myths to Live By*.

With our old mythologically founded taboos unsettled by our own modern sciences, there is everywhere in the civilized world a rapidly rising incidence of vice and crime, mental disorders, suicides and dope addictions, shattered homes, impudent children, violence, murder and despair.⁹⁰

Campbell suggests that myths and science together should be able to get past the “conflicts of illusion and truth” to find the “point of wisdom” where “lives can be put back together again.” Myths are a way of integrating our outer experience with our “innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”⁹¹

Behind much of this lies the work of Carl Jung. Jung suggests that myths are archetypes of the human psyche, and that their role is to enable “a gathering together of what is scattered, of all the things in us that have never been properly related, and a coming to terms with oneself with a view to achieving full consciousness.”⁹² Like Campbell, Jung believes that human beings need myths. Religions also need myths. Religion requires an element of a transcendental “other,” whether that other is “a ‘God,’ a ‘Savior,’ a philosophical idea, or an ethical principle,” or indeed the material of materialism.⁹³ In a letter to a clergyman who had wondered about the possibility of a “religionless Christianity,” Jung warns against the process whereby someone who undergoes a deeply religious experience decides that it had simply happened in his psyche and should therefore be dismissed. It is invalid reasoning to dismiss something as “‘only psychological’, as though there could exist anything *that is not psychological*.”⁹⁴ All consciousness is processed through our psyche. The presence of religious archetypes within our psyche has nothing to say either way about the objective reality beyond the experience.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁹¹ Campbell and Moyers, *Power of Myth*, 5.

⁹² Jung, *Collected Works*, 263.

⁹³ “*Materia* is fundamentally just a mother-goddess of chthonic nature.” Jung, “Religionless Christianity,” 45.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 46. Italics in the original. Cf. Dumbledore’s comment in *Deathly Hallows* when Harry asks him if the afterlife vision is “inside my head.” “Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?” Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 579.

Jung argues, however, that the presence of religious archetypes does affect our ability to *speak* about that religion. Not only must religions have myth, but the essentially communal nature of religion means that we must be able to use myth to communicate religious experience.

Myth is an eminent social phenomenon: it is talked about by many and listened to by many. It affords image and expression to what is in the last analysis an unexpressable religious experience. Thus it makes fellowship possible, while a merely subjective religious experience without the traditional mythical expression remains inarticulate and unsocial, and, if it does anything, fosters a *spiritually solitary life*.⁹⁵

Myths are the means by which it is possible to have meaningful conversation about individual religious experiences; they are, in a sense, the vocabulary of religious experience.

Jung and Frye therefore reach a similar conclusion from different angles: myth is a key tool in speaking of mysteries. Yet, as Jung points out, many Christian theologians have believed that “the concept of faith must ... be purified” of its uncomfortably mythic elements, those things which are “particularly offensive to reason.”⁹⁶ Myth’s popular association with “falsehood” as opposed to history and science’s association with “fact” encourages this process of biblical demythologization. What, then, should be done with myth in the Bible?

The presence or absence of myth in the Bible may be a point of contention in some Christian circles, but for biblical scholarship its presence is undeniable. Michael Fishbane stresses the value of myth in Scripture and is concerned that in “cleansing” the Bible of any “anthropomorphic and anthropopathic depictions of God” in order to “save Scripture from the merest taint of mythic irrationality and its so-called imaginative excesses,” something vital is lost. Those who do so want to show “that the Bible in its deep and true sense is a book of philosophical reason, revealed by a rational God who may best be understood and loved intellectually.”⁹⁷ Such an approach entails

⁹⁵ Jung, “Religionless Christianity,” 45-46.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁹⁷ Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 3-4.

the presumptive dismissal of certain apparently mythic features of biblical language ... that blatantly occur in the monotheistic canon of Scripture—as if these were merely due to “the inadequacy of human language” and “limitations of human thought,” or to some sort of necessarily “indirect grasp” of “spiritual concepts” by “images that emphasize the sensual.” But on what grounds are such assertions made? Surely there is nothing in Scripture itself that would point in this direction, or suggest that the representations of divine form and feeling in human terms are anything other than the preferred and characteristic mode of depiction.⁹⁸

He argues both that much of the Bible is clearly mythic, and that *mythos* speaks a different mode of truth to *logos* and does not need to be reduced to it.⁹⁹

Fishbane is responding to a long process of “demythologisation” which began well before Rudolf Bultmann’s name became associated with the term. Bultmann built on the work of a number of theologians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who had begun to apply Enlightenment rationalism to biblical texts.¹⁰⁰ Bultmann’s project included not only complete story-patterns such as the “myth of the scapegoat” under the heading of “myth,” but all those parts of the New

⁹⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁹ “In most pre-modern cultures, there were two recognized ways of thinking, speaking and acquiring knowledge. The Greeks called them *mythos* and *logos*. Both were essential. ... *Logos* (‘reason’) was the pragmatic mode of thought that enabled people to function effectively in the world. ... But it had its limitations: it could not assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life’s struggles. For that, people turned to *mythos* or ‘myth’.” Armstrong, *Case for God*, 2-3.

¹⁰⁰ From the time of the Enlightenment onwards, the major programme of German theology was to bring the Bible into accord with presuppositions of Enlightenment rationality. Some of the major influences of this time came from Rousseau, Novalis, Hegel, Schleiermacher, F.C. Baur, D.F. Strauss. Barth describes Strauss’s approach: “To conceive of Christ as the God-man can only hinder us in thus making fruitful his moral and religious greatness. The purpose of critical research into his life is therefore the removal of all that which makes of him a more than human being.” Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 553.

Testament “which are more or less mythical in their form.”¹⁰¹ This became problematic, as John Macquarrie notes: “It very quickly becomes evident that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to isolate the mythical from the non-mythical.”¹⁰² The crucifixion, for example, is an historical event but “the New Testament sets it in a cosmic drama involving pre-existence, incarnation, resurrection and exaltation. The mythical elements cannot be sealed off, as it were.”¹⁰³

Despite these difficulties, Bultmann argues demythologisation is necessary in order to “set the *kerygma* free so that we may be genuinely addressed by it”—where *kerygma* is “the proclamation of the decisive act of God in Christ.”¹⁰⁴ Paul Ricoeur plays on this idea, but suggests the purpose of demythologisation is to set the *myth* free.¹⁰⁵ Demythologising involves bringing myths into “contact with scientific history” which will strip them of their “explanatory pretensions” and release, instead, their “exploratory significance.”¹⁰⁶ Demythologising in this sense prevents myths from being reduced to a sign (which has a “one-to-one relationship with its meaning”) and returns them to their intended *symbolic* role.¹⁰⁷ A symbol, in contrast to a sign, cannot be completely decoded or explained. It creates “a permanent possibility” that is not exhausted by a single referent or a particular time and place, and is more compatible with the true nature of myth.¹⁰⁸

What Ricoeur calls “demythologisation” could just as easily be called “re-mythologization”—setting myths free to function *as* myths.¹⁰⁹ As Jason Leif suggests:

[In remythologizing we] work to reclaim the ancient function of myth—invoking imagination in order to establish the relationship between myth, meaning, and identity, while reclaiming the power of the biblical narrative.¹¹⁰

¹⁰¹ Macquarrie, *Scope of Demythologizing*, 15.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Macquarrie, *Demythologizing*, 13; Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” 13.

¹⁰⁵ Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 5.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Lacocque, “Apocalyptic Symbolism,” 6.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Lief, “Objectivist Paradigm,” 322.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Both when *mythos* is mistaken for, or interpreted as, *logos* and when myth is removed from the narrative, the text loses some of its power to ignite an imaginative understanding of religious faith. In re-mythologising the Scriptures, we accept the mythical aspects of the biblical narrative as something positive.

This approach frees us from the false dichotomy of faith and reason, meaning we do not have to force our understanding of science and history into an objective reading of the biblical text which transforms the Bible into a book of inerrant propositions. At the same time, neither are we forced into a program of demythologization, driven by historical criticism, which makes the message of the Bible fit into modern scientific and cultural perspectives. Instead we wrestle with the mythological message of the text on its own terms—not having to protect it with doctrinal assertions of inerrancy or infallibility, nor having to correct elements we find culturally embarrassing or archaic.¹¹¹

Re-mythologising recognises the value of myths both in secular circles—where they are necessary for the maintenance of “civilised society”—and religious circles, where they are necessary for the communication of religious thought and experience.¹¹² It acknowledges that biblical writings contain mythical elements as well as elements of narrative and history, and resists interpretations that turn one into another.

While the New Testament writers use a range of tropes and reasoned arguments to communicate the atoning significance of Christ’s death and resurrection, it is the most obviously mythic aspects of their atonement language that reappear in fantasy books. This is unsurprising, given the nature of the fantasy genre. Of the numerous mythologems used by New Testament writers to reflect on atonement which have been taken up in fantasy works, I will focus attention on six:

i. Blood as life

¹¹¹ Ibid., 324.

¹¹² For myth in “civilised society” see Campbell and Moyers, *Power of Myth*, 9.

- ii. Blood as an instrument of reparation and cleansing
- iii. Evil personified
- iv. The cosmic battle between light and darkness
- v. Covenant as a means of holding back chaos
- vi. Covenant curses

Each of these has its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures and Pseudipigrapha, but is taken up by both the New Testament authors and these fantasy writers in new stories, re clothed in a new setting and given new significance while retaining its essential meaning.

In the above two chapters we have explored aspects of the philosophical and literary milieu within which fantasy authors today are writing. It is a time when many philosophers are critiquing the inability of Enlightenment rationalism to express transcendence, while simultaneously questioning whether such transcendence exists. There is debate over the referential power of words themselves along with a growing interest in the expressive ability of metaphor and myth. There is also a movement within biblical scholarship to welcome and explore the Bible's mythic qualities.

This background can help us to understand some of the reasons for fantasy's rising popularity. Fantasy writers explore ways of expressing transcendence without needing to debate its reality. They draw on figurative and mythic language to create worlds in which mystery is possible. As Frye points out, "nothing ontological is asserted by literature as such," and fantasy works are not making the kind of truth claims that religious texts make.¹¹³ They are, however, the literary descendants of religious texts when they employ the same myths and imagery and use language in similarly "odd" ways to evoke a sense of something beyond everyday experience. In these works *mythos* continues to be the language with which we "assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life's struggles."¹¹⁴

In the following chapters I will look more closely at the genre of fantasy, and then turn to the fantasy worlds of the three series chosen for analysis. This will prepare the ground for understanding the role biblical mythologems play in their stories of atonement.

¹¹³ Frye, *Words with Power*, 23.

¹¹⁴ Armstrong, *Case for God*, 3.

Chapter 4

Fantasy and Faith

Religious texts are written in order to evoke and support belief in a particular religious world view. They must, therefore, purport to refer to some form of reality. Fantasy authors may hope their readers will suspend disbelief for the duration of their reading, but their works would cease to be “fantasy” if similar truth claims were made by them. Given this fundamental difference, this chapter will address the question of the relationship between fantasy writing and religion. After a brief exploration of the nature of fantasy writing itself and setting some parameters around my use of the term, I examine the implications that arise from fantasy’s particular ability to free the reader from empirical restraints and create worlds that offer a sense of wonder and possibility. I argue that, within these created worlds, fantasy is able to address matters that were traditionally the province of philosophy or religion, and trace how this is reflected in the development of children’s and teenage fantasy literature of the twentieth century.

Fantasy writing has experienced an upsurge in popularity in recent decades. Yet the variety of works the term “fantasy” now encompasses means that to talk of a “genre” of fantasy or “sub-genres” within it is not straightforward. Labels like “paranormal” imply a clarity that is not present in the works themselves, which blend and extend sub-genres, progressively producing stories for which new sub-genre labels are created. This is not surprising. Todorov observes that a characteristic of art is that each new case alters the genre. If it does not, it is mere “popular” fiction, which is more like a student repeating past experiments in science, than an art.¹

Both the “popular” and genre-stretching traits are apparent in any review of recent fantasy literature. Each time a new work successfully stretches a particular “established” genre, a stream of books springs up in its wake. Witness the range of vampire romances that followed the 2005 publication of Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight*, for example.² Then in 2007 Cassandra Clare’s *Mortal*

¹ Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 6.

² For example, “The Morganville Vampires” series by Rachel Caine and “Blue Bloods” series by Melissa de la Cruz were first published in 2006; “Vampire Academy” series by Richelle Mead and the “House of Night” series by P.C. Cast in 2007; “Evernight” series by Claudia Gray in 2008.

Instruments series arrived, in which vampires appear in a story that is primarily one of angels and demons, set in a contemporary American city. Here magic, the paranormal and the quasi-spiritual are combined. Is this “urban fantasy” because of its setting, or “paranormal fantasy” because of the vampires and werewolves, or “romantic fantasy” because of the relationship between two of the characters? Or did it help to establish a new sub-genre, one which, by involving Nephilim and demons in teenage fantasy, introduced a new trend of books about fallen angels?³

The term “fantasy literature” therefore encompasses a varied field. The works I have selected for analysis come from the point on the spectrum where the *magical* aspect of fantasy is most concentrated. It is the point where, as Robert Scholes suggests, we are offered “a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know” which “returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way.”⁴ Science fiction and dystopic literature, while on the same continuum as fantasy, are far to one end. The worlds portrayed in them are not necessarily “radically discontinuous” to our world, but rather convey what our universe might one day be. The possibilities and limitations of these worlds are often created through extensions of present earthly experiences, such as scientific discovery, power-hungry individuals or the over-use of the world’s resources. Alien figures come not from worlds that no amount of scientifically-based travel could take us to but from planets within our own universe that could conceivably be reached if we travelled far enough. The type of fantasy literature I will focus on, by contrast, is that which involves magic or supernatural forces. It hints at a world beyond our own that, while it may be ostensibly set within or overlapping with our own world, is revealed only to select people.

This magical fantasy is also distinct from that which could be called the “uncanny.” When Todorov writes of the “fantastic” it is mainly this latter type of writing to which he refers. When we encounter the uncanny we experience a tension between perceiving it as believable-unreal or

³ See the “Fallen” series by Lauren Kate (2009), or “Hush Hush” by Becca Fitzpatrick (2009).

⁴ Quoted in Mathews, *Liberation of Imagination*, 4.

unbelievable-real. While that uncertainty lasts, we are in the fantastic.⁵ This is clearly not the experience of most readers of the magical type of fantasy literature, who are unlikely to feel any serious inner conflict over how to understand the reality or unreality of the text. Nor do readers seek to resolve the tension. Rather they willingly (in Coleridge's terms) "suspend disbelief."⁶ Or, in Tolkien's terms, they willingly enter a secondary world of belief.⁷ In other words, the tension, in the manner of metaphor, is a creative one that is willingly entered into. Believable and unbelievable, possible and impossible are held together, not in hesitation or uncertainty, but in the creation of something new: wonder and possibility.

1. Reality, wonder and possibility

Mathews describes fantasy literature as "fiction that elicits wonder through elements of the supernatural or impossible. It consciously breaks free from mundane reality."⁸ "Wonder" is the important word here. Even Aristotle, despite his love of logic, "acknowledged that myth is a valid expression of wonder and the love of Wisdom."⁹ Wonder is neither belief nor unbelief, but a state of openness to possibilities, of viewing the world afresh. It is a state in which the limits of "mundane reality" suddenly become permeable. It is also a state in which even the mundane can be seen in a new way. According to C.S. Lewis:

The value of myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by 'the veil of familiarity.' The child enjoys his cold meat (otherwise dull to him) by pretending it is buffalo, just killed with his own bow and arrow. And the child is wise. The real meat comes back to him more savoury for having been dipped in a story; you might say that only then is it the real meat. If you are tired of the real landscape, look at it in a mirror. By putting bread, gold, horse, apple or the very roads into a myth, we do not retreat

⁵ Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 25.

⁶ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*. Quoted in Cornwall, *Literary Fantastic*, 1.

⁷ Tolkien, "Tree and Leaf," 49ff.

⁸ Mathews, *Liberation of Imagination*, 2.

⁹ Fishbane, *Biblical Mythmaking*, 2.

from reality: we discover it. As long as the story lingers in our mind, the real things are more themselves.¹⁰

Like Todorov, Lewis speaks in dualities of “reality” and “unreality.” In the wake of deconstructionism, one could argue that the upsurge in fantasy writing is a symptom of the postmodern belief that it is essentially impossible to express reality.¹¹ According to Aichele, “The fantastic is the potential within language (within any signifying system) to speak the incoherence at the heart of every allegation of reality. Fantasy exposes the discontinuity between the signifier and any signified, the gap which we must endlessly seek to fill with ‘reality’.”¹² If fantasy is given this role, it becomes central to all literature; it is “the literary and literal chaos from which all narrative proceeds and which is prior to, and essential to, all language. ... [I]t opens onto the unreality inherent in all language.”¹³ By referring to a world that does not exist, fantasy epitomises language’s inability to refer anywhere beyond itself. It “lay[s] bare the contingent and constructed character of meaning itself.”¹⁴ In a time when all truth claims are viewed with scepticism, fantasy is popular because it makes no such truth claims.

Aichele concedes that such literary theories, carried to extremes, lead to a certain paralysis. Foucault admitted to a sense of futility, Derrida to a sense of wheels turning and turning and never gripping the ground.¹⁵ Yet such paralysis, futility, and inability to come to grips with life are not commonly translated into the plots or themes of fantasy works themselves. There is certainly scepticism, but there is also hope.¹⁶ While characters may experience paralysis or futility, overwhelmingly the stories are ones of battling against the odds and, more often than not, succeeding. Kath Filmer argues that while recent fantasy literature “comes to terms with the existential *angst* of the twentieth century, and accepts the reality of the scepticism that pervades

¹⁰ Lewis, “Tolkien’s ‘The Lord of the Rings’,” 90.

¹¹ Aichele, “Literary Fantasy,” 325.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 327.

¹⁴ Castelli, Moore, Phillips, Schwartz, eds. *The Postmodern Bible*, 2.

¹⁵ Aichele, “Literary Fantasy,” 329.

¹⁶ Filmer, *Scepticism and Hope*, iii.

the external world,” often the worlds it creates are far from relativistic.¹⁷ Commonly they remind us, as James Sennet suggests, “of a truth we know down in our souls and deep in the darkness of sleepless nights: right and wrong are clearly different. . . . It is the difference between good and evil, and it is real, the most real thing in the universe. It is a difference that shocks us out of naïveté.”¹⁸

There is irony here. Fantasy writing can be claimed by postmodern literary theorists to epitomise the incoherence, scepticism and self-reflexiveness of language. Yet it is also the postmodern recognition that the world cannot be contained within empirical language (since there is no guarantee that such language points to a clear reality) that affirms the long tradition of fantasy writers looking beyond the empirical world, and thus eliciting wonder and hope in their readers.

Rolled all together, these narrative strains deliver us from the minimalist, empiricist, scientific, naturalistic bent that conceives of this world as (in computer parlance) the ultimate WYSIWYG—what you see is what you get. The fantasy phenomenon is a reminder—or, for many people, a first indication—that there is more in this world than is dreamed of in our science. It is the Romanticism of the late 20th and early 21st century, calling us away from the stuffiness of a “real world” that offers the soul no breathing room and into the great outdoors of spiritual and magical wonder, where words have unimaginable power and single choices change the course of history.¹⁹

Sennet is right to link “spiritual” with “magical” in this sense. Both deal with things beyond empirical understanding, and therefore potentially with mysteries such as death and life, truth and emptiness, good and evil, and the existence (or not) of a spiritual world. Fantasy makes no truth claims in itself but “provide[s] the means for expressing any number of them.”²⁰ Fantasy

¹⁷ Ibid., 2.

¹⁸ Sennett, “From Narnia to Hogwarts,” 43.

¹⁹ Ibid., 32.

²⁰ Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 10.

does not need to be “religious” in order to “speak religion”: it is already utilising the same language of wonder, hope and possibility.²¹

This is not a new idea. Myths have always addressed human bewilderment, exploring solutions to the essential questions.²² Religion has always, until relatively recent times, been taught primarily through stories. Ironically, after decades during which critical scholars have demythologised religion so that it could be in tune with a scientific and rational age, teenagers are seeking answers to “religious” questions where myths are still told. For some, fantasy authors are today’s prophets and priests.

2. Fantasy authors as prophets and priests

Filmer points out that many fantasy writers have recognised their emerging role as prophets and priests.²³ She suggests that, in materialistic Western societies, the church’s voice is generally only heard by those who seek it out in marriage or baptism or Sunday worship. Christianity is no longer the accepted source of authority and inspiration; it has become marginalised and specialised. Speak of “belief systems” in general society and that is acceptable. Speak of religion and one is likely to be met with anger or indifference.²⁴ Since both clerics and politicians have disappointed their people, we have, instead,

the rise of the “author guru”; whether the book concerned deals with losing weight from hips and thighs, or methods of reconstructing one’s psyche through meditation and carrot-juice. ... [I]t seems to me that what is happening in these secular situations merely images rather poorly what fantasy literature has achieved and is still achieving, the creation of author-priests whose role is to *minister hope* to readers and to *construct visions of reality in which humanity might transcend itself* (italics mine).²⁵

²¹ Filmer, *Scepticism and Hope*, iii.

²² Frye, *Words with Power*, 23.

²³ Filmer, *Scepticism and Hope*, 16-19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

Fantasy writing is particularly suited to the second of these tasks and has often chosen to take on the equally priestly task of the first as well.

Another factor in the development of a priestly/prophetic role for fantasy writers links back to Ricoeur's observation that the world has become increasingly "available" and "objectified," effectively removing any sense of mystery and, with it, possibility.²⁶ Mathews suggests that fantasy works try to reawaken an ancient sense of the infinite and transcendent. "The authors seemed drawn toward the conjuring of primitive, unpredictable, infinite powers *beyond* comprehension."²⁷ In an objectified world, the infinite has been made finite and humanity has discovered a lingering hunger for infinity. Fantasy authors posit the idea that this world still contains mystery, and they can offer a language with which to consider it. Like priests and prophets, they become intermediaries between the people and the unknown.

This may explain the centrality of death to many fantasy plots.²⁸ The mystery of death and what (if anything) lies beyond it has long been the province of priests and prophets. In a secular age, funerals increasingly emphasise the "celebration of a life" rather than speculating about the mystery of what is beyond death. As Filmer notes, "Secularity may be honest, but the comfort it offers is necessarily limited."²⁹ In contrast, fantasy books experiment with ideas of death being reversible and life continuing beyond it. They also frequently attribute meaning to death; it has an efficacious role. Rather than being simply the end of life, death is frequently life-giving.

3. Allegory, mythopoesis and twentieth-century fantasy literature

Creating fantasy worlds of hope and purpose is not the same as claiming that such hope and purpose is justified by a reality within our own world. There is a gulf, for example, between giving magical powers to fantasy characters and claiming the divinity of the historical man Jesus.

²⁶ Ricoeur, "Language of Faith," 225-26.

²⁷ Mathews, *Liberation of Imagination*, 10.

²⁸ Each work studied in this thesis exemplifies this. Other examples include "Inkdeath" by Cornelia Funke, and Martine Leavitt's *Keturah and Lord Death*. Even Meyer's *Twilight* series centres around death, life, and those who no longer inhabit either.

²⁹ Filmer, *Scepticism and Hope*, 44.

The first is certainly no proof of the second. Yet although the gulf cannot be breached, there is a long history of communication across it in two main ways: allegory and mythopoesis.

The use of allegory in interpreting literature for philosophical or religious ends can be traced back to at least 500 BCE when Greek philosophers, confronted with the disturbingly immoral behaviour of their gods in Homer's writings, chose to use allegorical interpretation to transform these works into teaching tools.³⁰ Christian apologists have also turned to allegory in order to teach and encourage the faith of their readers, from Paul in Galatians 4:21-28, to William Langland's dream-visions in *Piers Plowman* in the fourteenth century, to Victorian moral fables such as Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*. The nineteenth-century works of George Macdonald, however, mark a new direction. C.S. Lewis describes Macdonald's fantasy works as "fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic," a distinction that would become central to Lewis' own writing.³¹

Lewis' *Narnia* series is particularly significant for understanding his distinction between allegory and mythopoesis. While the books are crammed with Christian images, a child can read the series and remain unaware of any Christian underlay. Lewis expresses frustration at the tendency of critics to dig past the mythopoeic aspects in search of allegory.³² "No story can be devised by the wit of man which cannot be interpreted allegorically by the wit of some other man ... [so] the mere fact that you *can* allegorize the work before you is of itself no proof that it is an allegory."³³ He repudiates any idea that the *Narnia* series itself is allegory.

³⁰ "Theagenes of Rhegium is the first that we know of who brought allegory to the aid of the Homeric gods." Theagenes initiated this process by suggesting that the gods at war with each other in Troy represented the opposites of fire and water, wisdom and folly, desire and reason. Nagel, "Allegory," 41.

³¹ Lewis, *George Macdonald*: xxix.

³² There was considerable discussion at this time over whether *The Lord of the Rings* had been written as an allegory about the atomic bomb. Lewis shows this to be groundless. Lewis, "Tolkien's TLOTR," 89.

³³ Lewis, "On Criticism," 57-58.

If Aslan represented the immaterial Deity in the same way in which Giant Despair represents despair, he would be an allegorical figure. In reality however he is an invention giving an imaginary answer to the question, “What might Christ become like, if there really were a world like Narnia and He chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as He actually has done in ours?” This is not allegory at all.³⁴

Expressed in this way, the *Narnia* series is closer to biblical fan fiction than allegory. An already-established character is put in a new situation, surrounded by new circumstances, and the author explores the new possibilities offered by this. There will be many aspects of the new story that are familiar, but Lewis asserts that this form of writing is a different genre to allegory.

The distance Lewis seeks to place between allegory and his own works is echoed by many fantasy writers who have followed him. In part this may be from a desire to protect themselves from the accusations of didacticism that often accompany allegory, and from any sense that they are proselytising.³⁵ Philip Pullman goes as far as to say that if his stories teach at all, “that is not his conscious intention.”³⁶ But it is not as simple as this. Avoiding allegory does not mean avoiding the promotion of a belief system. Pullman has also been quoted as saying that he is “trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief,”³⁷ but the details of Lyra’s meditative practices have been described as “more didactic than any description of a practice in Narnia.”³⁸ Ursula le Guin bases her quartet on Taoist philosophy, and communicates that philosophy strongly.³⁹ Christian authors such as Madeleine L’Engle, Katherine Paterson or Gerald Morris are generally more covert in clothing their religious faith in fantasy. But as Katherine Paterson admits:

³⁴ Lewis, “Letters,” 283.

³⁵ Lewis bluntly denies this when Brian Aldiss suggests that *Perelandra* had been written for “didactic purposes.” Lewis’ reply is: “Yes, everyone thinks that. They are quite wrong.” Lewis, “Unreal Estates,” 87.

³⁶ Pullman quoted in Vincent, “Driven by Daemons.”

³⁷ Higgins and Johnson, “The Enemy Church,” 28.

³⁸ Paulsell, “Fantasy worlds of Pullman and Lewis,” 13.

³⁹ le Guin, *The Earthsea Trilogy*.

Who you are informs what you write on a very deep level. You reveal yourself whether you intend to or not. . . . If [the writing] comes from a person who has a Christian hope and a Christian knowledge of grace, then I think hope and grace are going to infuse my work—not that I put them in, but because I can't help having them there.⁴⁰

This would be true of any piece of creative writing, but the elements peculiar to fantasy identified earlier make it particularly receptive to any “infusion” of religious thought. This does not make overt didacticism inevitable, but does increase its likelihood.

The question of didacticism is not, however, the primary reason Lewis wants to differentiate between allegory and mythopoesis. In his essays he seeks to explain a more elusive link between fantasy (not only “Christian” fantasy) and religious faith. This is found in the creation of myth (mythopoesis), and with it the creation of fantasy worlds. Lewis argues that a fantasy world will always have something “spiritual” about it, since “to construct plausible and moving ‘other worlds’ you must draw on the only real ‘other world’ we know, that of the spirit.”⁴¹ This fantasy-creation works on an imaginative rather than an intellectual level, as Lewis himself discovered when first encountering Macdonald’s *Phantastes*. He wrote of this experience:

What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptise . . . my imagination. It did nothing to my intellect nor (at that time) to my conscience. Their turn came far later.⁴²

Lewis is not primarily interested in instructing through fantasy. He is interested in creating a particular imaginative state of mind.

⁴⁰ Chattaway, “Deeper into Terebithia,” 65.

⁴¹ Lewis, “On Stories,” 12.

⁴² Lewis, *George Macdonald*, xxxviii.

Fairy land arouses a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth.⁴³

This sense of “something beyond his reach” is common to religious thought. For Lewis, it did not need to be specifically Christian. Just as he believed that pagan tales were “good dreams” that prepared humanity’s imagination for Christianity when it arrived, so he suggests that fantasy works prepare the imagination of the secular world today to understand the Christian myths when they hear them.⁴⁴ Contemporary readers may choose not to accept them, but they have at least a chance of appreciating that Christianity is more than a set of doctrines and laws. The mystery and magic that Lewis sees at Christianity’s heart have a chance to “appear in their real potency,” stripped of their “stained-glass and Sunday school associations.”⁴⁵

The majority of children’s fantasy authors who have followed Lewis have not done so in order to prepare their readers’ imaginations to receive the “Christian myth.” But most would see their works as closer to mythopoesis than allegory. This makes studying these works for images and mythic motifs they share with the New Testament, a delicate business. My aim is not to uncover strictly allegorical representations of Christian doctrines or virtues.⁴⁶ Instead it is to appreciate how authors, working in a similar way to composers of music, weave ancient motifs into a new orchestration. Just as a fragment of the medieval plainchant *Dies Irae* emerges in the midst of works by Mozart, Holst, Berlioz, Rachmaninof and many others, each time clothed in new orchestration and harmony yet each time recognisable, so mythic motifs used by the New Testament writers to speak of atonement emerge in fantasy literature woven into the mythopoeic creation of a new world.⁴⁷

⁴³ Lewis, “On Three Ways of Writing,” 29.

⁴⁴ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 51.

⁴⁵ Lewis, “Sometimes fairy stories may say best,” 37.

⁴⁶ An exception is Garth Nix’s series, “Keys to the Kingdom” where the classic virtues and vices are personified.

⁴⁷ For example, Mozart’s Requiem, Holst’s *Planets*, Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* and Rachmaninov’s first three symphonies as well as his *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini* all use this motif.

In summary, we find in fantasy literature a form of writing that offers a contrast to Ricoeur's scientific, objective, "technological language, which disposes." It is a form of writing closer to his "language which awakens possibilities" and "understanding."⁴⁸ These phrases encapsulate the essence of the interaction between fantasy and religion. Questions explored in the language of myth or fantasy are essentially the same haunting questions that arise in religion. Since questions of meaning and destiny, death and finitude of necessity seek answers beyond finite limits, materialist answers prove unsatisfying. Once, however, a language of possibility is opened up, even in a fantasy world, there is a way of speaking of mystery: a language of faith. For faith, as Frye explains, is that which grasps a vision which is not merely the "world as it is" but a possible world.⁴⁹

No study such as this one could claim to encompass "teenage fantasy works" in their entirety. I have chosen to concentrate on three series completed since 2000. I have selected works in which an important character dies or appears to die, in order to examine the connections between these deaths and atonement within the story. The works are drawn from three different sub-genres from three different provenances. The *Old Kingdom* trilogy is by an Australian author and is "high fantasy," set in a complete and distinct world.⁵⁰ The *Mortal Instruments* trilogy is by an American writer and is set in an American city in the present day (so could be called "urban" fantasy). It includes paranormal, romantic and angelic elements with very little "magic" as such.⁵¹ The *Harry Potter* series is by a British author. It contains elements of "high fantasy" in its plot and gives a prominent place to magic. It too is set in the present time, largely in a remote area of northern Britain.

Each of these series contains stories of atonement, and each makes use of biblical themes and mythologems in the telling of their stories. But each also creates a world that is significantly different to the one we know. In order to understand how atonement can be achieved within these

⁴⁸ Ricoeur, "Language of Faith," 231. Cf. Ch. 1, ii, "Reason and imagination."

⁴⁹ Frye, *Double Vision*, 19.

⁵⁰ Nix, *Old Kingdom Trilogy*.

⁵¹ Clare, *The Mortal Instruments*.

worlds, we must understand something of the worlds themselves. Why are they in need of atonement? What is it in the history of these worlds that has created the present situation?

The nature of each series will demand a slightly different approach. While Nix's Old Kingdom is a world completely removed from ours, with its own complex mythological history, much of Harry Potter's world is recognisably our own. Although there is a strong magical dimension to Harry's world that significantly changes the ways atonement can be presented, my study of the unfamiliar Old Kingdom will necessarily be the more extensive of the two. The *Mortal Instruments* are also ostensibly set in our time and our world, but, like the *Harry Potter* series, there is much going on that cannot be seen or understood by "mundane" humanity. The battle for redemption in *The Mortal Instruments* takes place within the unseen parallel world, and it is that world that I will introduce in the next chapter.

There are numerous other fantasy books that could have made up part of this study, and on occasion I will refer to them to clarify or reinforce my analysis. But the next task is to enter the world of the Old Kingdom where Abhorsen and necromancers battle and Death is a place whose mysteries are all too well known to many of the living; the world of the Shadowhunters where Nephilim join forces with werewolves to battle demons; the world of Harry Potter where the great, but dark, wizard Voldemort seeks ultimate power over life and death.

Chapter 5

Three Fantasy Worlds

In this chapter I provide a background to the fantasy worlds of the *Old Kingdom* and *Mortal Instruments* trilogies, and explore how they, together with the world of the *Harry Potter* series, reach a point where atonement is needed for those worlds to survive in their present form.

1. The Old Kingdom Chronicles by Garth Nix

The Old Kingdom is attached by means of an ancient Wall to the northern end of the country of Ancelstierre. Most of the inhabitants of Ancelstierre would rather not think about the Old Kingdom, and in some official quarters the Old Kingdom's inability to provide suitable answers with which to fill out forms means that it clearly does not exist.¹ However, those who live or work close to the Wall are unable to delude themselves for long. Too many have died (or suffered fates worse than death) from Old Kingdom trespassers.

For the Old Kingdom is a place where there is an ongoing battle to keep the Dead from returning to Life: the Dead who must feed repeatedly on the Living if they are not to fade back into Death. It is also a place where Death itself can be, and is, deliberately entered and exited by those who have the skills, equipment and courage (or greed) to do so. In this way, the “mystery” of what comes *immediately* after dying is no mystery at all to necromancers and the Abhorsen. Those who die pass through nine gates at varying speeds, and both necromancers (who try to bring the Dead back to Life) and the Abhorsen (whose role is to ensure they remain dead) explore seven, or occasionally eight, of them. However, deep in Death the mystery remains. No one in Life has ever passed through the ninth gate and returned.

Ancelstierre provides a powerful foil to this magic-laden Old Kingdom. In Ancelstierre we have a familiar world where the Dead stay dead, where technology is advancing and where nothing is accepted that seems to “contradict [their] understanding of the forces of nature and the mechanics

¹ Nix, *Abhorsen*, 152.

of how the world work[s].”² The beliefs of the Old Kingdom people are “superstitions”³ to be dismissed or studied from the point of view of sociology.⁴ Nick, an Ancelstierran whom we meet in *Lirael*, epitomizes their attitude: “Once he decides something is just so, he won’t change his mind unless you can prove it with mathematics or something he accepts.”⁵ Yet such an attitude is rapidly revealed to be dangerous and eventually becomes catastrophic. However little the Ancelstierrans want to admit it, the Old Kingdom forces on them the reality of mysteries, myths and possibilities beyond their dreaming.

It seems probable that a kingdom in which the Dead return to a parody of Life and consume the Living would be a nightmare kingdom, that the comparatively untroubled land of Ancelstierre would be far preferable. Yet there is more to the Old Kingdom than the aberrations of necromancers. For those who belong to the Old Kingdom, their land holds a richness not to be found in the mundane land to the south. As Sabriel returns north after many years schooling in Ancelstierre, she realises that “her memories of the Old Kingdom were dim. . . . But she felt a sense of mystery and wonder kindle with the force of the Charter Magic she felt around her—a sense of something so much more alive . . . and much more freedom.” This is despite that “feeling of wonder and excitement” coming “laced with dread.”⁶ Her son, later, realizes that Ancelstierre seems “somehow less real,” “dreamy,” “washed-out” when compared to the Old Kingdom.⁷ Danger is real in the Old Kingdom, but life, death, courage, myth and joy are also more real there than in the mundane lands.

Here, embedded in story, are two parallel ways of understanding the world and living within it. There is no doubt that the reader is encouraged to explore the vital issues of life in the story in which the limits of science are transcended, to avoid at all cost the dangerous attitudinal blindness of a Nick. As the series reaches its climax, it becomes clear that the battle to save the world

² Nix, *Lirael*, 436.

³ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 347.

⁶ Nix, *Sabriel*, 31.

⁷ Nix, *Lirael*, 436.

against a being in whom evil is focussed can only be won by those who take the myths of their world seriously, especially the myth central to their world's existence: the act of creation.

Myths gain their peculiar power partly from the sense that they are grounded in a distant, mysterious past. In both the Hebrew Scriptures and Old Kingdom the myths that make sense of how each world functions can be traced back to the Beginning itself, to the worlds' very creation and formation. Like Ancelstierre, we may have lost, in the West, our collective sense of connection with a mythic Beginning, but the characters in the Old Kingdom have not. The precise details of the events of that time are revealed to them very slowly, but they are always aware of at least one ancient link: ever since the Beginning there has been a Charter, and that Charter shapes their lives.

*Five Great Charters knit the land
Together linked, hand in hand.
One in the people who wear the crown
Two in the folk who keep the Dead down
Three and Five became stone and mortar
Four sees all in frozen water.⁸*

At the time of the formation of the Old Kingdom there were nine Bright Shiners, Free Magic beings whose power far exceeded that of any others.⁹ The Charter was the creation of seven of them who chose to bind themselves to the restrictions of this Charter in order to preserve the world. Preservation was necessary because the ninth Bright Shiner, the most powerful of them all, was Orannis, the Destroyer. Orannis was the antithesis of life and creation. It existed to annihilate, and world after world had already fallen to Its destructive power.¹⁰ When It reached

⁸ Nix, *Sabriel*, 216.

⁹ There are numerous possible Christian allusions in the trilogy I will not explore in depth unless they are directly linked with atonement. The nine Bright Shiners could, for example, be linked to the medieval division of angels into three "hierarchies" of three "species" each. See Lewis, *Discarded Image*. There are also numerous other allusions to myths beyond Christianity.

While interesting, they are not pertinent to this thesis, but references to some can be found in Horan, "Abhorsen," 94, and Mills, "Premature Burial," 51.

¹⁰ Nix uses a capital "I" in "It" when referring to the divine figure of Orannis.

what would become the Old Kingdom, the Seven were ready for It and used their combined powers to form the Charter which bound It deep in the earth.

Orannis was pure Free Magic, unbound by restrictions or laws. The other Bright Shiners were also Free Magic, but whereas they chose to use the Magic for life, in Orannis this Magic was used solely for death. In order to bind Orannis, Free Magic itself had to be bound and channelled into paths of creation rather than destruction, enabling life that was not Free Magic to exist. The binding of Orannis, then, resulted in the possibility of creation. This process is experienced in miniature by Sabriel when she puts on a Free Magic ring which has been controlled by the Charter. Initially she falls into “infinity, into a void that had no end and no beginning. Everything was gone, all light, all substance,” but then “Charter marks suddenly exploded all around her and she felt gripped by them. Halting her headlong fall into nothing, accelerating her back up, back into her body, back to the world of Life and Death.”¹¹ When the power of Free Magic is harnessed within the confines of the Charter, a limitless void takes on form and substance. The Charter “underpins everything that exists in the Old Kingdom. Almost all things are described, contained and joined by it. The Charter flows everywhere.”¹²

Although it flows everywhere, not everywhere is aware of it (Ancelestierre is not, for example). Nor does it flow everywhere equally, being particularly potent in certain places. The Disreputable Dog is Lirael’s dearest friend and (as we eventually discover) a Bright Shiner. She tells Lirael that five of the Seven Shiners put their lives completely into the formation of five sub-charters which together made up the Great Charter itself.¹³ Eventually these charters are contained in the Wall, the Great Charter Stones, and the three bloodlines of the Abhorsen, the Clayr and the Royal Family.¹⁴ While these charters survive, the Great Charter is strong.

“The Beginning,” as it is called in the Old Kingdom, sets the shape of how the Kingdom is to function from then on. In the creation of the Charter, we have more than an agreement or bargain

¹¹ Nix, *Sabriel*, 124.

¹² Nix, *Lirael*, Author’s Notes.

¹³ The Disreputable Dog was one of the two not completely subsumed into the Charter.

¹⁴ It was at the point of the creation of the Wall that the Old Kingdom was first “attached” to Ancelestierre; hence my use of that word in the opening sentence of this section.

made between quasi-divine beings and humanity. We have far more than a legal document. We have something that holds the world together, in which, as we will see, the co-operation of humanity plays an essential role. It is not that the Charter is obeyed in order to please the Bright Shiners (who, after all, have already subsumed much of their lives into the making of that Charter), but that the boundaries and control supplied by the Charter are what hold darkness and chaos and death at bay.

The Great Charter is therefore a thing of great power. Charter Mages may tap into it, carefully, in order to use certain Charter Marks, but only Charter Mages can do this and even for them it is a dangerous process. Marks that are too powerful for the wielders can kill them.¹⁵ As such the Charter is very much an impersonal force: magical, yes, but more like a potent ingredient than a magician. Gradually, however, it becomes clear that the situation is more complex than this. If the Charter were merely a force or tool, it would not be called upon to bless people or protect them, nor would it choose to act without request.¹⁶ Although the normal process is for Charter Mages to use the Charter, there are occasions where the Charter clearly uses the Mages.¹⁷ Eventually one suspects that the Charter has been active throughout.

Nix implies that the lives of the original Seven continue within the Charter in some form. When Lirael decides to make a “pretend” dog to keep herself company in her loneliness, she models it on a soapstone dog she finds deep in the Clayr library where she works. But as she starts calling on the Charter Marks she needs, the Charter itself takes over and floods her with marks that were “more ancient and more powerful than anything she had ever seen.”¹⁸ Marks of such power would kill her had she called on them, but she is merely a channel for power initiated by the Charter itself. She remains unharmed, despite the elements of Free Magic working through her. The result is the appearance of the Disreputable Dog: not “pretend” at all, but as alive and exuberant and affectionate as any large and scruffy mongrel could be. The Charter enabled creation at the beginning, and continues to choose to enable life.

¹⁵ Nix, *Lirael*, 100.

¹⁶ Nix, *Sabriel*, 215, 60, 71; *Lirael*, 143.

¹⁷ Nix, *Abhorsen*, 351; *Lirael*, 112-13.

¹⁸ Nix, *Lirael*, 113.

There is another sense in which the Seven continue to live in the Charter. Abhorsens carry seven bells, named after the Seven Bright Shiners and imbued with some small part of their lives. That small part comes through the sound the bells make. Each bell's particular power is that of the Bright Shiner whose name it shares:

Ranna — Sleeper

Mosrael — Waker

Kibeth — Walker

Dyrim — Speaker

Belgaer — Thinker

Saranath — Binder

Astarael — Weeper

Together the Seven made up what was necessary for creation. Late in *Abhorsen* we discover that the Disreputable Dog is “what’s left over” of Kibeth once most of her had been put into the Charter. Her bark still retains the power to make people walk involuntarily, either within this world or into Death.

The Charter, which continues to maintain creation, contains the living, creative energy and will of its creators. It forms the necessary boundaries around chaos and is also the means by which those boundaries were created. Without the Charter, the world would rapidly be destroyed. This is the background to a story in which atonement becomes vital. Forces of Free Magic combine to attack the Charter, and the inheritors of the Charter Lines find themselves battling to save their world from chaos and destruction. To do so, they must seek answers in their own mythological history and call on the atoning power of self-sacrifice in ways that will show interesting parallels with the stories of New Testament atonement.

2. The Mortal Instruments by Cassandra Clare.

Where the Old Kingdom is a unique world with its own beginning and its own distinct history, *The Mortal Instruments* is set in present-day New York and the mythology is largely that of the primary religious cultures of that city: Jewish and Christian. Although Clare's use of this

mythology makes it as unfamiliar and magical as that of the Old Kingdom, Clare did not invent a new world. Instead she creates a level of mystery in our own world.

In the world that Clare creates, there is much more going on in the streets of earth's cities than "mundane" people realise. "Mundanes" are easily deluded by "glamours" which can be cast over places, people and events and blind them to the "underworld" of magic and demonic influence around them. Thus the soaring cathedral that is the home of the Shadowhunters in New York appears to be a ruin, hideous and malformed demons can pass as police, and Shadowhunters can track and kill a demon in the middle of a party without anyone noticing.¹⁹ A derelict hotel hosts a hoard of vampires, and a Chinese take-away is the front for a den of werewolves (who, incidentally, will occasionally take orders and deliver the food for the fun of it).²⁰

Most of this underworld is the result of demonic activity. Demons, according to the hero, Jace, are "religiously defined as hell's denizens, the servants of Satan, but understood here ... to be any malevolent spirit whose origin is outside our own home dimension."²¹ Their presence on earth can be understood through the tale in *Paradise Lost* of Satan leaving Hell to seek the world God has created. Satan causes Sin to turn "the intricate wards" in Hell's gate and let him through, enabling him to enter the abyss, the realm of Chaos and darkness, before reaching earth.²² In *The Mortal Instruments* each world is protected from the demons that infest this darkness between the worlds by "wards."²³ However, like Satan, demons have long found ways of breaking through these defences. Interbreeding with fallen angels in the distant past produced faeries. Demonic interbreeding with humans continues to produce warlocks. Demonic diseases infect other humans, creating vampires and werewolves. Warlocks, faeries, vampires and werewolves are known collectively as "Downworlders," and despite their demonic origins, are distinct from demons. As Jace explains:

¹⁹ Note the site of this party is the Pandemonium Club; cf. Satan's council site in Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 1. Clare has acknowledged the influence *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Inferno* had on the writing of this trilogy. Cassandra Clare, "FAQS."

²⁰ Clare, *City of Bones*, 377.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²² Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 2, line 877.

²³ Clare, *City of Bones*, 167.

Vampires, werewolves, even warlocks, they're part human. Part of this world, born in it. They belong here. But demons come from other worlds. They're interdimensional parasites. They come to a world and use it up. They can't build, just destroy—they can't make, only use. They drain a place to ashes and when it's dead, they move on to the next one. It's life they want—not just your life or mine, but all the life of this world, its rivers and cities, its oceans, its everything.²⁴

Demons, like the Dead in the *Old Kingdom*, feed on life, and the only force preventing them from devouring the world is the Shadowhunters.

The legend of the Shadowhunters goes back 1000 years to a time when there was a particularly bad infestation of demons. As Hodge explains to Clary, “A warlock summoned the Angel Raziel, who mixed some of his own blood with the blood of men in a cup, and gave it to those men to drink. Those who drank the Angel's blood became Shadowhunters, as did their children.”²⁵ Because these humans have angel blood in their veins, they are also called Nephilim, after the half-human, half-angel creatures of Genesis 6:4. Raziel also gave them the “Gramarye” book, “The Gray Book.” The Gray Book contains copies of runes: complex marks which make up the language of heaven.²⁶ Each rune gives or strengthens a particular ability, and can only be put on Nephilim skin. If a Mundane is given a rune, they are likely to turn into tortured monsters called “Forsaken.” Finally, Raziel gave Shadowhunters the Mortal Instruments: a cup, a sword, and a mirror. The Cup has strong associations with Christ's chalice, although we are never told that it is that exact cup. The Sword was used to guard the entrance to Eden, and the Mirror turns out to be

²⁴ Ibid., 166.

²⁵ Ibid., 77.

²⁶ Ibid., 216. Note that Raziel is traditionally held to give secrets to humans, from Adam and Eve to Noah. He is also held to have written the medieval *Sefer Raziel*, which would fit chronologically with the Book being given to humankind 1000 years ago. Nyland, *Angels, Archangels and Angel Categories*, 93.

Lake Lyn, from which Raziel rose.²⁷ Each Instrument is dangerous, as holy objects are dangerous, and its power for good can be warped to a corresponding power for evil.

Shadowhunters are a people set apart, created to control demons and maintain peace amongst Downworlders. Maia, a young werewolf, thinks of them as “the arcane world’s secret police force.”²⁸ Yet the teenage Nephilim are also very much modern American teenagers. This is especially true of Clary, who provides the link and comparison between the world as we know it and the world Clare has created. Clary has reached sixteen in the mundane world without knowing that she has two Shadowhunter parents. Her closest friend, Simon, is an utterly mundane computer geek; her mother is an artist; her mother’s best friend, Luke, is a bespectacled bookseller; and her father, she believes, is dead. By the end of the series, Simon has become a vampire, Luke is revealed to be a werewolf, her mother is revealed to be a Shadowhunter, and her father is revealed to be both alive and the fear of most living Nephilim: Valentine. Clary, then, undergoes a steep learning curve.

Understandably, Clary sometimes yearns for the “normal” life she once had. But, as Luke tells her, “Normal isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”²⁹ As it was for the inhabitants of the Old Kingdom, so it is clear that for the Nephilim the dangers of seeing the layers of reality hidden from other people are compensated for by the added dimensions they give to life. At the end of the first book, Clary and Jace are riding a flying motorbike (fuelled by demon energies) over New York.

“What are you thinking?” he called back to her.

²⁷ There is a legend about Lake Llyn in Wales of the Lady of the Lake rising from it and using it as a mirror to see in in order to brush her hair. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/wfb/wfb03.htm>. Clare could also have associated her lake with Cadair Idris (Idris being the name of the Shadowhunter country) where legend tells that any who sleep on its banks will wake a madman or a poet. When Clare drinks some of the waters of Lake Lyn she starts going mad. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cadair_Ibris#Myths.2C_legends_and_popular_culture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cadair_Idris#Myths.2C_legends_and_popular_culture)

²⁸ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 34.

²⁹ Clare, *City of Glass*, 12.

“Just how different everything down there is now, you know, now that I can see.”

“Everything down there is exactly the same. ... You’re the one that’s different.”
... Her stomach dropped out from under her as the silver river spun away and the spires of the bridge slid under her feet, but this time Clary kept her eyes open, so that she could see it all.³⁰

In the world—our world as Clare portrays it—there is a level of reality beyond our vision. It is a reality of mystery and danger where the spiritual warfare between good and evil takes on physical form. Knowledge of this reality deepens and enriches the seer’s experience and understanding.

Despite the strong use of Jewish and Christian mythic figures, the sense of mystery in this world is not linked primarily to God. For most of Clare’s characters, heaven and heaven’s residents are distant at best and non-existent at worst. Although Jace recites words that call on some heavenly power to give him access to consecrated places, the words hold no meaning for him.³¹ He is “not really a believer.”³² He knows demons are a reality, but has no idea if angels or God exist. Similarly, Maia remembers that getting used to the idea of demons

had given her a headache. Vampires and werewolves were just people with a disease, that much she understood, but expecting her to believe in all that heaven and hell crap, demons and angels, and still nobody could tell her for sure if there was a God or not, or where you went after you died? It wasn’t fair.³³

Maia has a point. It seems that those whose eyes are opened to the ever-present reality of the demonic world suffer from the same doubts about God that affect mundane humanity. Jace in

³⁰ Clare, *City of Bones*, 442.

³¹ Clare, *City of Bones*, 235.

³² *Ibid.*, 237.

³³ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 34.

Book 1 still believes (falsely) that Valentine (whom he knew as Michael Wayland) was his father, and that he was murdered. He has this to say about belief in God:

My father believed in a righteous God. *Deus volt*, that was his motto—‘Because God wills it.’ It was the Crusaders’ motto, and they went out to battle and were slaughtered, just like my father. And when I saw him lying dead in a pool of his own blood, I knew then that I hadn’t stopped believing in God. I’d just stopped believing God cared. There might be a God, Clary, and there might not, but I don’t think it matters. Either way, we’re on our own.³⁴

For much of the trilogy, this appears to be an accurate assessment. Mystery is immanent, not transcendent. If there are wars in heaven they do not affect humanity; all that matters are the wars happening on earth. There may be a heaven, there may be a god, but meanwhile there are demons to fight on earth, and characters like Jace believe mortals fight them alone.

Ironically, we discover in the third book not only that angels are real (Jace and Clary encounter two of them), but that Clary and Jace have particular abilities because Valentine gave their pregnant mothers angel blood to drink. They are closer to angels themselves than any other Nephilim, yet doubt angels’ existence. Clare is wise to portray them in this way. Readers are likely to relate to Jace’s scepticism and Clary’s ignorance, and their doubts enhance rather than detract from the trilogy’s sense of mystery. If angels were as commonplace as demons, they would be a normal part of the Shadowhunter world. Since they are mostly objects of conjecture and faith, they remain mysterious.

However, very few Nephilim ever encounter an angel and for the most part their religion is earth-bound and pragmatic. They deal with reality as they find it, and if they must use runes and swords lit up by the power of an angel’s name to do so, they are no more in awe of them than a carpenter would be of an electric saw. They are aware of the care with which they must be used, but they are an accepted part of their world. When Clary asks why there are no churches in Idris, she is told,

³⁴ Clare, *City of Bones*, 238.

“No need. ... The demon towers keep us safe. We need nothing else.”³⁵ Their religious belief system has one prime purpose: to protect them from demonic attacks. Yet some religious belief continues to be important for many Shadowhunters because of the prestige it gives them. When the protective wards around their home city, Alicante, are threatened, the Shadowhunters refuse to believe it. Sebastian observes, “The wards are their religion. Not to believe in the power of the wards is not to believe that they are special, chosen, and protected by the Angel. They might as well believe they’re just ordinary mundanes.”³⁶ It is this pride that Valentine plays on in others to stir up hatred for Downworlders amongst the Nephilim.

As the story unfolds, this essentially pragmatic and controlled Shadowhunter religion is shaken. The supposedly infallible demon towers crumble. The ruling Council—symbol, they think, of the Angel’s divine favour towards Shadowhunters alone—is forced to admit its need of Downworlders. Yet Jace’s cynicism is also shaken. Half-way through his recitation of the correct words to open a church door, it opens, and Luke says, “The angel knows what your mission is. ... You don’t have to say the words aloud, Jonathan.” As Clary watched, “she saw something flicker across Jace’s face—uncertainty, surprise—and maybe even relief?”³⁷

Even the Shadowhunters’ understanding of the strict limitations and rules surrounding Runes is blown wide by Clary. When Clary reads her first rune, she thinks, “*Remember*. If the rune were a word, it would have been that one, but there was more meaning to it than any word she could imagine.”³⁸ Heaven’s language is both beyond the scope of our words and contains within itself the power to do the thing it expresses.³⁹ Runes epitomize the mystery of the world and are thus carefully controlled by the law-loving Shadowhunters. However, to the Clave’s consternation, Clary’s use of runes turns out to be unique and beyond the bounds of the Law. Her particular angelic gift, given through Ithuriel’s blood, enables her to visualize and uses runes that are not in

³⁵ Clare, *City of Glass*, 141. This was, ironically, said by Sebastian who is half demon and who will shortly destroy the demon towers.

³⁶ Clare, *City of Glass*, 229.

³⁷ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 34.

³⁸ Clare, *City of Bones*, 217.

³⁹ See Heb 4:12, “The word of God is living and active...”

the Gray Book, and to infuse the Gray Book runes with many times their usual power. Her hand is guided, allowing her to draw even the most ancient rune of them all: the Mark of Cain. It is “something perfect and strange and ancient, something from the very beginning of history,” something drawn by God himself.⁴⁰ Suddenly something from outside the Shadowhunter world is acting directly *in* their world; that which was already beyond words, but had become earth-bound through familiarity, has been made mysterious again. Clary’s gift shakes the Shadowhunters’ known world, as if the electric saw had suddenly started creating works of art unbidden. It is a reminder that there are other forces at work in the world. Even Shadowhunters do not necessarily see everything there is to be seen.

Clare has turned our world into a fantasy world by investing it with two of the key ingredients of fantasy literature: a sense of wonder and a sense of possibility. The reader sees, through Clary’s eyes, mundane reality peeled back to reveal a deeper, hidden reality of unknown potential. Then even that reality is pierced through with the infinitely deeper and more mysterious (because never fully explored) reality of the heavenly world.

Clare is not the only contemporary fantasy writer to set her works in the present day, with the mythic world in parallel with the material (“mundane”) world and visible only to a few. Rick Riordan, for example, has done the same, with both Greek and Egyptian mythology being woven into our own time.⁴¹ Riordan does not expect us to believe the ancient gods are genuinely playing a role in today’s affairs. Neither does Clare’s use of fragments of Jewish and Christian myths in a similar manner necessarily give them any credence. Clare, however, has done more than populate her world with angels and demons. She has also woven biblical motifs into the imagery that lies behind the fantastic action.

The central drama of the books is played out principally in the middle level of reality, the level hidden to mundanes but visible to Shadowhunters and Downworlders. It is a drama that has roots

⁴⁰ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 440.

⁴¹ Riordan, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*; Riordan, *The Kane Chronicles*. See also Scott, *Alchemyst*.

in an ancient mythic past, a “battle that never ends” between forces of light and forces of darkness.⁴² Clare portrays the darkness beginning to take over our contemporary world, imprisoning people in networks of deception, driving them into the hells of their own minds, as Milton’s Satan also experienced.⁴³ She explores the ways this kingdom of darkness might manifest itself today—how figures with too much in common with Satan might still imprison people in “hell.” Then, given that imprisonment, she explores the possibilities of light’s final victory. How can the characters be set free? What roles do light and self-sacrifice play in the atonement that is necessary for redemption? How atonement is made, the darkness defeated and the people set free are the questions that will be addressed in the following chapters.

3. The Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling

The *Harry Potter* books have been the object of detailed analysis and passionate debate on both popular and academic levels. This, combined with their popularity across age groups, means that many adults have at least a passing knowledge of the world Rowling has created. It is worthwhile, however, to consider briefly how Rowling uses the fantasy of her fantasy world, as her approach to magic is notably different to that of Nix or Clare.

For most of the series, Rowling presents mythological creatures and magical happenings as an ordinary rather than fantastic part of life.⁴⁴ Magic is more commonly used for peeling potatoes than saving the world. Mythical creatures and magical spells are hidden from Muggle eyes for purely practical reasons, but are dealt with (in the case of creatures) or used (in the case of magic) as naturally and pragmatically by wizards as rats or electricity are by Muggles.⁴⁵ This sense of the normality of magic is partly created by the familiarity of the world Harry lives in. Clare’s world is also supposedly our own, but much of her action takes place in that “middle

⁴² Clare, *City of Bones*, 235.

⁴³ Cf. “Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell.” Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 4, line 75.

⁴⁴ Ostling argues that the almost mundane practicality of the magic in Rowling’s works means that her world is in fact “disenchanted.” Ostling, “Harry Potter and the Disenchantment of the World,” passim.

⁴⁵ While witch hunts drove the magical community into hiding, the main reason they remain hidden is because otherwise Muggles would be wanting magical solutions to all their problems. The wizarding community would never be left in peace. Rowling, *Philosopher’s Stone*, 51.

level” of reality whose history and mythology is unknown to Mundanes. Rowling has us believe that despite the presence of wizards, witches, dragons and giants in Harry’s world, it is our world as well. It shares our history, even if that history can be reinterpreted in the light of magic. Wizards, for example, learn of the medieval witch hunts but are taught that while many innocent people were burned at the stake as “witches,” real witches could cast a couple of spells and rather enjoy the experience.⁴⁶ The students at Hogwarts celebrate Easter and Christmas and Halloween: there are no feasts to celebrate some hidden mythology unknown to Muggles. When inscriptions are written on tombstones, they include biblical quotes.⁴⁷ Again, there is no reference to any belief system or primal history that is not familiar to our Muggle world.

Yet by creating a magical world that exists alongside the Muggle world and deals with the same problems of exams and blocked drains, bureaucracy and cooking, Rowling is able to shape our view of those mundane realities. Her characters accept magic as normal, yet find aspects of the Muggles’ normality mysterious. Electricity, seen through the eyes of Mr Weasley, is as fascinating and foreign as magic is to Muggles. Escalators, ticket booths, trains, all become objects of interest and wonder.⁴⁸ In this way Rowling prepares us to be shown that the two deepest mysteries in the Wizard world—those things that are beyond their understanding or even magical control—are the same as in our own: death and love.⁴⁹ Both, through Rowling’s stories, take on not just magical qualities, but the status of being *beyond* even the magic of the most powerful wizards.

Similarly, the greatest evil force in the Wizard world is one familiar to Muggles as well: an insatiable lust for power. Voldemort and his dark army of Death Eaters practise Dark Arts which give them the power to make whomever they choose suffer, do their will, or die. As their power grows, they enlist the help of the dark Dementors who can suck all happiness from life and even pull people’s souls from their bodies. Muggles are murdered, and grey mist settles over the country. But Voldemort wants more than this. He rebels against the notion that there could be

⁴⁶ Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 7.

⁴⁷ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 266, 68.

⁴⁸ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 115.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 682-3, 743.

anything more powerful than he is, and sets out to conquer his own death. Atonement in Harry's world means lifting Voldemort's curse, grappling with the powers of death and temptation, and finally defeating Voldemort's dark powers through love and self-sacrifice.

The familiarity of Harry's world, and the lack of any new, deep mythological history within it, means that a more detailed background to its unfolding story of atonement is unnecessary. However, one issue connected to the varied reactions of Christian commentators to Rowling's books bears on my approach to all three series. While some groups have reacted strongly against the series, others have countered with defences of the Christian nature of the works. Writers such as Nancy Solon Villaluz have pointed out parallels between events in the story and the Gospels, delighting in cracking what she understands to be codes hidden within the pages in order to uncover the "real" meaning of the works.⁵⁰ Such an interpretation can lead to questions such as, "Is Harry Christ?" or "Is Dumbledore God?" on popular websites.⁵¹ James W. Thomas critiques this approach when John Killinger follows it in his own study of the series:

This kind of allegorical one-to-one identification permeates Killinger's book, and it impoverishes Rowling's books. ... Killinger seems to be giving readers *the* key to Rowling's books. This is all problematic, for the Potter books are so richly encoded that—infused as they are with Christian allusions, echoes and parallels—there are numerous other keys (for lack of a better term) to the books as well.⁵²

As Thomas argues, both Harry and Dumbledore are complex and unique characters, not allegorical representations of Christ. Harry makes this clear by repeatedly trying to quell the expectations and even the "worship" that others force on him.⁵³ The final book's epilogue, which has been widely criticised, is actually completely fitting: what Harry always wanted, and finally

⁵⁰ Solon Villaluz, *Sleeping Dragons*.

⁵¹ Granger, "But Obviously Dumbledore is not Jesus," <http://www.hogwartsprofessor.com/but-obviously-dumbledore-is-not-jesus-the-hogwarts-headmaster-as-christ-symbol-in-half-blood-prince/>.

⁵² Thomas, "Life, Death, and Resurrection," 365. He writes concerning Killinger, *Life, Death and Resurrection of Harry Potter*.

⁵³ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 11.

achieves, is a normal, low-key, happy life. His story does not end with him rising up to heaven on the clouds, but peering through the smog of a London railway station.

This distinction is important for the direction I will take when studying these fantasy series. When I note that a particular mythologem associated with biblical atonement is re clothed within a fantasy work, I am not saying that a character or event has been used allegorically. I suggested earlier that their use was more in the manner of an ancient musical theme being incorporated into a new composition. Tolkien uses another analogy when he describes our mythical heritage as a “pot of soup” where numerous elements blend and reform.⁵⁴ Alternatively, we could conceptualise it as a braided river, with innumerable rivulets and tributaries that cross over and join again, all forming the wealth of myth that flows down to us. In the next section, I will explore particular mythologems, or segments of river, as they are travelled by the Hebrew people, and suggest how Christ both travelled the same routes and discovered previously uncharted waters. Then, two thousand years later, we find certain characters from the three series we are investigating travelling the same segments. Although Harry, for example travels in a very different craft to that which carried Jesus, the Hebrew people or the early Christians, certain stretches of water are the same, and the countryside recognisable even after 2000 years.

Harry, and others, travel through countryside that is, or becomes, known to their readers in a way the countryside of first century Palestine is not. Readers experience with Harry the sometimes tortuous bends and hazards of streams which were formed by myths of atonement, and this can make the otherwise foreign lands around them seem familiar. Additionally, the reader can see how the characters in these books have navigated the dangers of these streams in the twenty-first century boats they steer, which may assist the reader’s own navigation as he encounters them in writings centuries older. Whether or not other parts of the story travel similar routes or are completely antithetical to the Christian story may well be irrelevant. It is the part in which these common segments are travelled that is of importance here and which will be addressed in the next section.

⁵⁴ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 20, 27.

To summarise, then: Nix's Old Kingdom relies on the strength of the Charter for its existence. He creates a powerful mythological history stretching from the Beginning to the literary present in which the Charter is repeatedly threatened by forces who reverse or pervert its order, breaking its boundaries. As the series begins, the Charter is weakened and in danger of being destroyed. In order to protect it, and therefore the world itself, there must be some process of atonement.

Clare's very different world is under constant attack from demonic forces which break through the protective wards around earth and are only prevented from slaughtering humanity by the Shadowhunters: humans with angel blood. Were the wards to break or the Shadowhunters desert their ordained role, darkness would engulf the world. When someone arises who wants to bring about both these ends, a process of atonement is needed to save both Shadowhunters and the world.

Finally, in Rowling's works, a powerful dark wizard seeks to take control of both the wizarding community and death itself: killing indiscriminately, but warding off death for himself. He must be conquered, and we discover that atonement is necessary for this to happen.

Each world, then, is in need of atonement, and their particular mythological backgrounds will shape how this is attained in each case. The following chapters will explore the ways in which mythologems which were central to atonement as it unfolded in the world of the Bible are integral to these mythological backgrounds and the atonement that grows from them.

Chapter 6

Atonement through Blood.

In order to recognise the ways in which biblical atonement mythologems are being used today, it is vital to understand their use in the Bible itself. When the biblical writers spoke of blood or cosmic victory or covenant they were not propounding abstract doctrines. They were employing essentially mythic, occasionally shocking, and extremely complex concepts in order to speak of God's work with his people. In this chapter I examine the biblical understanding of blood, and the impact of that understanding on sacrificial atonement.

The Christian use of the word "blood" should be shocking. A newcomer in a church pew may hear the words of the religion's founder being read, telling the bewildered crowds to "eat his flesh and drink his blood" to receive eternal life (Jn 6:54). She could then be given a hymn to sing about being "washed in the blood of the lamb," be taught that this religion was founded on salvation through bloodshed, and then be invited forward to drink red wine with the invitation, "This is my blood, shed for you. Drink it in memory of me." Those around her would accept the words calmly, but she could be excused for being horrified or revolted. Viewed in this way, it sounds like a setting for a new teenage vampire novel.

The last sentence is not entirely frivolous. Recent atonement writing by theologians and philosophers is saturated with an awareness of how scandalous much atonement imagery is, and probably was from the beginning.¹ The newcomer in the pew may have grasped something missed by those for whom the language has become partially tamed by the familiarity of doctrinal formulas.

Blood in the Bible is more than a physical substance. It is something inherently "holy," with all the associated dangers of holiness. It can be used to influence cosmic forces of good and evil and

¹ See, for example, Finlan, *Options on Atonement*; Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*; Baker, ed. *Proclaiming the Scandal*; Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*; Chase and Jacobs, eds., *Must Christianity be Violent?*

partakes in the battle between life and death. I will focus on two key elements of this “mythic” representation of blood in the Hebrew Scriptures that are taken up again in the New Testament, and which have survived as mythologems to be re clothed in fantasy stories today. These are the elements that “the life of every creature is its blood” (Lv 17:14) and that blood can be a cleansing or reparative agent. The two motifs are complexly interrelated, but in the interests of clarity I will approach them separately.

1. The life of every creature is its blood (Lv 17:14)

Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! (Gn 4:10)

We should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. (Acts 15:20)

In the biblical narrative, the first interpersonal crime is the shedding of blood. Abel’s blood cries out to God from the earth (Gn 4:10). The significance of that cry resurfaces throughout the Bible, from Genesis to the basic instructions given to the young church in Acts, reinforcing the notion that blood is something which must be treated with particular care.² When God launches the new world after the Flood, the only instructions he gives Noah are with regard to blood. When in Acts the apostles launch the new church, two of the four prohibitions they place on Gentiles are to abstain from eating flesh with blood in it and from bloodshed (Acts 15:20). Milgrom describes

² We may have lost this sense in the modern church (apart from the renewed respect for blood driven by a secular consciousness of HIV-AIDS) but it remained present in the Christian church for centuries, as evidenced from this grotesque description of practices at the time of the Inquisition:

“... il était permis d’appliquer la torture, procédé légalement admis par la justice civile pour la découverte de crimes graves, mais dont la justice ecclésiastique devait, en principe, s’abstenir. En fait, elle la pratiquait aussi, avec cette réserve qu’il ne devait pas s’ensuivre de mort ou de mutilation, ni d’effusion de sang; l’effusion de sang constituant, pour les clercs, une irrégularité canonique.” The fact that all that held the church back from spilling blood during their questionable torturing sessions was that it was a “canonical impropriety” speaks volumes about where the concept of respect for blood had reached by that stage in the church’s history. Oldenbourg, *Le bûcher de Montségur*, 429.

the blood prohibition as an ancient *leitmotif* that runs through all of Israel's history and legislation.³

Yet in the Gospels, Jesus tells his followers to drink his blood. He takes this central prohibition from the roots of time, and shockingly, albeit metaphorically, overturns it. This raises a number of questions. Why would he ask his disciples to drink even symbolic blood, when there is no blood drunk at Passover or in any Hebrew sacrificial or covenantal rite?⁴ Why do the epistles choose to emphasise the bloody nature of Jesus' death, when there is very little blood spoken of at his crucifixion, at least in the Synoptic Gospels?⁵ To what extent is a mythic understanding of "blood" responsible for these puzzles?

Biblical commentators give a range of answers to this last question. Westermann opts for a "functional" understanding of the word "blood" as a *signifier* of life.⁶ While the blood is pulsing, a creature is alive, and at that point one is not allowed to eat it. When it stops pulsing, the creature is dead and can be used as food. There is nothing mysterious here. Schmiechen sees it as a *symbol* of life.⁷ As a symbol it points to some deeper reality beyond itself, since "the symbol is not the thing."⁸ Milgrom also uses the word symbol, yet within the cultic practices he discusses the symbol itself holds power. At times, such as in the rite of the red cow in Numbers 19 or the bird rite in Leviticus 14, Milgrom sees in blood's efficacy a remnant of superstitious or pagan customs.⁹ A sense of the numinous does imbue biblical references to blood. Blood itself pollutes the land (Nm 35:33). Unavenged innocent blood poured out on the ground can lead to famine (2 Sm 21:1), infertile ground (Gn 4:12), and God's wrath (Ez 36: 17-18). More positively, blood is

³ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 105.

⁴ Margaret Barker does find evidence in the *Letter of Barnabas* for the officiating priests eating "a small part of the entrails of the sacrifice, 'unwashed and with vinegar'. They were consumed with their blood," during the rite of the Day of Atonement. Barker, "Temple and Liturgy."

⁵ Sheeley, "Nothing (a)B(o)ut the Blood," 110. See, for example, Rom 3:25, 5:9; Eph 1:7, 2:13; Col 1:20; Heb 9:13; 1 Pt 1:2, 19; 1 Jn 1:7, 5:6.

⁶ Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 465.

⁷ Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 25.

⁸ Cf. "the word is not the thing." Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, passim.

⁹ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 35, 135.

also the means through which individuals, the temple and the nation are ransomed, purified, or purged (three translations of the much-debated Hebrew root word *kpr*). “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb 9:22).

John Milbank describes blood as “the seamless flow of life.”¹⁰ When Abel’s blood cries out to God, it establishes from the beginning that life is God’s. No life can be taken without God’s knowledge (there can be no “perfect murder,” as Westermann points out) and for one to take the life of another is an act of such atrocity that the land is polluted by it.¹¹ In spilling his brother’s blood, Cain has spilled Abel’s life onto the earth, and that life has cried out in protest to its Creator.

Two chapters later, we are told that God intends to blot out all creatures since “the earth is filled with violence because of them” (Gn 6:13). The writer of the later book of Jubilees characterizes that violence as “all flesh . . . eating one another” (Jub 5:2). The inference is that there was widespread bloodshed. After the flood, God gives humanity the first direct prohibitions since Eden, and they are directed at this bloodshed. God concedes that humans, originally designed as vegetarians, are now going to eat meat. However, while the flesh may be taken for sustenance, that is only a concession. Humans must never forget that the *life* is not theirs for the taking (Gn 9:4-6). The life, the blood, should be released from the flesh, returned to the earth and covered with dust: buried, in fact, as a living being would be.¹² The Levitical laws are embedded in this history.

And anyone of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside among them, who hunts down an animal or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For the life of every creature—its blood is its life; therefore I have said

¹⁰ Milbank, “Stories of Sacrifice,” 53.

¹¹ Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 305.

¹² See Jubilees 21:17. “Be careful, my son, with blood, be extremely careful. Cover it with earth.”

to the people of Israel: You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off. (Lv 17:13-14)

Humanity is given permission to kill, but the brutalising possibilities of that concession are minimised by limiting the place, scope and method of animal killing. Only a few types of animals are suitable for food, and killing animals beyond certain bounds is punishable as murder. It may also be that Leviticus 17 is intended to restrict all killing to the temple.¹³ Restrictions on killing accompany reiterated prohibitions on eating the blood of any creature. Every lawful killing therefore contains a reminder that humanity is not permitted to take life from another being for its own sake. Flesh may be eaten only if the life-blood is returned to the ground or offered to God through the temple rites. If a life is taken purely for its own sake, it is as if one has eaten the blood of that being—as if one has taken that life into oneself—something no human being has the right to do. Failure to acknowledge this leads to the same punishment as wrongful killing: the transgressor is cut off (v. 14).

Jacob Milgrom understands this prohibition in terms of power. “The abstention from blood is a constant reminder to humans that, though they may satisfy their appetite for food, they must curb their hunger for power. Because life is inviolable, it may not be tampered with indiscriminately.”¹⁴ To consume the life of another is the ultimate expression of taking power over them.¹⁵ Releasing the life of an animal back to the ground and burying it is a reminder that there is a part of that animal that you have not taken power over, despite killing it; there is a part belonging to God that you do not control. On the other hand, knowingly to consume the life of another being is to seek to increase one’s own power at its expense.¹⁶

¹³ Milbank, “Stories of Sacrifice,” 48; Carmichael, *Illuminating Leviticus*, 59.

¹⁴ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 105.

¹⁵ Note that this, rather than nourishment, is frequently the basis of cannibalism.

¹⁶ René Girard’s theory of mimetic rivalry is another way of understanding this ancient idea of people seeking to consume another’s life in order to build up their own. Mimetic rivalry is based on the concept that humans “lack being” and therefore look out for others who appear to have more being. When they see what that person desires, they desire it too, in order to have and be all that the other is. It may seem that they want the *object* of the other’s desire, but the central aim is really to be that other person—to possess the life of the other. For a clear summary of Girard’s theory, see Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 35-41.

There are echoes here of another ancient story. When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they were exiled from the Garden so that they could not eat from the Tree of Life. Milgrom suggests that gaining knowledge unleashes new creative power and that, filled with the knowledge of good and evil, humanity is able to choose creativity or destruction.¹⁷ Using Žižek’s terminology, this is the point where humanity acquires both drive and tragic desire, and with them the ability to achieve in excess of themselves or to be trapped in an unending circle of violence.¹⁸ Either path involves an insatiable hunger for life. When God drives Adam and Eve from the garden, he makes it impossible for them to increase their life by feeding on the life of something else: the Tree of Life. What was done for Adam and Eve by restricting access to a plant was later done for Noah and those who followed him through the prohibition on blood, lest humanity use its new creative powers destructively and feed ever more voraciously on the lives of others.

Since life is closely linked to the physical substance of blood, blood takes on qualities beyond the material. It is God’s and therefore holy. Of course, as the Bible itself subsequently shows, the repeated blood prohibitions in story and law did not stop human beings from shedding blood and “consuming the life” of each other. Contingency plans were necessary: plans that increase the mythic aspects of blood by bringing it into a cosmic battle between life and death.

2. Blood as an instrument of reparation and cleansing.

Your own blood will I demand, from all animals will I demand it, and from humans in turn for the life of a person I will demand it. (Gn 9:5)

In the plot of the Genesis story, God has mercy on the first murderer. Although Cain is banished, he is protected from harm by a mysterious mark (Gn 4:15) and lives to build a city and found a dynasty. Yet God’s instructions here and in Mosaic legislation show no such leniency. God demands the blood of anyone who sheds the blood of another person. Nothing else can balance out the loss of blood but blood, for blood is life and there is no equivalent for life but life. Unlike

¹⁷ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 188.

¹⁸ Depoortere, “End of God’s transcendence?” 506.

those guilty of other transgressions, a murderer must not be ransomed (Nm 35:31), although if the killing was accidental, the perpetrator may flee to a city of refuge (Dt 19).

When holy things are desecrated they become dangerous to anything they touch. When Cain kills Abel, the ground becomes infertile, polluted by desecrated blood. Dealing with murder therefore involves more than finding the killer; it involves purifying the land on which the murder took place. Deuteronomy prescribes a ritual involving the elders of all the surrounding towns and the sacrifice of a young heifer that absolves them of blood-guilt and purges the land (Dt 21:1-9). This purging is vital because if a land becomes too polluted, it will eventually vomit out its inhabitants (Lv 18:28). It may be that voluntary exile for involuntary killing is a way of preempting this greater exile. A polluted land is also in constant danger of losing the presence of God, which would lead inexorably to the exile or extermination of all God's people.¹⁹ Therefore the pollution must be cleansed. Instructions are given in Numbers 35: 30-34:

If anyone kills another, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses; but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of a single witness. Moreover, you shall accept no ransom [*kopher*] for the life of a murderer who is subject to the death penalty; a murderer must be put to death. Nor shall you accept ransom [*kopher*] for one who has fled to a city of refuge, enabling the fugitive to return to live in the land before the death of the high priest. You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation [*ṣēkuppār*] can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the Lord dwell among the Israelites.

In a twist difficult for Western minds to understand, the blood of the murderer has a purifying role for the land. A key root word *kpr* appears here in two forms. Murderers can have no *kopher* (ransom) accepted on their behalf, but their blood will make *kuppār* (cleansing) for the land.

¹⁹ Catherine Sider Hamilton notes the repeated references to innocent blood in Matthew's Gospel, and how Pilate, Judas and Jesus all give clues that the shedding of innocent blood which is about to occur will lead to tragedy in the land. She suggests that this is Matthew's background to the destruction of the temple. Sider Hamilton, "His Blood be Upon us."

Murderers cannot be purified by a ransom because they are themselves the means of purification for the land. The idea of “purification” cannot be removed from the translation “ransom” (the ransom payment clearly had a purifying, reparative role). Nor can we escape the idea that the murderer’s blood is also a “payment” of blood for blood, life for life, and thereby a means of purifying the land. Yet the emphasis lies on the problem of the land, rather than on the offender or on God. The “putting to death” of the murderer is not essentially punitive in intent but reparative. The focus is squarely on maintaining the purity of the land, which was polluted by blood and is now to be cleansed by blood.

Murder is an extreme example of the general problem of sin. As Goldingay writes, it is not that sin “involves infidelity or disloyalty which makes God angry but that sin pollutes, stains, and spoils, and thus makes people or things repulsive.”²⁰ The scale of sin means that dealing with every case *in situ* would be impossible. Instead, the temple provides a particular depository for this pollution where it may be dealt with. According to Finlan, “Whenever a sin is committed in Israel, it pollutes the temple.”²¹ Finlan likens this process to magnetic attraction. The consequences of every sin are drawn irresistibly to the temple and gradually creep closer to its sacred centre, the Ark, and the lid, the *kapporet*.²² Milgrom gives an even more vivid image by likening the process to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Whatever is done outside the temple makes no apparent impact there, but each wrong action causes a stain to appear within the temple until the whole is polluted.²³ The Hebrews dealt with this problem partly through prevention (the intricate purity laws) and partly through cleansing (the sacrifices).

There is an ongoing tension in the biblical account between God offering life and holiness, and humanity choosing death and impurity.²⁴ The purity laws attempt to redirect those choices before they pollute the land. Some laws apply to sinful and therefore polluting actions. Others focus on sources of physical impurity (menstrual blood [Lv 12:4-7, 15:19-30], semen [Lv 15:16-32, 22:4],

²⁰ Goldingay, “Your Iniquities Have Made a Separation,” 51.

²¹ Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 15.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 15.

²⁴ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 13.

and scale disease [Lv 13]) which have a “common denominator”: death.²⁵ Wasted blood and wasted semen are a loss of life-forces. Scale disease (like fungus and mould) looks like death, like a corpse, and in the battle between God’s gifts and humanity’s choices, anything associated with death is impure.²⁶

But many sins are involuntary and many more are committed despite laws. Since a holy God could not continue to live in a polluted temple, simply slowing down the rate of pollution was never going to be sufficient. It was imperative that the temple be cleansed so that God could continue to live with his people. The people of Israel needed a weapon of life and holiness with which to counteract the pollutants of sin, death and desecration. Blood was the answer, and sacrifices the chosen strategy.

Lay people could bring offerings to the temple for various levels of sin, or as peace offerings or celebrations. If the offering was an animal, the one offering lays a hand on the animal, marking it as his own, his representative. It is killed and the priests distribute its blood around the temple in carefully prescribed ways. The emphasis is not on the killing of the animal, but on the use of the blood that soaks up the pollution sin has left on the temple. Finlan writes, “The life-force can undo, or cleanse, the death-force that is impurity. Expressed by analogy with electricity, we can say that blood carries a life-charge that neutralizes the negative charge of the pollution.”²⁷

Milgrom prefers to see it in terms of a cosmic struggle between life and death:

The blood of the purification offering symbolically purges the sanctuary by symbolically absorbing its impurities. ... Another victory of life over death. Moreover, the priest is commanded to eat the flesh of the purification offering (6:19, 22 [Eng. 26. 29]; 10:17), and the high priest dispatches the sanctuary’s impurities together with the people’s sins (16:21). In neither case is the priest affected. Again, holiness-life has triumphed over impurity-death.²⁸

²⁵ Ibid., 12.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 13.

²⁸ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 12.

Several points here are relevant for understanding the doctrine of atonement through Christ's blood. Considered sacrificially, blood achieves *kpr* less in the sense of a payment and more as a means by which God's dwelling place could be cleansed and his relationship with his people made sure. The death of the sacrificial offering is a vicarious cleansing not a vicarious punishment, and within that cleansing there is already the sense of life conquering death.²⁹

The sacrifices brought by the people only cover inadvertent sins or sins that are confessed before they are discovered. Intentional sins must be dealt with by other means. At the heart of the temple was the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies, with the Ark, where all the worst deliberate sins and rebellions of the people collected. This is the only time in Leviticus that the word *pesha*, "rebellions, transgressions," is used, indicating the seriousness of these actions.³⁰ Blood needed to be taken to this inner sanctum, but the holiness of the place and the seriousness of the pollution required the priest to undergo elaborate rituals for his own safety and for the efficacy of the cleansing. This happened once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

On this Day the High Priest risks entering the Holy of Holies to cleanse it from the pollution of the nation. He takes blood from a bull to cleanse his own sins, and blood from a goat called both "the people's" goat and "the goat on which the lot of God fell" (Lv 16:15, 9). There is also a second goat, the scapegoat, which is not sacrificed and which I will discuss in a later chapter. On this day the focus for cleansing is the central shrine, the Ark with its top of solid gold. The High Priest is often understood to represent all the people of Israel—one person making atonement on behalf of the nation. Margaret Barker, however, suggests that the High Priest, wearing the Name of God on his forehead, represents God himself stepping in to make atonement on behalf of the people. The blood he uses is the blood of the goat that God has "laid his hand on": a gesture that also indicates representation.³¹

There is much in the text to support this. Normally the person making the offering selects the animal. On the Day of Atonement, God chooses the goat by lot (Lv 16:8). Neither the priest nor

²⁹ Goldingay, "Old Testament Sacrifice," 10.

³⁰ Carmichael, *Illuminating Leviticus*, 11.

³¹ Wenham, *Book of Leviticus*, 97; Barker, "Temple and Liturgy," 5.

anyone else identifies himself with the goat about to be killed by laying a hand on it; it is merely brought to stand before God (Lv 16:7, 9). Therefore Barker argues that it is God's goat whose blood purifies the sanctuary and the Holy of Holies; it is God's blood that is identified with the blood that makes atonement for the deep sins.

Barker notes that when the prophets and Wisdom writers use *kipper*, God is the subject and sin is the object. God wipes out, forgives or purifies the sin. In the temple cult, by contrast, the priest appears to be the subject and the parts of the temple the objects. But, according to Barker, "Actually this represents no rupture. This is very important: the ritual texts describe the actions done by the priests, whilst the non-ritual texts give the meaning of those actions. A priest smearing blood in the temple 'was' God removing sin."³²

Barker's argument suggests that in order to understand the phrase, "its blood is its life" (Lv 17:14) we must accept its mythological as well as metaphorical aspects. It is not only a metaphor; it both illustrates larger myths (God giving life to his people, God saving his people from sin and death) and itself "manifests some aspect of the cosmic order."³³ Blood *is* life in an active and concrete way. This resembles the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacraments, in which "a symbol in the proper sense participates in that which it signifies."³⁴ In sacramental theology the lines are blurred between the material and spiritual, the symbol and that which it signifies. This is part of the larger Hebrew world view and, as Luke Timothy Johnson observes, contributes to "the distance between ancient and contemporary readers."³⁵

The importance of temple theology to the New Testament understanding of blood's atoning power means that it is worth briefly considering how a similarly sacramental approach is taken to the physical temple. The Israelites believed that God's true throne was in heaven (Ps 11:4), and Eichrodt speaks for a strong line of scholarship when he argues that the Jerusalem temple was believed to be a copy of the heavenly ideal or prototype.³⁶ This correspondence is sometimes

³² Barker, "Atonement: The Rite of Healing," 5.

³³ Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 19.

³⁴ Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity*, 9.

³⁵ Johnson, *Hebrews. A Commentary*, 7.

³⁶ Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 107.

loosely called “Platonic.” But the earthly temple was linked with its heavenly ideal far more intimately than in any Platonic scheme. God’s glory, God’s name, God’s face, God’s presence actually graced the physical temple.

Barker cites Psalm 11:4 (“The LORD is in his holy temple, the LORD’s throne is in heaven”) and Jeremiah 17:12 (“A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary”) to argue that there is more to the earthly sanctuary than a type or copy. “The holy of holies, the place of the throne of the LORD, was simultaneously heaven and earth.”³⁷ The mystery of the link between earthly and heavenly temples, between symbol and reality, reaches its peak in the Holy of Holies, where heaven and earth are understood to overlap and where the symbol *is* the reality to which it points. The temple, like the blood that plays such an important role within it, is believed to manifest, in concrete form, a cosmic reality. In the New Testament this understanding of the temple is used together with the blood mythologems to construct a new story of atonement through the story of Jesus.

3. The blood of Christ

We cannot be sure how sacrificial practices or attitudes to blood may have changed between the writing of Leviticus and the time of Jesus.³⁸ It seems likely that even before the advent of Christianity there were both Hellenistic and Hebraic moves to spiritualize sacrificial concepts.³⁹ Yet the repeated reminders in Acts to abstain from consuming blood indicate that some, at least, of the intricate blood-themes of the Hebrew Scriptures were maintained. The Epistles’ puzzling preoccupation with Jesus’ blood rather than his agony or shaming is another indication that the mythic aspects of blood continued to be used by those communicating the message of atonement. These links with the Hebrew understanding of blood are frequently overlooked. One scholar writes that the terms “blood” and “flesh” are “virtually interchangeable,”⁴⁰ but this is unlikely given the complete prohibition on eating blood and the permission to eat flesh. Equally questionable is the suggestion that blood, which in the Hebrew Scriptures is equated with life, is

³⁷ Barker, “Atonement: The Rite of Healing,” 4.

³⁸ Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 21.

³⁹ Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 19.

⁴⁰ Hughes, “Blood of Jesus,” 103.

now a metaphor for death.⁴¹ While the focus has moved away from the temple to Christ, the mythologem remains essentially the same. Blood is life; it is the antithesis of death.

Blood's mythic power plays a crucial role in the New Testament accounts of atonement. The idea that blood is life provides a background to the belief that Christ gave his life to others. The idea that blood can purge the deepest of sins provides a way of explaining the efficacy of Christ's death. The New Testament writers reclothe these mythologems in the story of Jesus, using them to show how Jesus fulfils the ancient promises. In order to see how this re-clothing happens, we need to start with Jesus' life, not his death, and with the way in which that life transformed the prohibitions connected to blood in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Blood can cleanse that which is polluted while staying pure itself. The Gospels attribute such cleansing power to Jesus long before his blood is shed, by recounting his unhesitating willingness to reach out to touch those who are, for various reasons, polluted. As Goldingay observes, "They are no danger to him; he brings cleansing and restoration to them."⁴² This in itself is revolutionary. If Jesus can touch people who are ritually unclean—lepers (Mt 8:3), the dead (Lk 7:14), a haemorrhaging woman (Lk 8:43-48)—and cleanse them while remaining unaffected himself, he effectively makes purity laws redundant. Jesus transgresses them, but in doing so also "fulfils" them by bringing about their ultimate aim, which is purity. As with blood in the Old Testament sacrificial system, the impurities he absorbs are those of sin and physical infirmity alike. Forgiveness and healing are part of the one process, that of holiness and life defeating impurity and death (cf. Mk 2:1-12).

The Gospels portray Jesus as someone who "fulfils" the blood prohibition completely. Girard's work on the myth of the scapegoat emphasises humanity's blind tendency towards persecution and revenge: our belief that our lives will be bettered through feeding off the life of another. He is fascinated by the gospel story because, while it tells the familiar story of persecution, Jesus neither sides with the persecutors nor gives the slightest hint of revenge.⁴³ One could say Jesus

⁴¹ Sheeley, "Nothing (a)b(o)ut the blood," 101.

⁴² Goldingay, "Old Testament Sacrifice," 11.

⁴³ Girard, *Scapegoat*, 126.

fulfils the *meaning* of the blood prohibition, which is to take no life (power) from another. Jesus' teachings reflect the same deliberate reversal of power (Mt 5: 38-48). Even his plundering of the kingdom of Satan, Girard argues, is through peace, through a process that marks the end of expulsion. It is not that he forcibly expels Satan, but that by bringing peace he removes Satan's power to bring violence, and therefore removes Satan's power to expel.⁴⁴

In John's Gospel, instead of taking life/blood from another, Jesus has "life in himself" (Jn 5:26), for "in him is life" (Jn 1:4) and through him there is abundant and eternal life for others (Jn 5:24, 6:33, 10:10). The disciples and crowds are told to take Jesus' life/blood into themselves. "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (Jn 6:53). The crowds have no idea that Jesus is facing imminent death, let alone a death with sacrificial overtones, and so they are understandably bewildered. But Jesus insists that through his blood their own lives will flow into the excess of life which is "eternal." "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day" (Jn 6:54).

Such extreme language, particularly in conjunction with the Last Supper, suggests that Jesus' death holds some key to the dispensing of this life. As Vanhoozer notes, Jesus' ability to absorb and heal human impurity (which also means to forgive it) *before his crucifixion* is of particular importance for those who believe that, given the history of religious violence, we cannot afford to allow a violent event such as the crucifixion to play a crucial role in atonement. Jesus heals and forgives freely before he dies.⁴⁵ Was his death, then, necessary for salvation? According to Girard, to view Jesus' death as necessary or efficacious is to succumb to the sacrificial mindset Jesus came to defeat. Similarly J. Denny Weaver proposes a "narrative Christus victor" understanding of atonement that is based entirely on Christ's life and resurrection, with his death being an inevitable but soteriologically unnecessary consequence of confronting the powers of injustice.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid., 192.

⁴⁵ Vanhoozer, "Atonement in Postmodernity," 387.

⁴⁶ Girard, *Scapegoat*, 126; Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*.

Certainly, leaving out a meaningful role for the crucifixion removes some of the moral dilemmas of atonement theory. But such an understanding underestimates the rich mythic background to Christ's death and has little of interest to offer writers of fantasy today. The story of Jesus' life and death in the New Testament lies squarely at the intersection of history and myth. Jesus' call to drink his blood, to take in his life, brings us to the crux of the story. Something happens there which is necessary, efficacious and powerful enough to shape both history and myth from that point on.

Many of the ways the New Testament speaks of the blood of Christ correspond to how blood functions in the Hebrew Scriptures. Christ's blood washes robes white (Rv 7:14), cleanses from sins (1 Jn 1:7), sanctifies (Heb 9:13, 13:12), and purifies (Heb 9:14, 22), all in keeping with blood's role in absorbing impurity and death. Just as blood's purifying work in the temple was to make it a place fit for God to inhabit, so Christ's blood involves "making peace" (Col 1:20; Eph 2:13-18) and "obtaining the church for God" (Acts 20:28). Even the references to "ransom" (1 Pt 1:18-19; Rv 5:9) and "redemption" (Eph 1:7), as we have seen, link with blood's role in Mosaic law.

But this is not a simple restatement of ancient mythologems. The familiar qualities of blood are given new qualifiers which compel the reader to understand them in uniquely far-reaching ways. The authors write of *eternal* redemption (Heb 9:12); "saints from *every* tribe and language and people and nation" being ransomed for God (Rv 5:9); the reconciliation of "*all* things" in heaven and earth (Col 1:20); the creation of a whole *new* humanity (Eph 2:15); a purifying event within a *heavenly* sanctuary (Heb 9:12). What had once been localised to the people of Israel in daily or yearly rites is now thought of in terms of "all" people and "eternity." Perhaps the strangest aspect of all is in Romans 3:25 where, through Jesus' blood, God is said to "put him forward" as a *hilasterion*, the ornate gold slab that covered the Ark of the Covenant and was the focus of the rites on the Day of Atonement. All these "normal" mythic understandings have been stretched beyond their Old Testament limits.

In dying, Jesus was mysteriously able to give his blood, and in giving his blood he was able to give his life fully. It is this overflowing gift of life that is the purifying force sweeping through

this atonement thread. To return to the question raised earlier, how do others share in this gift? Luke Timothy Johnson notes how difficult it is for us to comprehend the Hebrew understanding of life. It was not an “autonomous possession” but a gift of God in which all living beings “participated mutually.”⁴⁷ Given the laws surrounding the handling of blood, this mutual participation included the ability both to take and to give life. This is why the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, after carefully arguing for the divinity of Jesus in the opening chapter, moves to defend equally carefully his humanity. In order to share his life with humanity, Jesus first had to truly participate in human life. Jesus shares the same Father as those whom he sanctifies (Heb 2:11), he calls them brothers and sisters (2:11, 12), and he shares in their human condition: “Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things” (2:14).⁴⁸ It is through sharing in the flesh and blood of humanity that Jesus is able to die and to share his life-blood with others who participate in life. In the incarnation, the life of God becomes part of that “mutual participation in life by all living beings” that is God’s own gift to them. Given this understanding of life, “drinking the blood” of Christ symbolises taking hold of the offer of the gift of Christ’s life, released from his own body and made available through his death.

Christ’s atoning blood is therefore to be understood within the Hebrew understanding of life. This does not reduce the shocking nature of what is claimed, however. There are expectations laid upon the life-blood of Jesus that go far beyond those laid on the blood of his fellow humans. Jesus “transcends their condition even as he shares in it, since he is able to accomplish what other humans are unable to do.”⁴⁹

Within the Christian understanding of the incarnation, God is now able in Christ to supply his own blood, not that of a goat, for the rites of the Day of Atonement. That “true” blood, that “true” life and holiness, is understood finally to cleanse the “real,” heavenly Holy Place (Heb 9:12) of which the earthly temple was a copy. But the vision also turns inwards; it becomes,

⁴⁷ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 26.

⁴⁸ In the Greek, it is actually “blood and flesh.” It may be significant that blood is emphasised in this way.

⁴⁹ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 99.

perhaps, more “spiritualised.”⁵⁰ The main focus is no longer the cleansing of a building, but the cleansing of the consciences and hearts of the people (Heb 9:14, 10:19-22; cf. 1 Jn 1:7). In this change of focus, the borders between figurative and literal, symbol and reality, again become blurred. There is no recorded time in which Jesus’ followers are literally touched by his blood, and yet both Hebrews and 1 Peter can speak of them being “sprinkled” with that blood in order to purify their hearts and consciences (Heb 9:14, 1 Pt 1:2). The sprinkling is metaphorical, but the shedding of Christ’s blood is literal.⁵¹ Just as Jesus is understood to have passed easily between the earthly hill on which he was crucified and the heavenly temple in which his blood made atonement, so in writing about his death the biblical authors pass between what we would perceive to be literal and figurative descriptions of the workings of atonement within the hearts of his people.

The way in which Christ’s atoning blood is said to cleanse the hearts of his people can best be understood in conjunction with a new understanding of the temple. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus prefigures the idea of a personified temple in the claim that he would “rebuild this temple in three days.” John decodes this claim:

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking of the temple of his body. (Jn 2:19-21)

In the Gospels, the temple, God’s dwelling place on earth, the site of forgiveness and reconciliation and healing, is to be found in Jesus.

The “temple” of Christ’s body is “destroyed” at his crucifixion and “rebuilt” at his resurrection. After his death, the significance of this transferred temple is extended to Jesus’ followers. “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?” (1 Cor

⁵⁰ Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 19.

⁵¹ For further discussion on this, see Sheeley, “Nothing (a)b(o)ut the blood,” 114.

3:16).⁵² Jesus' life-blood has absorbed and conquered death, and Jesus returns in the form of the Spirit to dwell among his followers, making them the locale of the presence of God, and therefore the temple. The young church saw itself as formed by the Spirit into the new temple, both collectively (Eph 2:21) and individually (1 Cor 3:16). Where God's Spirit was, God was, and where God dwelt, there was the temple.

And where the temple was, there also was the cleansing power of the blood of Christ. The image of Jesus using blood to cleanse and purify the temple is as applicable to the "temple" of the people of God as it is to the heavenly temple. So John can write, "If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:7).

The ways in which the New Testament speaks of the blood of Jesus and the giving of his life combine literal, mythic and metaphorical associations. Perhaps that is why symbols rather than explanations are used by the church to recall his atoning death. In the end, this atonement thread is encapsulated in the way in which it has been passed on in dramatic, enacted story. Christian believers still regularly say they are "drinking his blood" and "eating his flesh" when taking bread and wine, which they call his "flesh and blood," into themselves, taking the gift of life into the "temple" of their bodies in celebration of that life conquering pollution, sin and death.

If we draw the threads of this chapter together, we find the central belief that life comes from God. It is holy and must therefore be treated with great care and honour. This concept or belief takes on physical form in blood, so that beliefs about life may be enacted and ritualised. "Life" becomes something that can be handled—can be taken, given, utilised—while remaining holy and connected with the divine. This is a mythologem that is important for understanding the life and death of Christ in the New Testament, and continues to be at the centre of the ritual celebrating of that life and death in the Eucharist.

⁵² See also 1 Cor 3:17, 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21; Rv 3:12.

The second key mythologem of this section grows from the first: that blood may be used to counteract or purge death and signs of death, such as sin and illness. Again this underlies the practice of Holy Communion. It is central to Christian theology, and is a crucial tool for understanding atonement in the three fantasy series I am examining. When the New Testament writers used these mythologems from the Hebrew Scriptures, they re clothed them in the story of Christ in order to illuminate the meaning of his atonement. We will find that fantasy authors are still using these two mythologems to make sense of the process by which their fantasy worlds are set right.

Chapter 7

Blood and Atonement in Three Fantasy Worlds.

In the previous chapter I examined two ancient mythologems that help us to understand Christian atonement. In this chapter I explore how these mythologems are used by three fantasy authors in their own stories of atonement.

1. The Old Kingdom

In the Old Kingdom, existence is made possible by the Charter that holds everything together and keeps the Destroyer, Orannis, and the destructive powers of Free Magic at bay. But as the series unfolds, the Charter is being weakened and the rise of Orannis seems imminent. Atonement in the Old Kingdom involves counteracting the encroaching evil and healing the Charter, so that the Kingdom may be saved from destruction and creation set once more “at-one” with itself.

Although all three books of the trilogy tell of small battles and small victories, the definitive act of atonement involves someone willingly giving her life to save not just one small group of people but the world. As such the climax of the trilogy already echoes the Christian story of atonement. What is of deeper interest is the role that mythical aspects of blood play in making sense of that death. Why should a life, freely given, affect a cosmic force of evil? How does life have that power? What does Nix do to create a mythological framework within which such atonement is plausible?

As I will discuss in later chapters, the blood mythologems are not the only or most important elements of biblical myth in this trilogy. However, they do play a vital role in the Old Kingdom’s understanding of life, death and atonement. Because life is made concrete and tangible in blood, life may be captured, hoarded, manipulated, passed on, and used for good or evil. Because life/blood is holy, characters have a material substance of power that can work on a cosmic level to cleanse and heal when used rightly, or to pollute or destroy when that life is warped and desecrated.

Although these two aspects of blood are linked closely here, as they are in the biblical narrative, they can be considered separately. I will first discuss how the mythologem that “life is in the

blood” is used negatively and positively for atonement in the trilogy, then examine how blood’s cleansing, reparative role is also crucial to the salvation of the Kingdom.

a. Life is in the blood

In the Old Kingdom, the doorways between life and death do not always open one way. Life is something the Dead seek; it is something that can be stolen and fed on, in order to keep death at bay. Blood/life retains its power when used wrongly, but that power becomes destructive, a way of upsetting the balance of creation and loosing Death into Life. We witness this early on when Sabriel, on the first day of her journey into the Old Kingdom, comes across a lesser Charter Stone that has been cloven and its Charter magic destroyed. Someone has shed the blood of a Charter Mage and by spreading this life (blood) over the Stone, a gateway is opened for a Dead spirit to “break through into Life”: the blood-life of the one providing life for the other.¹ Using blood in this way is such a severe violation of the Charter that the Stone splits in half.

This had happened centuries earlier to two of the Great Charter Stones. The strength of the Charter in these stones required correspondingly powerful blood to break them: the blood of the Royal Line. Prince Rogirrek (later Kerrigor) killed his two royal sisters, used their blood to split the stones, and had just cut the throat of his mother (the Queen), and caught the blood in a golden cup to carry to the third Stone when the current Abhorsen arrived and stopped him.² However, the two Great Charter Stones remained broken. They became a drain on the Charter rather than a source of its strength.

Blood in evil hands becomes dangerous. Hideous Mordicants are made of bog clay and human blood mingled and moulded. The blood gives life to the clay and enables the monsters to pass in and out of death freely because they bear both life and death within them.³ Others from Death can be lured back to Life by blood, and can remain there only by repeatedly consuming the life/blood of others, “topping up” their life energies.

¹ Nix, *Sabriel*, 62.

² *Ibid.*, 228.

³ *Ibid.*, 80.

Having the Dead eat the life of the living is a graphic portrayal of the Hebrew idea of blood being used to take power over another individual. But the power of life/blood may be used in other ways as well. It is because Kerrigor has at his mercy the blood of both the Abhorsen and Royal lines that he believes he finally has all the power he needs to break the Charter.

Power that ruled before the Charter, power that made the Wall. I have it now. I have that broken puppet, my half-brother—and I have you, my Abhorsen. Power and blood—blood for the breaking!”⁴

What Kerrigor has not grasped is that an insatiable hunger for power is dangerous to the hungering person himself as well as to those around him. Those who become addicted to power not only consume the life of others, they are eventually consumed themselves, as Kerrigor and Hedge discover. Both become increasingly creatures of Death.⁵

Blood taken violently violates the Charter and brings destruction. Blood given willingly, however, is life-giving. For weeks, Touchstone (Sabriel’s husband and of the Royal Line) labours over the Great Charter Stones that had been split so many years before by Kerrigor:

... each morning taking a silver, Charter-spelled knife and deliberately re-opening the cuts in his palms from the day before. ... Cutting his hands, and casting spells that he had not been sure of, spells that were terribly dangerous to the caster, even without the added risk and burden of the broken Stones.⁶

In giving his blood, Touchstone gives years of his life. By the end of those weeks his hair has grown grey. However, the Stones are mended and the Charter restored.

Touchstone is not alone in being willing to give his life for the sake of another or for some greater cause. However scared Sabriel, Lirael, Sam or Nick are, they know they must go ahead with their

⁴ Ibid., 360.

⁵ Ibid., 289.

⁶ Nix, *Lirael*, 267.

tasks.⁷ They realize they are likely to die if they proceed, and also that there are “far worse fates than simple death.”⁸ Sabriel does slip over into Death after defeating Kerrigor, and Nick also finds himself on the Death side of the border with Life after his battle with a sliver of Orannis in his bloodstream. Although both are returned to Life (Nick through the auspices of the Disreputable Dog who cheerfully breaks all the rules without, somehow, harming them), they had started their task believing that they were likely to die permanently. Every time the Abhorsen restores the balance between life and death, she must enter Death herself to do it. The Old Kingdom is a place of deep courage.

Being willing to sacrifice their lives is more than an acknowledgement of the danger of what they are doing. The Old Kingdom’s sense of balance means that blood/life becomes a form of currency. Although Touchstone’s blood is essentially used for “healing” the damaged stones, it is also true to say it “cost” him dearly. Sometimes the only “payment” valuable enough to make something happen is blood/life. For Mogget to be freed he declares that a “blood-price” is necessary. This idea is echoed in Sabriel “paying” with her blood for a paper boat to travel the river of death to her mother, and Lirael “paying” with her blood to be able to see the past.⁹ Most importantly, Life can buy back from Death only by dying itself. Necromancers use this quality of the Old Kingdom in their warped practice of letting the Dead consume the life of the living. In order for them to bring anyone back from Death there has to be some sort of “exchange” between Life and Death to keep the balance.¹⁰ All the ways in which blood is used to heal and restore are also indicative of this innate balance. The degree to which something is healed or restored is proportional to the blood—the life—given.

This self-giving has been part of the pattern of the Old Kingdom since the Beginning, when the Charter was formed. The Disreputable Dog tells Lirael about the Five Bright Shiners who “gave

⁷ Nix, *Sabriel*, 243; Nix, *Lirael*, 52, 83, 158.

⁸ Nix, *Abhorsen*, 125.

⁹ Mogget is a Free Magic being, the 8th Bright Shiner who had sided with neither Orannis nor the Seven. He is bound to the Charter for safekeeping by the Seven through a collar he wears. Nix, *Sabriel*, 143, 67; Nix, *Abhorsen*, 323.

¹⁰ Nix, *Sabriel*, 11.

themselves to the making” of the Charter.¹¹ While all Seven put some of themselves into it, the five sub-charters came “from the original sacrifice of the Five, who poured their power into the men and women who were your ancestors.”¹² Although they live on in some form in the Charter, their independent lives are absorbed into that Charter. Thus from the formation of the Old Kingdom itself, Life is created through the willing self-giving of life.

The life-gifts did not stop there. Two of the Charter bloodlines decided that it was dangerous to have the Charter sustained only through fragile humanity. They, the Wallmakers, followed the example of the Five and put themselves “into the creation of the Wall and the Great Charter Stones. Quite literally.”¹³ Sam, discovering that he himself is somehow a Wallmaker, “wonder[s] if that would be his destiny too. Would he have to make something that would end his life, at least as a living, breathing man?”¹⁴ For Sam realizes that this is a pattern of how things function in his world. The cost of creating or restoring the Charter is life.

In the final chapters, seven gather again as the Seven Bright Shiners had gathered in the Beginning. Six of the new Seven are of the bloodlines of those Bright Shiners; the seventh is Kibeth herself. They have to re-enact the beginning to re-bind Orannis. Each of the Seven puts his or her own blood on the sword which is to bind Orannis. In doing so they infuse it with the life of the original Seven who live on in their blood. It is this, combined with their united purpose and voices, which gradually forces Orannis down and painfully begins to re-form the battered Charter.

Orannis, however, fights against these controlling forces. “Can a Seven of such watered blood and thinner power prevail against the Destroyer, the last and mightiest of the Nine?” and as Lirael strikes Orannis with the sword for the final binding, It enters her blood, “spreading through to consume her in Its final fire.”¹⁵ Lirael had “Seen” that this would be the price necessary for the final binding.¹⁶ The depth of the evil they fought meant the “samples” of blood on the sword

¹¹ Nix, *Lirael*, 418.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Nix, *Abhorsen*, 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 362, 368.

¹⁶ Nix uses a capital S to refer to “seeing” the past or future.

would not be enough to conquer it without a further act of self-sacrifice, without a life given completely. At this point, the mythologems of blood as life and of blood's cleansing power become impossible to separate. Before discussing the final act of atonement, let us turn to the significance of the second blood mythologem within the Old Kingdom.

b. Blood's cleansing power

The evil which blood will have to cleanse pollutes whatever it touches, causing any who come near it to become physically ill. When scouts try to lever the protective stones away from around Kerrigor's sarcophagus, they collapse on shaking limbs, vomiting.¹⁷ Again as the new Seven approach Orannis, the "stench of Free Magic" sickens them.¹⁸ Even a voice can have this effect. When Nick hears the necromancer, Hedge, speaking through his confusion, the voice "made him feel unclean."¹⁹ Evil pollutes the landscape, causing barrenness and, in Orannis' case, "an ugly wound of red dirt and yellow clay in the green of the valley."²⁰ Such pollution is contagious. When Lirael strikes Orannis with the Charter sword the pollution of its evil seeps up the sword and into her arm, seeking to destroy her completely.

Evil also consumes life. There is no life around the mound that conceals Orannis, no birds, insects or grass. The area does not even have a name or identity.²¹ The Dead can only be brought back to Life by consuming another's life, and can only remain in Life by finding more lives to consume. Evil's corrosive, life-taking power even affects those who use it deliberately. "Free Magic eats up necromancers," the Disreputable Dog explains. "The power they seek to wield—the Free Magic they profess to master—ultimately devours them."²²

Nix's story tackles the ancient theological question of whether evil has independent ontology or is merely a warping of the good, and comes down firmly on the latter side. Since unbridled power cannot be an agent of creation, so evil (which seeks such power) can only be derivative, taking,

¹⁷ Nix, *Sabriel*, 329.

¹⁸ Nix, *Abhorsen*, 360.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

²¹ Nix, *Lirael*, 9.

²² *Ibid.*, 416.

warping or reversing good. All that is used for evil in the trilogy began as good: the bells of the Abhorsen had the charter magic removed from them and became the Free Magic bells of the necromancers; gateways to death were made through the blood of the living; the marks used by Kerrigor were corruptions of Charter marks.

As we reach the final scenes of *Abhorsen*, Lirael is willing to give her blood/life in the battle against the ultimate pollution of Orannis. However, although her role and her willingness are important, they are not enough for this situation. Her blood, even with the life of a Bright Shiner faintly within it, is not strong enough against the most powerful Shiner of them all. The pollution of its evil would overcome her without being conquered itself. So, at the last minute, the Dog (the Bright Shiner Kibeth), severs Lirael's hand with all the polluted blood within it, fights the power coursing through it and manages the final binding herself. The evil consumes all the Dog's life, and Lirael finds her lying on her side, suddenly looking very old. She wags the tip of her tail and whispers to Lirael before she dies, "Well, that's done Mistress. . . . I have to leave you now."

Lirael's response is, "It was supposed to be me!"²³ Throughout the trilogy, humans fight encroaching evil with their own blood, their own lives. But human blood/life was not powerful enough to bind Orannis at the Beginning, and nor is it enough here. The fundamental force of evil had always been there, in the background, but at these times it reveals itself in its full power. The atonement offered by the Disreputable Dog is therefore one that could not have been fulfilled by any of the human characters. Their role as carriers of the Charter enabled the results of the creation and the atonement to be sustained, but they could achieve neither themselves. As it was at the Day of Atonement and again in the story of Christ's crucifixion, deep atonement requires the giving of divine blood, the offering of divine life.

In depicting the Disreputable Dog's atonement within that fantasy world, Nix makes careful use of the two blood mythologems, both in the history of the Kingdom, and in the action of the Trilogy. Life, in the form of blood, is repeatedly sought to counteract death. Life/blood has value in itself; it is a power that can be used for evil, but it can also be used to defeat evil in cases where nothing

²³ Nix, *Abhorsen*, 369.

else can. The Dog's act of atonement may be understood as her "paying" the power of her life in order to overcome the Destroyer, or, as it is painted more graphically in the story, as the Dog absorbing into her body all that is left of the evil and pollution and poison that Orannis unleashed, and by that absorption, cleansing and disempowering it. Absorbing it fully uses up all her life, and she passes into Death. The Charter, however, is restored.

One other point needs noticing. This may not be the first time the Disreputable Dog, or Kibeth, has given her life. We are never told exactly what Lirael sees in the dark mirror that showed her how Orannis had been bound at the Beginning, but clearly she saw that the one who wielded the sword would die. Who did this the first time? We are not told. However, there is a clue. When Lirael first finds the Disreputable Dog, she is a small soapstone statue which she inadvertently brings to life. When the Dog passes over into Death at the end of the book, she is once again a soapstone statue in Life. The implication is that it was not just the Five who gave their lives completely to the formation of the Charter; Kibeth, the Disreputable Dog, was the first to sacrifice herself at the binding of Orannis, just as she did at the rebinding. It certainly seems that death is not the end for her. She shows no sign of heading deep into Death, but simply runs along the border between Life and Death with her tail wagging furiously, presumably waiting until she is needed once again.

2. The Mortal Instruments

The world of the *Mortal Instruments* shares a mythological "beginning" with Judeo-Christian tradition, but this mythology remains largely in the background. More important for the story is a development a thousand years ago when the race of Nephilim, or Shadowhunters, was formed in order to fight demonic hosts breaking through to earth. In the struggles between these angelic representatives and demons, Clare makes the battle between good and evil concrete. It is not a straightforward case of good Nephilim and bad demons, however. The force that threatens to take over the world is driven by a corrupted member of the Nephilim, and one of the heroes is a vampire who is, through his vampirism, infected with a demonic disease. Atonement here means victory over evil in whatever forms that evil takes.

As such, the principle atonement mythologems used in this Trilogy are those associated with the "victory" theory of Christian atonement. However, the blood mythologems are still present. The

danger of misusing blood is apparent in both the climactic scene, where blood is used to fight against the powers of good rather than *for* atonement, and in the presence of vampires. But throughout the trilogy, blood is also used in acts of reparation and healing.

We will first consider how “life is in the blood” is re clothed within the trilogy, then focus on how the blood prohibition is presented in terms of sacrificing others for one’s own benefit. We will then examine blood’s purgative powers and the effects of twisting those powers for evil. Finally we will trace how Clare weaves themes of self-sacrifice into her story.

a. Life is in the Blood.

Blood is the means by which a particular life can be passed from one person to another. This idea lies behind the circumstances which set Clary and Jace apart from other Shadowhunters. Clary’s father, Valentine, gave their mothers angel blood to drink when they were pregnant, allowing certain life-qualities of the angel Ithuriel to be passed onto the foetuses. Clary is able to call on angelic runes unknown to human beings. Jace, whose unsuspecting mother took more angelic blood than Clary’s wary parent, can leap superhuman distances, is unsurpassed in fighting demons, and even glows with apparently angelic light at times. In contrast, Jonathan (whom we know as Sebastian for most of the final book) had ingested demon blood while in utero, and that demonic blood/life gradually consumes his humanity. Blood here is an active force, a particular power encapsulated in a physical substance.

The *Mortal Instruments* series is one of the many contemporary teenage fantasy books to feature vampires. In Clare’s world, vampires and werewolves are humans who become infected with demonic diseases. While werewolves are infected through being bitten, in an interesting departure from many vampire traditions, Clare’s vampires are infected through ingesting vampire blood. Simon, for example, bites a vampire while under an enchantment that has turned him temporarily into a rat, and even this small amount of vampire blood within him drives him back to the vampire lair. The particular life of vampires can be passed on through blood and shapes the entire being of the person who receives it.

People who deliberately or inadvertently taste vampire blood take that vampire life within them. In

turn, vampires feed on blood and therefore feed on life. The life in the blood sustains them, keeping death away. It is by associating vampires with this mythologem that the concept of vampires as “undead” blood drinkers makes sense. It is also by understanding vampires to be a radical reclothing of this mythologem that another key aspect of vampire lore can be understood. Commonly vampires are believed to be “damned.”²⁴ Both this trilogy and the *Twilight* series question how final this fate may be, but traditionally their damnation is accepted. Both humans and other paranormal creatures kill, yet are not banned from hallowed ground. Vampires are distinctive only for taking the blood of humans and animals for themselves, and this is sufficient to damn them.

If the Hebrew idea of the holiness of blood is assumed, this provides a way of understanding why drinking blood would damn vampires and make them incapable of entering holy ground or even uttering the name of God.²⁵ This holiness applies even to animal blood, and therefore affects “vegetarian” vampires as well as those who drink human blood.²⁶ In Hebrew thought, to attempt to feed on life itself, even animal life, was to desecrate something holy and overstep the limits set by God. It is a logical next step to see those who commit that sacrilege as being condemned and too desecrated to approach anything holy.

Vampires and certain demons are the only creatures that physically drink blood in this series, but Clare broadens her condemnation to those who would willingly sacrifice others to enrich their own lives. No matter what highly plausible justifications her characters give for taking the life-blood of others, Clare makes it clear that it is always an act of darkness. In *City of Bones* Jace rediscovers the two men he had witnessed years previously apparently killing his “father.” He decides to track them down and kill them. Clary asks, “You mean you want to kill them for revenge?” Jace replies, “For justice. ... I never knew who killed my father. Now I do. This is my chance to make it right.’ ... Clary didn’t see how killing one person could make right the death of another, but she

²⁴ McLeod, *Vampires*, 6, 21, 114. Clare, *City of Ashes*, 59.

²⁵ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 59; Clare, *City of Glass*, 179.

²⁶ Vampires who feed only on animals refer to themselves as “vegetarians” in the *Twilight* series. Meyer, *Twilight*, 164.

sensed there was no point saying that.”²⁷ Yet soon afterwards, Luke has to remind Clary of the same thing. She asks him if they can kill Valentine, since he killed her brother and grandparents. Luke, who is the consistently wise figure in these books, asks, “And you think killing him will what? Erase those things?”²⁸

The “justice” involved in killing another person as punishment is presented by Clare as a desire to better one’s own life by taking the life of another. Neither Jace nor Clary follow through on their revenge plans, but others do. Like Jace, they tell themselves and others that it is not revenge but justice. The Inquisitor, for example, attempts to strike back at Valentine through his “son,” in retaliation for her son’s death.²⁹ The Clave are happy to accede to this, as Luke recognizes: “They can’t get their hands on Valentine, so they’ll punish his son instead.”³⁰ Revenge is thinly veiled as justice, and Clare suggests they are dangerously close to each other.

Killing others in the name of a particular cause is equally tempting, because again its justification can sound plausible. Valentine is willing to sacrifice Jace rather than give up his mission. He is also willing to sacrifice innumerable children in the quest to make more Shadowhunters: when unprepared Mundanes drink from the Mortal Cup, 20% become Shadowhunters and 80% become the hideous, tortured Forsaken. Valentine did not plan to prepare his captives, justifying his acts by arguing that Shadowhunters “had made the world safe for humans for a thousand years ... and now was their time to repay us with their sacrifice.”³¹

The other dark characters in this trilogy share this willingness for others to be sacrificed for their cause. Aldertree is the new Inquisitor in *City of Glass*. He captures Simon and attempts to blackmail him into telling the Clave that the Lightwoods are in league with Valentine, arguing that the Clave needs a common enemy to unite against. When Simon suggests that there is “nothing inspirational about blaming the Lightwoods for everything,” Aldertree replies simply, “Some must

²⁷ Clare, *City of Bones*, 165.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 374.

²⁹ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 244.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 271.

³¹ Clare, *City of Bones*, 148.

be sacrificed.”³² In contrast, Clare’s “light” characters refuse to buy into this scapegoat mentality, even if they suffer themselves as a result.³³

The final word on this is given by the Angel in the book’s climactic scene by the Lake. Valentine has sacrificed Jace in order to save his own life, and uses that sacrificial blood to raise the Angel Raziel. Deluded as he is, he believes that the Angel will favour him. The Angel destroys his pretences in a few, glorious sentences to which I will return, but finally tells him:

*God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son on an altar much like this one, to see who it was that Abraham loved more, Isaac or God. But no one asked you to sacrifice your son, Valentine.*³⁴

Sacrificing Jace is the last in a long list of acts for which Valentine is condemned by heaven. Clare uses the angel’s judgement to affirm the trilogy’s warning against any practice that involves sacrificing another, whatever its justification. Life is sacred and belongs to God. It should never be taken from another by force. Self-sacrifice, however, as we will see, is very different.

b. Blood’s cleansing power

One of the curses associated with the vampire disease is that vampires cannot survive sunlight. The reason for this will be discussed in the later chapter on light and darkness, but one unusual case comes within the province of the blood mythologems. Jace has no particular reason to love Simon, whom he knows is also in love with Clary. Yet when Simon is captured by Valentine and left for dead (or, as vampire-Simon would say, “dead-er”) in a cell on Valentine’s ship, Jace voluntarily joins him there. He unhesitatingly cuts his own wrist to revive Simon with his blood. When they are later trapped on a boat and cannot avoid the sunrise, Simon finds that light no longer harms him. He becomes what the other vampires call a “Daylighter.”

³² Clare, *City of Glass*, 106.

³³ *Ibid.*, 429.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 494. The words of the Angel are in italics in the original.

Vampires have drunk Shadowhunter blood before without this result. The difference is in Jace who has more angel blood than any other Nephilim. Jace's blood becomes part of Simon's blood/life. "Jace could see the dark tracery of Simon's veins. ... Veins full of blood. *My blood ... My blood in his veins.*"³⁵ The angel blood, acting with all the power of blood in the biblical story, cleanses the part of the demonic curse that makes vampires creatures of darkness. Filled with that blood, Simon, while remaining a vampire, can again live in daylight. It is also worth noting that a single dose of Jace's blood apparently changes the nature of Simon's vampirism permanently. If it is seen as purifying the demonic side of vampirism, thus enabling Simon to be exposed to light safely, it does so in the Christian sense of Christ's once-for-all atonement, rather than the Jewish practice of annual cleansing.

As in the Bible, this cleansing power is transformed into polluting power when blood is abused. The clearest example is when Valentine dips the Mortal Sword in the blood of a warlock, a werewolf, a faerie and a vampire (the Ritual of Infernal Conversion), and causes its considerable angelic power to be transformed into an equivalent amount of demonic power.³⁶ Armed with this, Valentine is able to summon and control countless demons and potentially bring widespread destruction. Desecrated blood is also significant in the climactic scene of *City of Glass*. In a black parody of the Last Supper, Valentine builds an altar on which he puts the Mortal Cup. In order to summon Raziel he needs blood for that cup. His explanation to Clary, who has portalled there in a desperate attempt to stop him and landed in the cursed lake, shows clearly how warped Valentine's own understanding of the holiness of blood has become.

"Blood is needed to complete this ceremony," he said. "I intended to use my own, but when I saw you in the lake, I knew it was Raziel's way of telling me to use my daughter's instead. It's why I cleared your blood of the lake's taint. You are purified now—purified and ready. So thank you, Clarissa, for the use of your blood."³⁷

He is about to kill her when Jace arrives, confronts him, and is killed himself. The blood that is

³⁵ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 377.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

³⁷ Clare, *City of Glass*, 486.

poured into the Cup is the blood of the one Valentine calls “my son” moments before killing him.

I called this a “black parody” of the Last Supper. In the story of the Last Supper, Jesus, God’s son, holds up the cup and tells his disciples that it holds his blood, given for them. By the lakeside, Valentine, a figure who models himself on Satan, fills the Cup with blood he has taken by force from his own son. The first is an act of love, the second of power. The first is a way of bringing life to others, the second is a way of bringing death. There is a powerful difference between the effects of willing self-giving and of sacrificing others.

This contrast between giving love and seeking power is closely tied in Clare’s works to giving life and causing death. Although her books are written primarily for teenage girls and romantic love understandably plays a large role in them, it is only one aspect of the love that Clare explores in the story. Love in this world is tough, because characters who love know that this love may require of them their own blood and life. Valentine fears such love, both because of the vulnerability it creates and because of the degree of self-sacrifice it may draw from people. When Jace was young, he asked for and received a hunting falcon and was instructed by Valentine to train it. He dedicated hours to working with the bird, making it trust him and respond to him. When he brought it to show Valentine, Valentine broke its neck. He said he had given it to Jace to train, not to love, and teaches him that “to love is to destroy, and ... to be loved is to be the one destroyed.”³⁸

Despite all Jace’s efforts to learn this lesson from his “father,” he remains a figure who, behind the defensive cynicism and smart comments, is intensely vulnerable. Valentine is right inasmuch as his vulnerability arises from his ability to love, but is proved profoundly wrong in his understanding of love itself. For Valentine, love’s vulnerability is a weakness. The only “love” he contemplates indulging in is very different to that understood by Jace or Clary.

“You’ve never cared about anyone. Not even my mother. Not even Jace. They were just things that belonged to you.”

³⁸ Clare, *City of Bones*, 193.

“But isn’t that what love is, Clarissa? Ownership? ‘I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine,’ as the Song of Songs goes.”

“No. And don’t quote the Bible at me. I don’t think you get it.”³⁹

Clary’s response sums up love as it appears in the trilogy: “It’s not just that someone belongs to you, it’s that you give yourself to them. I doubt *you’ve* ever given anything to anyone. Except maybe nightmares.”⁴⁰ The positive figures in the series believe that to love is to give oneself and to risk oneself. Clary does not hesitate to enter a vampire lair out of love for Simon, and Jace does not hesitate to go with her out of love for her. Magnus weakens himself deeply by rescuing Alec from the river while trying to control the deadly spell around the dark ship so that those fighting on it will not be destroyed by it. Alec, desperate to return and fight, instead says to him, “Take my hands. . . . And take my strength, too. Whatever of it you can use to—to keep yourself going. . . . Take it. It’s yours.”⁴¹ Isabelle sums up this attitude to life when she tells Clary, “Do you not think we’re not all of us, at all times, prepared to die if we have to, if the cause is great enough?”⁴²

Love leads naturally to self-sacrifice when the need is there. At each crucial point of the plot, someone is rescued through the courageous self-sacrifice of another. What Jace learns during his time in “hell” is that love does not make you weak, as Valentine had taught him. From Clary he learns that it makes you strong, and that that strength is the ability to sacrifice yourself if needed.

I used to think being a good warrior meant not caring. . . . And then I met you. You were a mundane. Weak. Not a fighter. Never trained. And then I saw how much you loved your mother, loved Simon, and how you’d walk into hell to save them. . . . Love didn’t make you weak, it made you stronger than anyone I’d ever met.⁴³

³⁹ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 352. Note Satan’s facility with Scriptural quotation: Mt 4:5-7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁴² Clare, *City of Glass*, 349.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 532.

Clary and Jace come very close to “walking into hell” to save others, and to sacrificing their own life blood in their efforts. They both survive. Yet in the end, as we will see as we explore the “Victory” mythologems in this series, it is Jace’s blood, given through his death, which releases the divine power who cleanses their world of Valentine and his demons.

While the final atoning act in this series is more one of “victory” than “blood,” the blood mythologems are woven into the fabric of the whole trilogy. Particular life is passed from one character to another through blood. Taking life wrongly desecrates and warps the life within it and releases power for evil rather than good. The giving of life/blood willingly for another out of love can cleanse or save that individual from death. Blood is powerful, holy, valuable and able to convey life from one person to another. Clare has preserved the essence of these mythologems while clothing them in a very different time and world.

3. The Harry Potter Series

Dumbledore is the greatest wizard of his age, and has magical powers that are seldom tapped to their full potential. Yet even Dumbledore talks of certain things as if they are a mystery beyond his reach or control. One of the ancient mysteries is love, which I will look at in more detail when exploring the “Victory” myths of atonement. Closely linked to this, however, is another ancient magic with ancient power: the magic surrounding blood.⁴⁴ Both are types of magic Voldemort learns he has underestimated: “His mother left upon him the traces of her sacrifice. ... This is old magic, I should have remembered it, I was foolish to overlook it ... but no matter.”⁴⁵ In fact it matters greatly, as Voldemort discovers, too late.

a. Life is in the blood

The idea that “blood is life” is never stated in the *Harry Potter* series, but the way blood is used there makes little sense unless this is the underlying belief. There are scattered allusions to it, such as the Philosopher’s Stone—the source of everlasting life—being “blood red,” but more importantly some of the key plot elements depend on it.⁴⁶ The reason Harry is alive at all, the

⁴⁴ Griesinger has linked this to the “deep magic” of Lewis which is also a magic of self-sacrifice. Griesinger, “Harry Potter and the ‘Deeper Magic’.”

⁴⁵ Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, 566.

⁴⁶ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 212.

reason Neville Longbottom is not destroyed by Voldemort, and the reason Voldemort is eventually defeated, all depend on this mythologem.

As in the works of Nix and Clare, blood in the *Harry Potter* series not only carries the life of the person whose body it is in, it can also acquire the life of others. The earliest example of this is when Lily gives her life for Harry. In this magical world, her sacrifice provides more than a temporary protection; her life—and the protection it provides—lives on in his blood, “flows in [his] veins.”⁴⁷ She passes something of her own life into the life-blood of her son, not through inheritance, but through a particular sacrificial action. This life exists in Harry’s blood to the extent that it can later be taken and shared by Voldemort. Similarly, the sacrificial power of Lily’s blood continues to live and protect Harry through the fairly unwilling blood of her sister, translated from one to the other. Petunia has no love for Harry, but she takes him into her home. As Dumbledore explains to Harry:

In doing so, she sealed the charm I placed upon you. Your mother’s sacrifice made the bond of blood the strongest shield I could give you. . . . While you can still call home the place where your mother’s blood dwells, there you cannot be touched or harmed by Voldemort. He shed her blood, but it lives on in you and her sister. Her blood became your refuge.⁴⁸

Biologically ludicrous as this may be, the idea that particular life can be passed from one person’s blood to another resonates with the Hebrew understanding of life being something in which all living beings “participate mutually,” and where blood is the “seamless flow of life.”⁴⁹ Lily passes something of her life and sacrifice to Harry, and Harry, as I will discuss later, does the same for all the Hogwarts fighters. In the New Testament, Christ does it for humanity, giving his “abundant life” to his followers through his blood (Jn 6:53, 10:10).

⁴⁷ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 736.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 737.

⁴⁹ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 26; Milbank, “Stories of Sacrifice,” 53.

Life-blood in Harry's world can also be forcibly taken. Voldemort and his followers say they are "Death Eaters," but in "eating" death they are feeding on the life that is taken. This is illustrated vividly in *Chamber of Secrets* where the "memory" of Voldemort held within a diary gradually feeds on Ginny's life, draining it from her while growing ever stronger himself. The connection between life and blood is demonstrated visibly when Harry stabs the horcrux-diary that holds the fragment of Voldemort's soul, it floods blood-like ink over his hand.⁵⁰

If life/blood is taken forcibly from another, it will give that person life. It does not stop being life simply because it has been taken wrongly. However, the life it gives will be a cursed life. In *The Philosopher's Stone*, Voldemort is little more than a wraith. We discover later that his life at this point is tethered to earth only through his horcruxes, scattered around Britain. His physical body had been killed by the curse he had thrown at Harry, leaving only his fragmented soul. In an attempt to strengthen his life force until he can locate the Philosopher's Stone, Voldemort commands Quirrell, whom he is possessing, to kill two unicorns and drink their blood. Unicorns are a symbol of utter purity. In Harry's world, unicorns behave according to the medieval belief that they are best tamed by a virgin, which means that it is likely Rowling also has in mind the allegorical linkage of the unicorn with Christ: pure, gracious, with the ability to purify contaminated water by touching it. In seeking out unicorn blood to drink, Voldemort is therefore doing a horrific thing. The blood of a unicorn keeps you alive, but at "a terrible price."⁵¹ Slaying innocence destroys the humanity of the killer and creates a "half-life, a cursed life."⁵² Blood has been taken wrongly, and although it retains the power of life, that life becomes warped and destructive.

Another powerful example of this is in the graveyard scene in *Goblet of Fire* where Voldemort uses Harry's life-blood to rebuild his own body. The dark magic he invokes involves using the flesh and blood of others, where the blood must be taken forcibly from a foe. Dark magic cannot use blood/life willingly given, such as a friend might offer. It must be taken unwillingly and violently to be dark. Voldemort chooses to take Harry's blood, both because it had been Harry's

⁵⁰ Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets*, 237.

⁵¹ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 187

⁵² Ibid.

life that had destroyed his own, and also so that the lingering protection of Lily's sacrifice can be part of his own life-blood.

I knew the one I must use, if I was to rise again, more powerful than I had been when I had fallen. I wanted Harry Potter's blood. I wanted the blood of the one who had stripped me of power thirteen years ago, for the lingering protection his mother once gave him, would then reside in my veins, too.⁵³

Voldemort believes, rightly, that this means he will be able to touch Harry and, wrongly, that it will enable him to kill him. What he underestimates is the strength of life in that blood. He understands the "power" of blood in terms of impersonal, cold power, rather than the power of *life* that it is. Voldemort does not just take the protection Lily gave, but part of Harry's life into himself: life that continues to live within him while remaining Harry's. Voldemort already cannot die while Harry is alive, since part of his soul is in Harry. Now, by taking Harry's life-blood into himself, he ensures that Harry cannot die while Voldemort is alive. Part of Harry's life is in Voldemort, tying him to life as long as Voldemort lives. This is the reason for the strange flicker of triumph in Dumbledore's eyes as Harry tells him the story of what has happened in the graveyard.⁵⁴ As Dumbledore explains much later, "He took your blood and rebuilt his living body with it! Your blood in his veins, Harry, Lily's protection inside both of you! He tethered you to life while he lives!"⁵⁵

Voldemort is the only character who literally feeds on blood or uses the life/blood of another to physically rebuild his own life. But all the Death Eaters are hungry for power, hungry for the life they can steal from others.⁵⁶ Significantly the spell Harry uses to defeat Voldemort more than once is *Expelliarmus*. *Expelliarmus* is not a curse. It does not bring the other person under the caster's control in any way, whether to shape their will, torture them, or kill them; all it does is remove the means by which the other can curse. Harry does not feed on the power of another,

⁵³ Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, 570

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 604.

⁵⁵ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 709.

⁵⁶ For the connection between taking blood and taking power, see p. 83.

even when fighting for his own life; he merely stops the other from feeding on him. In this way he mirrors Girard's depiction of Jesus who does not even use violence against Satan but rather removes Satan's ability to attack others.⁵⁷ Similarly, Dumbledore in the Ministry for Magic does not attempt to kill Voldemort, but simply makes him unable to kill others.⁵⁸ Dumbledore had learned many years earlier of the dangers of seizing power for oneself, and chooses another way.

Voldemort claims to have "pushed the boundaries of magic further, perhaps, than they have ever been pushed," but he cannot accept that there are kinds of magic about which he remains "woefully ignorant."⁵⁹ Here he shows that he does not begin to understand the power—indeed, the danger—of blood. Like truth, blood is a "beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution."⁶⁰

b. Blood and holiness

The Hebrew concept of the holiness of blood has survived in all three fantasy series under discussion. Used rightly, blood is a positive thing. Used wrongly, blood can be an instrument of destruction.

"Holiness" is a word that still retains overtones of power and awe, qualities that have generally been lost from words such as "goodness," "truth" and "love." In Rowling's stories, however, *all* these qualities have such power as to be dangerous. They are a danger to evil, to darkness, which cannot survive in their presence. Expressed mythically as they are, they can imbue something material with their power. The blood that flows in Harry is filled with the sacrificial love of his mother: something so good that Voldemort cannot bear even to touch his skin. "[I]t was agony to touch a person marked by something so good."⁶¹ The holiness of this blood, filled with this love, literally burns Quirrell/Voldemort when they come in contact with it. "Lord Voldemort's soul, maimed as it is, cannot bear close contact with a soul like Harry's. Like a tongue on frozen steel,

⁵⁷ Girard, *Scapegoat*, 192.

⁵⁸ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 718.

⁵⁹ Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*, 415.

⁶⁰ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 216.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

like flesh in flame—.”⁶² Repeatedly, the desecrated, dark being that is Voldemort comes up against holiness, goodness, truth or wholeness, and is defeated there.

The relationship between Dementors and Patronuses is not expressed in terms of blood, but follows a similar trajectory. Dementors embody the uncleanness of death that the Levitical laws tried to keep from contaminating the temple. The only parts we see of them are a dark, life-sucking mouth and a scabbed, dead-looking hand. They, too, feed on life and happiness and anything positive, leaving behind despair and death. They are so profane that close contact with them can draw all that makes a human life “human” out of a person, leaving only an animated corpse. The Patronuses, in contrast, are made of light, of hope, of love, of purity—and before them Dementors flee. Once again, death, decay and unholiness have been “neutralised” by life, purity and holiness.

It is the quality of holiness in blood that gives it the power to soak up hatred in love and death in life. This is portrayed vividly when Harry’s blood is added to the swirling dark contents of the cauldron holding Voldemort’s potion, and turns those contents “instantly, a blinding white.”⁶³ The same power can also be related to Lily’s or Harry’s sacrifices, giving us another way of understanding them. When they gave their lives, their blood “neutralized” the negative charge of the death curse. Hatred was neutralised by love, and death by life through the power of self-sacrifice. Dumbledore speaks to Harry of Lily’s actions in *Order of the Phoenix*:

I knew, too, where Voldemort was weak. And so I made my decision. You would be protected by an ancient magic of which he knows, which he despises, and which he has always, therefore, underestimated—to his cost. I am speaking, of course, of the fact that your mother died to save you. She gave you a lingering protection he never expected, a protection that flows in your veins to this day. I put my trust, therefore, in your mother’s blood.⁶⁴

⁶² Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 685.

⁶³ Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, 557.

⁶⁴ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 736.

Blood holds within it the holiness of life, and blood given for others conveys that holiness and life to them. The complexities of this within Harry's world are drawn to a climax at Harry's "death." What makes "all the difference" to Harry's action, the thing that makes his death efficacious, is that he is willing to give his life freely to save others.⁶⁵ As has already been proven repeatedly through the consequences of Lily's self-sacrifice, life given for others transfers itself into the very blood of those other people, its holiness providing a barrier between them and evil. Once Harry had willingly given his life, Voldemort cannot hold or harm those fighting at Hogwarts. The silencing curses Voldemort casts on the crowds, the fire he forces over Neville's head, the body-bind he puts on him, all die out and Neville is enabled, instead, to seize Gryffindor's sword and kill another part of Voldemort's soul.

The fact that Harry is alive to witness this, despite dying, also depends on the ancient magic of blood. It is because of Voldemort's actions in the graveyard, tying Harry's life to his own, that he cannot kill him. His *Avada Kadavra* curse succeeds only in killing the one thing in Harry that is not Harry's life: Voldemort's own fragment of soul. The impact of this causes Voldemort to collapse, and frees Harry to converse with the "dead" Dumbledore before Voldemort recovers. There are other important factors in Harry's return from death which will be explored in the chapters that follow, but none of these could have come into play had the power of blood not bound Harry to life in the face of the darkest magic imaginable.

Life/blood works, in these books, on mythic levels. Rowling has taken mythologems from the Bible and re clothed them in a new story. Christ's blood "washes" our "robes" a pure white in Revelation 7:14 as Harry's whitens the dark potion in the graveyard. Christ's blood soaks up or cleanses the "temple" of his people of all that is evil, as Lily's and Harry's blood soak up the evil thrown at those for whom they gave their lives. Christ passes the power of his self-sacrifice to his followers through his blood; Harry receives power through his mother's self-sacrificial blood and passes it to the fighters at Hogwarts through his own self-sacrifice. Christ's life-blood takes death and transforms it to life, and Harry's own "resurrection" is, at least in part, due to the power of blood.

⁶⁵ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 567.

Voldemort unwittingly clarifies and illuminates the nature of life/blood in his own misuse of it. The power of blood/life is demonstrated through Voldemort's hungering after it; the holiness of blood/life is demonstrated through Voldemort's desecration of it; the ability of life to be passed on and provide a shield to others is able to be demonstrated because of Voldemort's murder of Lily and attempted murder of Harry. Blood/life in this series is indeed a "deep magic."

There are countless ways of speaking of the Christian mystery of atonement, and the blood mythologems are simply two of them. Yet they continue to be important in new expressions of atonement. Aspects of Christian atonement that are puzzling in our world are reclothed in a fantasy world and there, at least, make sense. The question of how one person's death could be efficacious for salvation is less puzzling when set against the background of particular understandings of the nature and power of blood in these stories. A life that is given up freely has within it power, holiness, innate value and the ability to be passed from one person to many others.

In mythical understanding, the life found in blood has an existence independent of the body it enlivens. Blood can be taken from a body and its power used for other ends, both good and evil. The Dead of the Old Kingdom, the "undead" vampires, and the barely-alive Voldemort all feed on blood. In doing so they feed on life and take that life within them. The innate power of life/blood can be used to break ancient Charter Stones and potentially to destroy all that held life together. The life/blood of another can be taken in order to enrich one's own life or achieve one's own ends, and this lies behind the bulk of the atrocities perpetrated by the evil characters in these series. Whether the life is taken by physically ingesting blood or by sacrificing a fellow human, the reasoning is the same: the life-power of the other is something that can be taken for oneself or given to another.

The power of blood is the power of something innately holy. When it is desecrated it becomes a weapon of darkness. Hence the damnation of vampires, the darkening of the Mortal Sword when ritually dipped in blood, and Voldemort's cursed, half-life through drinking the blood of a unicorn. But blood can also cleanse, neutralise and conquer evil and darkness. Harry's blood turns a dark

potion blindingly white; the Disreputable Dog absorbs all the pollution and evil of Orannis and thus neutralises it; Jace's angelic blood can cleanse some of the demonic taint from Simon's own blood. This mythological understanding of blood also makes imaginative sense of statements about Jesus' blood having the power to purify his followers (Heb 9:22, 13:12, 1 Jn 1:7) and "wash" their robes white (Rv 7:14), and of the way the language of temple sacrifice is employed to describe what Christ achieved (Rom 3:25, Heb 9:12-14, 13:12).

The power and holiness of blood means that blood has innate value. Although not a strong theme in *Harry Potter*, there is one instance of "paying" with blood. Dumbledore discovers that the price for entering Voldemort's cave is blood—something he finds a little "crude."⁶⁶ In the Old Kingdom, however, such an understanding of blood is vital. Touchstone can "pay" with his blood in order to right a wrong, and Mogget knows that a blood price is necessary for his own freedom. There is an order and balance in the Old Kingdom in which every wrong must be paid for or balanced by something equally valuable. The destruction of a lesser charter stone requires one "currency" of blood; the restoration of a Great Charter Stone requires blood of higher value. The final absorption of Orannis' evil demanded blood of an even higher order: that of a Bright Shiner herself.

In Leviticus, nothing can cleanse or pay for a murder except the life/blood of the murderer. In each of these fantasy series there are degrees of evil that can be atoned for by degrees of sacrifice. Various portions of blood/life can be given, as Jace gives to Simon, to counter small pollutions, or whole lives may be required. The Inquisitor gives her life to save one life: Jace's. The Shiners gave their lives into forming the Charter and enabling all life. Most significantly, Kibeth, the Disreputable Dog, gives all her life into re-forming that same Charter. In the Old Kingdom the final, cosmic act of atonement requires the giving of divine blood, since only divine blood was powerful enough to absorb a cosmic evil. Again, this is a mythic understanding of blood that can provide an imaginative understanding both of the idea of Christ "paying" a ransom (1 Pt 1:18-19, Rv 5:9), and why he needed to be divine to do so on a cosmic level.

⁶⁶ Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*, 153

One more factor is needed, however, to make sense of the role of blood in cosmic atonement: whatever salvation is achieved, it needs to be effective beyond the time and place in which it happens. In the Old Kingdom, this aspect of atonement is more relevant to “covenant” language, and in Clare’s world it is more relevant to “victory” language. However, in *Harry Potter* it is achieved through blood. Lily’s and Harry’s sacrifices live on in the blood of those for whom they died. They are passed on not just in the blood of their own family (although it is there, too, as Petunia shows) but through intent. The power of sacrificial love diffuses into the blood, the life, of all those for whom the sacrifice is made.

The *Harry Potter* series is the only one of the three in which the final act of atonement is achieved by a human being alone. It is also the one in which the effectiveness of this act is passed to others through blood. This is significant. The book of Hebrews emphasises that Christ’s work could be passed on to others because he shared humanity—“flesh and blood”—with them (Heb 2:10-15). In the Old Kingdom and *Mortal Instruments* a divine figure is needed to perform atonement, but for the power of sacrificial blood to be passed on to others, a human figure—Harry, in this case—is needed. There are hints here of the necessity of the doctrine of the dual nature of Christ for an atonement that is both cosmic and able to be communicated to all humanity.

When these theological concepts are couched in story, they take on all the scope, interest and sense of possibility that comes with something grasped imaginatively. The use of blood in ancient sacrifices, for example, is likely to remain something of discomfort and strangeness for a non-Jewish teenager while it is expressed in the world of Leviticus. However, the idea of vampires is now so much a part of many of their imaginative lives that the phrase “blood is life” is no longer difficult to grasp imaginatively. Nor is it inconceivable that one person’s blood could give *another* life. These are concepts created by the story and made sense of within the story. One does not have to reason out every step of how Jace’s blood negates the demonic influence that makes Simon unable to face the sunlight; it is accepted as a possibility within the story despite it being physiologically suspect for the blood Simon drinks to appear immediately in his veins or stay there permanently. These mere scientific points are irrelevant. Within the story, it works, and raises the possibility that it could “work” within the Biblical story as well.

In each of these series, blood enables an evil being to be overcome. In this sense blood is part of the victory of light over darkness and of life over death; it is part of the process whereby the figure of evil is finally defeated. This will be our focus in the next chapter. The mythic elements associated with the atonement theories of sacrifice, covenant and victory overlap considerably when they are woven into the gospel story. They provide different ways of understanding the same story. Likewise the mythic elements in the three fantasy series make sense of the events of their respective stories, tying them into a satisfying whole and grounding them in an ancient mystery.

Chapter 8

Atonement through Victory

The language of victory has the dubious privilege of being even more problematic than the language of blood when it comes to conveying the message of atonement. “Victory” has too often been associated with violence in the name of “the good.” Examples of atrocious “victories” abound in the church’s history itself, and religious terrorism is very much a present reality. It is no wonder that people are wary of any language that links religion with concepts of conquest.

But there are theological difficulties as well as philosophical and ethical ones. “Victory” implies someone or something over whom to be a victor. The options the New Testament holds out for that vanquished foe include Satan and demons, as well as sin and death, implying there is a war happening on a cosmic level. For a post-Enlightenment, “de-mythologised” world, this can be problematic. Additionally, there are relatively few hints in the Hebrew Scriptures as to why this Satan and his minions appear in the New Testament in the form they do. We can piece some background together from Second Temple Jewish literature, from the writings of surrounding cultures, and from the evidence of the New Testament itself, but the allusions to such beings in the Hebrew Scriptures are few and ambiguous. The idea of cosmic warfare, in contrast, is certainly present in the Hebrew Scriptures, but this gives rise to other questions. How can such conflict and evil exist and need vanquishing in a belief system involving one omnipotent God? And if, as the New Testament suggests, there has been a decisive victory over this evil, where is the evidence? What does Christ’s atoning victory mean in a world that appears to be as full of evil as it ever was?

Despite all these difficulties there is clearly something deeply appealing in the drama of cosmic warfare as it is played out in Christian atonement—of good and evil fighting it out and of good conquering, paradoxically, through self-sacrifice and willing death. The idea of such a victory is brought to life again repeatedly in fantasy books today.

Jeffrey Burton Russell launches into his four-volume exploration of the history of the devil by noting:

The historical evidence can never be clear enough for us to know what *really* happened (*wie eigentlich gewesen*), but the evidence as to what people *believed* to have happened is relatively clear. The concept—what people believed to have happened—is more important than what really did happen, because people act upon what they believe to be true.¹

In exploring the ways in which the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures convey stories of victorious atonement, I will not be debating the objective reality of Satan, demons or angels. Like Russell, I am interested in what people believed and translated into their writings. Rather than debating the existence of such beings, we will, in Luke Timothy Johnson’s words, “entertain the notion” that those who used the language of cosmic battles and principalities, powers and demons, experienced their world in a way that made ideas of this sort compelling.²

Far from demythologising their language, then, we will instead utilise its mythic complexities. Kirsten Nielsen argues that the use of mythic language for the devil is important for any discussion about Christianity.³ She points out that just as we employ multiple images for God, both animate and inanimate, so, when talking of evil, multiple images are necessary.

Everything said about the devil must be figurative. And of the devil we must speak both impersonally, as we speak of powers, and personally, as when we speak of Satan. Neither should we forget the images of the old dragon or the wily serpent. These images taken from the four elements must be included if we are to refer adequately to life’s destructive powers.⁴

¹ Russell, *The Devil*, 12.

² Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity*, 164.

³ Nielsen, *Satan the Prodigal Son?*, 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

This range of images reflects the variety of ways evil is depicted in the Bible. The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures do not provide a set of doctrines about the nature of evil, nor a single understanding of demonic powers, nor even a unified myth concerning the entry of evil into the world and what to do about it. Yet the wealth of ideas and images the Bible calls on to explore questions of evil have their own value. As Russell notes, “So long as the inherent inconsistencies were expressed mythologically and taken mythologically, the problem [of evil] was not acute. With the efforts of Christian and Rabbinic theologians to elucidate it rationally, it became unmanageable.”⁵

One mythological expression of evil that is of particular importance in both Christian atonement and many contemporary fantasy books is that of *personified* evil: some being in whom evil is concentrated and who is responsible for the spread of that evil throughout the world. Also of particular significance is the imagery surrounding the conflict between that being (or beings) and God: imagery of a battle between the forces of God and those of evil, between the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness. These two mythologems—personified evil and the battle between Light and Darkness—will be my focus in this chapter.

1. Evil personified

God’s first victory, according to the Hebrew Scriptures, was over Chaos. In Genesis 1:2 God controls and gives form to the unformed depths and darkness with a few brief words.⁶ Elsewhere God’s victory is pictured in terms of subduing Leviathan or crushing Rahab underfoot (Is 27:1; Ps 74:14, 89:10; Jb 26:12), echoing stories from neighbouring peoples of their gods battling the beasts of Chaos. While chaos is an impersonal force in Genesis 1 and embodied in the references to Leviathan or Rahab, one thing is certain in both story strands: God is victor.

The completeness of this initial victory is a guarantee of present and future victories for God’s people.⁷ When Israel needs help, she reminds God how he “cut Rahab to pieces” and “pierced the dragon,” how he “dried up the sea” and “made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to

⁵ Russell, *Devil*, 220.

⁶ For a fuller discussion of this, see Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 30.

⁷ Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God*, 24. See also Macky, *St Paul's Cosmic War Myth*, xii.

cross over” (Is 51:9, 10). Repeatedly God steps in as the Divine Warrior whose power is so great that he is able to wield the storm, flood and plague which in Ancient Near Eastern mythologies were often deities in their own right.⁸ Such a God brings with him vengeance as well as redemption, wrath as well as comfort (Ex 6:6; Is 41:14, 43:1, 14, 52:9; Jer 50:34). Yet even when God’s intervention is not good news for his people, there is no doubt of his supreme power.

What is surrounded by doubt in the Hebrew Scriptures is the degree of separation between God and the evil he fights. There are very few allusions to a figure in whom evil is personified, distinct from and in opposition to God. While the idea of God’s victory implies that evil *is* something distinct from God, the chaos that God defeats, for example, is sometimes portrayed as the chaos monster that God created (Ps 104:26), and the evil that is done may be portrayed as coming about through an evil spirit sent by God (2 Chr 18:18-22). In Isaiah God is plainly said to “form light and create darkness, make weal and create woe” (Is 45:7). Yet the same biblical narrative also has divine beings who do not do God’s will (Ps 82), and one being in particular in whom evil comes to be more fully personified. Russell sees an unresolved ambiguity between monism and dualism here.⁹ The Hebrew Scriptures sound monistic when they speak of God as the single, supreme, being who contains within himself both good and evil, yet the stories of God’s conflict with Chaos or Satan imply a type of dualism.¹⁰ This ambiguity reflects the difficulties inherent in making sense of the duality of good and evil within the one good creation made by one good and all-powerful God. We cannot understand the concept of a distinct and separate personified evil in Hebrew thought without holding it in tension with the One-ness of their God.

Theologian Paul Fiddes says with confidence, “There is no conflict in God.”¹¹ This is in accord with 1 John 1:5, which states, “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.” But such a statement is not so clearly in accord with the way God is characterised in the Hebrew Bible.

⁸ Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God*, 140.

⁹ Russell, *Devil*.

¹⁰ Gustaf Aulen argues that “in the scriptural view, evil has not an eternal existence” and that therefore it is not dualistic. Evil comes from opposition to God. This is not entirely satisfactory, however, as it avoids the question of how the desire to oppose God arose i.e. how evil came into existence. How did a good God create the serpent? Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 4.

¹¹ Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 133.

There, as R.N. Whybray points out, God punishes not only the sinful but random foreigners and even his own people, sometimes indiscriminately, and often beyond what seems fair or reasonable. At times God seems to exhibit insecurity, jealousy and vengefulness.¹² He puts fruit in the garden to tempt humanity, throws them out of the garden when they succumb in case they become too much like him, and apparently lies to them about the immediately fatal consequences of eating it.¹³ Whybray finds further evidence of God's insecurity at the tower of Babel (Gn 11); when he needs to be reminded of his own justice by Abraham (Gn 18); and when he reassures himself of Abraham's love by commanding him to kill his son (Gn 22). Moses has similar troubles with God, who inexplicably attempts to murder him on his way to fulfil God's instructions (Gn 4:24) and who on two occasions needs to be reasoned with in order to be prevented from wiping out his people (Ex 32, Nm 11). Abraham's question, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is right?" (Gn 18:25) is a complex one.¹⁴

There is also the mysterious motif of God "hardening" someone's "heart" and then punishing them for their resulting actions. Pharaoh is one victim of this (Ex 4:21). So too are Eli's sons, with respect to whom we read, chillingly, "But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to kill them" (1 Sm 2:25). An entire nation—the Canaanites—have their hearts hardened to resist the Israelites so that they may be slaughtered:

For it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed, and might receive no mercy, but be exterminated, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. (Jo 11:20)

Here all is under the control and power of the one God who is ultimately responsible for everything.

This kind of God contains both good and evil, light and darkness, unlike the God of whom John writes (1 Jn 1:5). This is a God who exhibits inner conflict between doing good and doing harm,

¹² Whybray, "Shall Not the Judge of the Earth do what is Right?," 2-3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

from whom come both woe and weal (Is 45:7). Yet the claim that “God is good” is central to both Judaism and Christianity. If there is no force for evil beyond God—if God is the primary source of both good and evil—then this claim becomes very difficult to uphold. One approach is to suggest that there is more good in God than evil so that good will always win, but this is not yet the purely “light” God of John’s writings. Another is that God weighs his actions in accord with an external measure of good and evil and can be relied upon to choose the good, but this would posit the existence of something else separate to God (the measure). Alternatively God could be conceived of as being beyond the moral bounds that tie humanity, in which case our understanding of the term “good” becomes essentially meaningless when applied to God. Terry Eagleton observes that some theologians follow this latter alternative, finding it no more relevant to talk of matters of good and evil in regard to God than it would be in regard to a sandstorm.¹⁵

The Hebrew Scriptures do not resolve dilemmas such as this one. Yet neither is the issue of the origin of evil ignored simply because it cannot be resolved. As Russell points out, the Hebrew people clearly puzzled over the degree of suffering they underwent as God’s people, and a number of possible explanations are explored in their stories and songs.¹⁶ It was conceivable that evil and sorrow were the fault of humanity and humanity’s sin, which the stories of Adam and Eve, the Flood, and breaking the covenant suggest. Yet the scale of the punishments and the scale of evil seem massive compared to “puny man,” and surely an all-powerful God should not be thwarted by humanity?¹⁷ Russell continues, “The corrupt will of human beings seemed insufficient to explain the vast and terrifying quantity of evil in the world.”¹⁸

The idea that there could be another force in the world, one evil enough and powerful enough to cause this degree of trouble, was another possibility. Russell suggests that the evil aspect of the Hebrew God could be perceived as gradually separating itself from the original unity. “Before,

¹⁵ Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, 24. See also Marshall, “Violence of God,” 85. “If God’s deeds are beyond all moral valuation, so that nothing God ever does can be called bad, then it is equally true that nothing God does can ever be called good, and no way finally exists to differentiate between God and the Devil.”

¹⁶ Russell, *Devil*, 181.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

Yahweh had been the God, the antinomy of inner opposites. Now Yahweh became the Lord, the good aspect of the God.”¹⁹ Yet since they were strictly monotheistic, this evil aspect could not in itself be a god. Instead, it took the form of a spirit sent from God, an angel of God, or a son of God. Further, while this evil aspect does in a sense separate from God, it does not leave God’s control. There are hints in the Hebrew Scriptures that it begins to over-reach its bounds, but in general it remains under the authority of God.²⁰

Thus, when in 2 Chronicles 18:18-22 Micaiah sees a vision of an angel offering to be “a lying spirit in the mouth of all [the] prophets” on behalf of the Lord, the Lord sends the angel out and takes responsibility himself for the action. The story of David being incited to count the people of Israel is told twice, and in one telling the inciter is God (2 Sm 24:1) while in the other it is Satan (1 Chr 21:1). Possibly the author of Chronicles wants to distance God from the accusation that he wills people to do evil, but there are no such misgivings shown with the later story of Micaiah.²¹ Another alternative is that the author understood Satan to be fulfilling the will of God as the lying spirit of Micaiah’s vision did, so that saying God’s servant did it was another way of saying God did it. That is certainly the consistent picture of the tempters, obstructors or “satans” who appear in the Hebrew Scriptures. They come, as the angel with the lying spirit did, from the host of heaven, the divine assembly of the *bene ha-elohim*, the “sons of God,” and act at God’s command.²²

As Johnny Awaad points out, tempting or obstructing is normally a role rather than the essence of the being doing it, and both humans and supernatural beings can be called a “satan” if they are fulfilling that role.²³ One who seems to specialise in that role, however, appears in the opening chapter of the book of Job. While he is unable to move against Job without God’s permission, he does have a degree of autonomy. He is able to incite God himself, almost against God’s better judgement (Jb 2:3). Page notes that his destructive actions go beyond tempting and obstructing.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For a full discussion of this idea, see Macky, *Cosmic War Myth*, 34-35, 41-45.

²¹ Page, “Satan, God’s Servant,” 454.

²² Pagels, *Origin of Satan*, 39.

²³ Awaad, “Satan in Biblical Imagination,” 113.

He aims to turn Job away from God.²⁴ There is also a suggestion here that Satan is a *jealous* son of God, one who hears praise of Job and so devises a scheme for his downfall. These familial relationships emphasise both the perceived proximity and distinction of evil from God.²⁵ Satan's most independent moment is found in Zechariah:

Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this man a brand plucked from the fire?" (Zec 3:1-2)

Whereas Satan accuses Joshua, God chooses to pardon him, replacing his filthy clothes with clean ones. Satan's attempt to turn God against someone has again not succeeded. This Satan appears to be in opposition to God as well as to humanity, showing signs of an independent, perhaps rebellious inclination.²⁶

These few appearances are the extent of the depiction of Satan as a particular character in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet by the time we reach the New Testament, the "whole world lies under the power of the evil one" (1 Jn 5:19) who is the "ruler of this world" (Jn 12:31), the "god of this world" (2 Cor 4:4), and the "ruler of the power of the air" (Eph 2:1-3). There are demons, "authorities ... cosmic powers of this present darkness ... spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" against whom Christ's followers must struggle (Eph 6:12) and yet whom Christ has somehow disarmed (Col 2:15). It appears that the writers had access to other stories and teachings that disclosed a more detailed understanding of Satan and evil than is present in the Hebrew Scriptures. Some of these stories and teachings can be found in works that were not included in the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures.

²⁴ Page, "Satan, God's Servant," 450.

²⁵ Nielsen, *Satan the Prodigal Son?*, 100.

²⁶ Note that Sherlock sees here "no hint that the accuser is evil, or opposed to Yahweh" but is simply a foil to illuminate God's saving work, while Pagels sees the same passage as showing Satan taking on a "sinister quality" as he becomes God's "opponent." Sherlock, *Overcoming of Satan*, 5; Pagels, *Origin of Satan*, 45.

There are, however, a number of other brief points to be addressed before looking at these extra-canonical writings. First, a fully-fledged dualism would have been known to the exiled Hebrew people through Zoroastrianism. They would have had every opportunity to learn of the beguiling idea of an absolute principle of evil who could release their good God from any responsibility for wrong. The price to be paid for this would be, of course, God's omnipotence. The tales of the Greek gods, too, could be dualistic. As Russell points out, on one level Greek deities were all manifestations of the one god, and were all ambiguous: mixtures of good and evil, sky and chthonic.²⁷ Yet there are other stories that provide various explanations of evil entering the world separately to the gods (Pandora, for example). Into this thread comes the story of the battle between the Titans, Chaos monsters and the Gods.²⁸ Given these influences, the determination of the Hebrew people to insist on their problematic belief in one ultimate and good God is remarkable.

Secondly, when the Septuagint refers to "hosts" or "angels" it does so using more abstract terms like "powers" (*dunameis*), "authorities" (*exousiai*), "principalities" (*archai*) or "rulers" (*archotes*). This must be kept in mind when we encounter these terms in the New Testament.²⁹ But when the Septuagint refers to evil spirits, it tends to use the word *daimonia*.³⁰ *Daimonia*, in Plato's writings, are neither good nor evil, but intermediaries between the gods and humans, inhabiting the middle region between them.³¹ In the Septuagint the term *daimonia* is narrowed down to apply to beings in opposition to God, while there are other beings who inhabit this "middle layer," such as the sons of God, the *bene ha-elohim*.³²

These *bene ha-elohim* feature in many books of the Pseudepigrapha. Two important traditions grew up around them. One was that some of these *bene ha-elohim* were in charge of each of the

²⁷ Russell, *Devil*, 132-38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ As noted by Macky, *Cosmic War Myth*, 40.

³⁰ Bell, *Deliver us from Evil*, 13.

³¹ Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 41.

³² Russell, *Prince of Darkness*, 45. Martin Parsons uses the idea of "an excluded middle" to describe the tendency in mainstream Western Christianity to ignore or dismiss the biblical witness to such beings. Parsons, "Binding the Strong Man," 106-7.

other nations, while God looked after Israel directly. The basis for this was found in the Hebrew Scriptures:

When the Most High apportioned the nations,
when he divided humankind,
he fixed the boundaries of the peoples
according to the number of the gods;
the Lord's own portion was his people,
Jacob his allotted share. (Dt 32:8-9)

However, the gods “judged unjustly” and “showed partiality to the wicked” (Ps 82:2), so God says to them:

I say, “You are gods,
children of the Most High, all of you;
nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
and fall like any prince.” (Ps 82:6-7)

The children of God are appointed to a role, but do not fulfil it as God had commanded. Macky suggests that they “abused their positions and so became objects of God’s wrath.”³³ It is worth noting that there is a close link between the corruption of the “gods” or “children of God” and the existence of injustice on earth (Ps 82:2-5). The relationship between heavenly and earthly actions is very close. When, later, Paul speaks of earthly and spiritual powers as if they were working together (e.g. Eph 6:12), he is following a long tradition.

The second tradition surrounding the *bene ha-elohim* goes back to Genesis 6. There the Hebrew Scriptures themselves may give an account of evil entering the world through means apart from God, as the *bene ha-elohim* descend to “take wives for themselves” from humanity, producing a

³³ Macky, *Cosmic War Myth*, 38.

race of heroes and warriors called Nephilim (Gn 6:1-4).³⁴ In Genesis the only link between the actions of the sons of God and evil is the juxtaposition of this story with that of God observing all the evil on the earth.³⁵ This is the story, however, taken up by those extra-canonical writers who sought to explore the origins of the fall of the angels into Satan's realm, and also, perhaps, to find a solution to the problem of evil which exonerated both God and humanity.³⁶

Two accounts of the Genesis 6 story that may pre-date the New Testament are given in 1 Enoch (second century B.C.E. to first century C.E.) and Jubilees (second century B.C.E.).³⁷ In 1 Enoch, 200 angels are encouraged by their leader, Semyaz (who had been given that leadership position by God [9:7]), to bind themselves together by a curse of disobedience, and descend to earth in order to "choose wives" and "beget children" (1 En 6:1-5). Once there, Azazel teaches the people war and vanity (8:1-2) while others teach them magic (8:3), and the people cry out to God for help. The angels Michael, Surafel and Gabriel hear the complaint and take it to God, who makes a pit in the desert, binds Azazel hand and foot, and throws him into it, "writing upon him all sin" (10:8), an interesting allusion to the scapegoat ritual in Leviticus 16. The other fallen angels are also cast down and bound, ready for later fire and torment. Interestingly, in a later chapter, Satan appears as their leader. It is he rather than Semyaz who is the one who has been behind it all (53:3, 54:6).

In Jubilees, the angels who came down and took wives from humanity are bound in the depths of the earth and isolated, "removed from under heaven" (5:7). But although these "Watchers" are bound, their spirits or demon-children continue to torment Noah and Noah's children (10:1-6). Noah prays for release from them. God is going to answer him, but Mastema, the chief of the demons, asks God that a tenth of their number be allowed to remain, since humanity deserves it. God allows this. Nine tenths of the demons are bound, but one tenth are left "subject to Satan

³⁴ Some interpreters understand these Nephilim to be human kings, but I am deliberately following the more mythic understanding of passages such as this one.

³⁵ For an exploration of rhetorical links between the story of the Nephilim and the flood, see Hendel, "The Nephilim were on the Earth," 13.

³⁶ Auffarth and Stuckenbruck, eds., *Fall of the Angels*, 1.

³⁷ Likely dates according to Charlesworth, ed. *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1.

upon the earth” (10:11). Noah is comforted by being shown how to heal the torments they cause. Satan now has workers of his own on earth.

By New Testament times, then, the brief references to a particular Satan in the Hebrew Scriptures had been elaborated significantly by subsequent writers. There is no sense of a single, unified story spanning the entire tradition, but it is possible to note certain key elements:

- i. An overarching sense that God is ultimately in control of all forces, good and evil.
- ii. Concurrently, a sense that evil may stretch or break away from its allotted bounds.
- iii. A tendency to give the name “Satan” (amongst other names) to a prominent exponent of such boundary-pushing.
- iv. A middle-layer between God and humanity, referred to both in terms of impersonal forces and, more often, personal beings.
- v. The idea that beings of this middle-layer were given the nations to oversee, but connived with the nations in injustice and, in doing so, rebelled against God.
- vi. The notion that some of the beings of this middle-layer (or their offspring) in ages past had sinned and been banned from heaven, but had been allowed to remain on earth, and are now workers of Satan.

When Satan appears in Matthew as an independent being (Mt 4:1-11), these are some of the ideas, images and stories that may have underpinned the readers’ understanding of who Jesus was encountering in the wilderness.

Satan (or the Devil) and his demonic servants are far from peripheral or occasional players in the New Testament stories. In the Gospels alone, “demon” (δαίμον) and related words occur 65 times, “devil” (διάβολου) 16 times, “Satan” (Σατανα) 16 times, and “Beelzebul” (Βεελζεβουλ) 7 times. Satan is the “ruler of this world” (Jn 12:31, 14:30) who can offer this kingdom to Jesus if Jesus worships him (Mt 4:8-10). It is Satan who murders and lies (Jn 8:44); who causes oppression and temptation (Acts 10:38, Eph 6:11); who condemns (1 Tm 3:6), captures (2 Tm 2:26) and brings about death (Heb 2:14). The world is under his power or dominion of darkness (Col 1:13).

However, one thing that remains almost as ambiguous in the New Testament as it is in the Hebrew Scriptures is the degree of independence Satan has from God. The Satan who meets Jesus in the desert and tempts him has been “given authority” over “all the kingdoms of the world” (Lk 4:6). The authority is real, but only because it has been delegated to him by God.³⁸ Satan tempts Jesus in the desert, but he is only able to do so because the Spirit of God has driven Jesus there (Mt 4:1; Mk 1:12; Lk 4:1). As Page observes:

Satan was not acting apart from divine knowledge or control. To the contrary, his actions had a place in God's plan for the one he had just acknowledged as his Son.³⁹

The Satan of Job or Zechariah is still recognisable here: one with power enough to cause deep suffering, yet who is only able to tempt or accuse because God allows him to do so.

The New Testament, like the Hebrew Scriptures, continues to affirm God’s “overarching sovereignty.”⁴⁰ There may be hints that Satan was the founder of evil (Jn 8:44) and clear statements of God’s utter separation from all acts of darkness (1 Jn 1:5), but Satan is never quite an “absolute principle of evil.”⁴¹ Satan is still used by God to discipline church members (1 Cor 5:5, 1 Tm 1:20), or to stop Paul from “being too elated” (2 Cor 12:17). In the Passion accounts there is a sense, particularly in John’s Gospel, that all Satan’s machinations are unwittingly playing into God’s hands (see also Acts 2:22-23).

There seems to be, however, a definite increase in the degree of Satan’s power in the New Testament. He is no longer simply the Tempter. Now he is described as the world’s ruler (Jn 12:31, 14:30, 16:1), the ruler of the powers of darkness (Eph 6:12), and even the “god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4). When he “demands” to “sift the disciples like wheat” (Lk 22:31), that demand is met, even though it is clearly contrary to Jesus’ wishes. Jesus does not prevent it, but prays that

³⁸ Page, “Satan, God’s Servant,” 457.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 456.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 465.

⁴¹ Russell, *Devil*, 230.

Peter will have the strength to survive it. The power of Satan is depicted as a genuine threat which Christ must meet.

The battle against the threat of Satan is a battle for humanity's allegiance. It is not so much that Satan is an equal and opposite force to God, but that humanity has chosen to follow this lesser power and Christ must win it back. For the New Testament writers, Satan is now unequivocally opposed to God and will do all he can to maintain his own kingdom. As Russell puts it, "Above all, he works to obstruct the mission of Christ," blinding the minds of unbelievers (2 Cor 4:4), "making crooked the straight paths of the Lord" (Acts 13:8-10), and blocking Paul's missionary journeys (1Thes 2:18).⁴² Satan is the "instigator" of sin in humanity (1 Thes 3:5), the father of lies (Jn 8:44), able to enter and possess a person's mind (Lk 22:3), binding them to sin and thereby to himself (Lk 13:16).⁴³ In response, Christ is an obedient son of God (Phil 2:8), bringing light into people's minds (Jn 1:9), setting them free from the sin to which Satan has bound them (Lk 4:18; Jn 8:36; Acts 13:39), bringing truth rather than lies (Jn 8:32) and providing them with the power to resist and eventually defeat Satan himself (Lk 10:18-19). Although Christ is clearly the more powerful of the two, these two "sons of God" are thus almost mirror images of each other.

What makes the battle between Christ and Satan a genuine one, despite their unequal powers, is the unknown factor of how humanity will respond. With which side will they choose to align themselves? Many of the biblical and extra-canonical writers speak of this battle in terms of light and darkness. This, then, is the second mythologem to be considered in this chapter. It is one that grows out of the first, but which involves a particular set of images and associations.

2. Kingdoms of Light and Darkness

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the battles God wages are against uncleanness, sin and death (as discussed in the previous chapter) and against chaos (as will be examined in more detail in later chapters). God is also spoken of as battling against Israel's enemies when he intervenes as the Divine Warrior and Redeemer of his people. These appear to be earthly battles, but the close connection between the heavenly and physical worlds in Hebrew thought mean that human and

⁴² Sundberg, "Satan the Enemy," 30.

⁴³ Ibid., 29.

cosmic battles are not distinct from each other. Tom Yoder Neufeld argues that, while God's foes may be human, when they disobey God it is a "participation, albeit as enemies of Yahweh, in the battle of the gods."⁴⁴ As a result, Israel's enemies may be spoken of as Leviathan (Ps 74:14), or *tannin* (Ps 74:13; Ez 29:3-5; Jer 51:34), or Rahab (Ps 87:4; Is 30:7).⁴⁵ As Neufeld suggests, the mythic language indicates the scope and seriousness of the wrath such disobedience provokes.⁴⁶

When, in Psalm 82, the "children of the most High" are said to have transgressed, they did so in collusion with the nations under them. Injustice on an earthly level meant injustice on the level of those beings in charge of that earth. In the same way, "earthly battles between nations are visible expressions of heavenly battles between those nations' angelic guardians."⁴⁷ It makes sense, then, that earthly victories secured through God's help should be expressed in cosmic categories, as is seen in the use of such language when the Exodus is recalled (e.g. Is 51:9-10; Ps 77:16; Hab 3:8; Ps 74:13-14). As Boyd explains:

... the evil character and threatening power of Rahab on a cosmic level was understood to be revealed in and channeled through the evil character and threatening power of Egypt. ... For this reason, Israel's defeat of an opponent was sometimes construed as the Lord once again defeating cosmic forces of chaos. (Is 17:12-14)⁴⁸

There is, then, a basis in the Hebrew Scriptures for the concept of a cosmic war. There is less evidence for the use of light and darkness to speak of that war. God's relationship with darkness is ambiguous; he is not yet depicted as the head of an Army of Light. God may bring darkness onto the earth, and is even said to dwell in darkness himself.⁴⁹ Yet God is also called upon to

⁴⁴ Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God*, 37.

⁴⁵ "Tannin" is "a more general term sometimes translated 'sea monster' or 'dragon'." Routledge, "Did God Create Chaos?," 71-2.

⁴⁶ Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God*, 35.

⁴⁷ Macky, *Cosmic War Myth*, 39.

⁴⁸ Boyd, *Satan and Evil*, 32.

⁴⁹ For bringing darkness on earth see Ex 10:21; Jo 24:7; Jb 19:8; Ps 44:19, 105:28; Jer 13:16, 23:12; Lam 3:2,6; Ezr 32:8. For dwelling in darkness see Ex 20:21; Dt 5:23; 2 Sm 22:10-12; 1 Kgs 8:12; Ps 18:9; 97:2.

bring light into darkness (Is 42:16, 60:1; Mi 7:8-9); where God is, light is (Jb 3:4, 29:3; Ps 27:1, 36:9, 104:2, 118:27; Is 2:5, 60:19); the light of God's countenance shines on his people (Ps 4:6, 89:15, 90:8); and even the darkness becomes light to God (Ps 139:12).

There is nothing here as clear-cut as two distinct kingdoms, one light and one dark. It is significant, however, that the two central stories of salvation history—creation and the exodus—do contain references to light conquering darkness. In the exodus story it is a minor motif: the pillar of fire that leads Israel through the darkness (Ex 13:21). In the Genesis story, it is central. When God begins to create, “darkness covered the face of the deep,” (Gn 1:2) and God's first, decisive act is to control that darkness by the creation of light (Gn 1:3-4). While God will continue to separate and order creation for the next five days, the act that allows all others to follow is the creation of light, the turning of wild darkness into ordered night.

Already, in this initial act of creation, of God taking control over darkness and bending it to his will, darkness has associations beyond the physical absence of light. As God controls darkness, he controls chaos. The precise meaning of the phrase *tohu va bohu* is still a matter of debate, but it has overtones of desolation, formlessness and wildness.⁵⁰ This “nothingness” is given form as light forces a boundary around darkness. Chaos and the darkness which “covers the face of the deep” (Gn 1:2) are closely linked.

The land of gloom and chaos,
Where light is like darkness. (Jb 10:22)

I did not speak in secret,
In a land of darkness;
I did not say to the offspring of Jacob,
‘Seek me in chaos.’ (Is 45:19)

In other passages, darkness is associated strongly with death, sin or the “way of evil”:

⁵⁰ For a discussion on this phrase, see Routledge, “Did God create chaos?,” 73-74.

... before I go, never to return,
To the land of gloom and deep darkness. (Jb 10:21)

Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
Or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? (Jb 38:17)

It will save you from the way of evil,
From those who speak perversely,
Who forsake the paths of uprightness
To walk in the ways of darkness. (Prv 2:12-13)

Darkness is something from which people seek to be rescued. Despite the many times God himself is said to bring darkness on the earth, in Isaiah people are living in a land of darkness from which God will rescue them (Is 9:2; 60:2). Darkness imprisons people (Is 42:7), a thought echoed in the Wisdom of Solomon.⁵¹

For when lawless people supposed that they held the holy nation in their power,
they themselves lay as captives of darkness and prisoners of long night, shut in
under their roofs, exiles from eternal providence. (Ws 17:2)

For whether they were farmers of shepherds
Or workers who toiled in the wilderness,
They were seized, and endured the inescapable fate;
For with one chain of darkness they all were bound. (Ws 17:7)

While the Hebrew Scriptures do not speak of a war between the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness, there is a wealth of imagery from which such an idea could emerge. Battles happen on a cosmic as well as earthly level; darkness is associated with chaos, sin and

⁵¹ *The Wisdom of Solomon* was not included in the final Hebrew canon but is part of the Septuagint.

death; darkness can imprison people and put them into a slavery from which they need to be redeemed; when people live in a land of darkness, their only hope is in the light God can bring.

These scattered references and images are drawn together in several extra-canonical texts in which the world is split into two clear camps: one following death, darkness and the devil, the other following life, light and God. In the Wisdom of Solomon, for example, the devil is directly responsible for death entering the world, *contrary to God's will* (1:13; 2:23-24), and since then death has succeeded in luring impious people into a life of meaningless unreality.⁵² These impious ones live in blind darkness, believing that they should enjoy creation to the full while they can, and that they can do so with impunity, scoffing at the righteous and their belief in God. But while the righteous may appear to die, they are really passing a test of God and moving to reign with him (3:1-17), whereas the impious will be punished “as their reasoning deserves” (3:10).

The choice between “two ways” is apparent also in the Testimony of the Twelve Patriarchs. In these writings, it is understood that since the Watchers brought a curse on humanity there have been two types of spirit or angel on earth. One type is guided by God, and the other by Beliar (alternatively called Satan) to torment and lead humanity astray (T.Ash 1:8, 9; 6:5; T.Dan 5:6). As Russell points out, here Satan's separation from God is so distinct that he has his own spirits to send out in the manner that God sent him.⁵³ The result is two kingdoms, one of darkness and one of light. “And now, my children, you have heard all; choose therefore for yourselves either the darkness or the light, either the law of the Lord or the works of Beliar” (T.Levi:19). Each individual's life ends as the world does, with a battle between the angel of the Lord and the angel of Satan (T.Dan:6).⁵⁴

⁵² Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God*, 51.

⁵³ Russell, *Devil*, 211. For a discussion of who is under the authority of the devil, see also Garrett, *Demise of the Devil*, 38-40.

⁵⁴ Russell, *Devil*, 211.

Many of these ideas crystallise in the writings of Qumran with their strong dualism between light and darkness.⁵⁵ Here the Angel of Darkness, Belial or Satan, who rules the Kingdom of Darkness, is in open warfare with the Kingdom of Light. This Angel of Darkness had been created by God to *punish* sinners, but in fact urges humanity on to greater sin and lures it into ever greater need of punishment. To join the Kingdom of Light, one must join the Qumran community. Once there, one is relatively safe from the attacks, though not the temptations, of Satan.⁵⁶

Variations of such stories were familiar to the people we read about in the Gospels, for whom talk of demon possession and “kingdoms” was commonplace.⁵⁷ Allusions to a demonic realm or Satan’s ruling of the earth did not need to be explained. The NT authors assumed their readers shared a knowledge of this network of interlacing stories about God, good, and evil. The “Kingdom of Heaven” (or the “Kingdom of God”), which is contrasted with the Kingdom of Satan in all three Synoptic Gospels (e.g., Mt 12:26; Mk 3:24; Lk 11:18), is a dominant theme in Jesus’ teaching. Likewise, the image of light battling against darkness permeates the New Testament.⁵⁸

We cannot be certain about the exact understanding readers brought to references such as these. It seems, however, that the two mythologems we are considering were an established part of the understanding of God, good and evil at this time. Evil is at least partially focussed on or caused

⁵⁵ Bell, *Deliver us from Evil*, 20-21.

⁵⁶ For a review of the relevant references, see Macky, *Cosmic War Myth*, 41-44.

⁵⁷ Elaine Pagel acknowledges the importance of such stories, but differentiates between the writings which became canonical for the Hebrew people and those which did not. Even though the canon was not yet settled when the works I have referred to above were written, she attributes them to people on the “fringe” of “mainstream” Hebrew faith and argues that the development of the ideas of a personified principle of evil and warring kingdoms is a natural development of dissident groups needing to establish an “us and them” situation. Her point, while persuasive, does not take into account that Ahriman in Zoroastrianism was a personified principle of evil, yet was not the creation of fringe-dwelling dissident groups. Russell’s suggestion that the creation of such stories was the result of various groups wrestling with ongoing questions about the origin of evil seems more plausible. Pagels, “Social History of Satan,” 106-11. For a fuller discussion see Pagels, *Origin of Satan*, especially pp 6-10, 12-14.

⁵⁸ e.g., Mt 4:16, 6:22-23; Lk 1:79, 2:32, 16:8; Jn 1:5, 3:19-21, 8:12, 9:5, 11:9-10, 12:35, 12:46; Acts 13:47, 26:18; Rom 2:9, 13:12; 2 Cor 4:4, 6, 6:14, 11:14; Eph 5:8-9; Col 1:12; 1 Thes 5:5; 1 Pt 2:9; 1 Jn 1:5; 2:8-9; Rv 22:5.

by “principalities and powers” (Eph 6:12), demons or the tempter, Satan. Through their machinations the world has become a place of darkness: a place that is invaded with light at the birth of Christ.

3. Victorious atonement

Colin Gunton observes that historically the idea of Christ’s victory over Satan has suffered from being taken too literally. Particularly when considering the Church Fathers, “the metaphorical dimension has fallen into the background ... and the result is that *too much* is known about what is supposed to have happened.”⁵⁹ In contrast, Gunton could be said to over-emphasise the metaphorical nature of demonic language, reducing the cosmic battle to “earthly realities” and praising the “restrained use the Bible makes” of demonic language.⁶⁰ The centrality of exorcism to Jesus’ healing ministry makes the claim of a “restrained use” of demonic language arguable, but the greater problem here is if Gunton is trying to protect the New Testament writers from twenty-first century accusations of naïveté. There is no reason to believe that the Gospel writers meant their demons to be metaphorical. It is commonplace, however, both to believe in the reality of something and to use it figuratively when speaking of something else. When images of light and darkness, battles and victories, serpents and chaos are used figuratively by the writers of the Bible, that use does not imply that the writers believe they have *only* figurative reality. As Boyd notes, when the Hebrew writers, faced with powerful earthly enemies, use “mythological language” to recall God’s victory over chaos monsters, they do so to “exalt God’s sovereignty precisely because they are certain that these raging forces are real, formidable foes.”⁶¹

This complicates any discussion about victorious atonement. The Satan who is defeated is not presented as a poetic personification of evil. Satan is a being able to plan and choose, think and feel. However, when the New Testament writers attempt to explain how Christ achieved this atoning victory over Satan, the language inevitably becomes metaphorical. Sometimes it seems he is defeated by force, with God planning to “crush Satan underfoot” (Rom 16:20), and with spiritual “weapons” being used against him (Col 2:15; Eph 6:10-17; Rom 13:12). Other

⁵⁹ Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, 64.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 64-66.

⁶¹ Boyd, *Satan and Evil*, 31.

depictions of Christ's victory involve him "undoing" death and sin (Rom 5: 12-21) or providing a "ransom" (Mt 20:28; 1 Tm 2:6; 1 Pt 1:18; Rv 5:9).

What is certain in the writings of the New Testament, however, is that although Satan has been comprehensively defeated, he is still an active, intelligent presence who continues to fight battles long after the outcome of the war has been settled. Christ's followers, then, must also continue to fight battles that are described metaphorically in order to hold out against a real foe.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:10-12)

a. Light, darkness and recapitulation

The most common way in which the New Testament speaks of both Christ's victory over Satan and his followers' continuing battles is through the imagery of light and darkness.

The people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned. (Mt 4:16; Is 9:2)

to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Lk 1:79)

For the New Testament writers, the world is in darkness because of humanity's decision to follow evil. "People loved darkness rather than light," John writes, "because their deeds were evil" (Jn 3:19; cf. Acts 26:18). The coming of Christ is, as it was at creation, the coming of light into a world of darkness. Light "comes" differently this time, however. It does not instantly control chaos, but appears as a shard of light contained in one person who enters this kingdom of

darkness and whose light is not “overcome” by that darkness (Jn 1:5). The darkness, too, is understood differently. It is not the physical, desolate darkness that covers the deep, but rather the darkness within humanity. The Light has come to “enlighten” everyone with the knowledge of God (Jn 1:9). Similarly Paul writes:

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)

As Christ the Light dwells in the world, the darkness is progressively banished. As in the theory of “recapitulation” associated with Irenaeus, Christ in some way “undoes” the sins of Adam by progressively facing with obedience the temptations that in humanity had led to sin, thereby turning their darkness into light. Understood in this way, Christ’s earthly life was a “continuous process of victorious conflict” with his death as the “final and conclusive battle.”⁶²

He has, therefore, in His work of recapitulation, summed up all things, both waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam, and trampled upon his head. . . . And therefore does the Lord profess Himself to be the Son of man, comprising in Himself that original man out of whom the woman was fashioned (*ex quo ea quae secundum mulierem est plasmatio facta est*), in order that, as our species went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one; and as through a man death received the palm [of victory] against us, so again by a man we may receive the palm against death.⁶³

Where Adam unleashed sin, and therefore death, on the world, Christ unleashed obedience and therefore life (Rom 5:12-21). The first step in Jesus’ mission is to face Israel’s temptations in the desert and respond with obedience and unconditional love rather than doubt and demands.⁶⁴ The

⁶² Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 30.

⁶³ Irenaeus, “Adversus Haereses” 5:21:1.

⁶⁴ Nielsen, *Satan the Prodigal Son?*, 110-14. Nielsen calls the passage a “Midrash on Deut 6-8.”

next is to move amongst the outward signs of darkness in humanity—sickness, demon possession, death—and quench them with the light of health and life. In doing so he openly uses the language of Kingdoms, both referring to Satan’s kingdom and telling the crowds that the Kingdom of God is amongst them when he is amongst them.⁶⁵ He declares that he is the “light of the world” who can lead people out of darkness into the “light of life” (Jn 8:12). Although darkness descends at Jesus’ death (Mt 15:33) and he is taken to Satan’s stronghold of death, Jesus shows that even there the Light can conquer the darkness. As Paul writes, “death has no more dominion over him” (Rom 6:9).

b. Christ as Redeemer

A second understanding of the means of Christ’s victory builds on the biblical idea of God as Redeemer. As we have seen, God is often called upon to redeem his people from slavery, exile and the rule of foreign nations in the same way as he defeated the monsters of chaos. Atonement is understood as God’s victory over an inferior power to set his people free. The New Testament writers inherit this language of redemption, but there it is Christ who serves as the divine redeemer. Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1). Christ defeats the ruler who has kept humanity bound and enslaved, “binding” the “strong man” so that he can “plunder” his house (Mk3:27).⁶⁶

This victory over Satan will one day redeem the whole creation. As Paul claims, “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). Aulen notes that this redemption “is not regarded as affecting men primarily as individuals, but is set forth as a drama of a world’s salvation.”⁶⁷ Schmiechen agrees, suggesting that this is a reminder that the whole creation is wrapped up in the need for liberation, so that atonement theories must look beyond individual sin and forgiveness to address violence and oppression in the world as a whole.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Satan’s kingdom: Mt 12:26; Mk 3:24; Lk 11:18. The kingdom among them: Mt 3:2, 4:17, 10:7, 12:28; Mk 1:5, 12:34; Lk 10:9, 11:20, 17:21, 18:16.

⁶⁶ Lk 13:16; Jn 8:1-36; Heb 2:14-15.

⁶⁷ Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 6.

⁶⁸ Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 132, 135.

The cosmic efficacy of Christ's act of redemption is one way his work as divine redeemer goes beyond that of the redeemer of the Hebrew Scriptures. Another is the way in which he achieves this redemption. In the Hebrew story, God brings about redemption through the strength of his arm, "sweeping away transgressions like a cloud" in order to bring his people home (Is 44:22). The armour of the Divine Warrior may be metaphorical armour (Is 59:16-19), and references to dragons' heads being broken are self-consciously mythic, but the violence they attribute to God's "cruel and great and strong sword" was all too real (Ps 74:13; Is 27:1). When these images are associated with Christ as Redeemer or his followers arming themselves for victory (Rom 13:12; 1 Thes 5:8), the question arises of just how violent his victorious atonement is.

This is not a new dilemma. Irenaeus debated the difference between Satan capturing humanity by force and deception, and God re-capturing them in redemption, concluding that the latter was not violent because it was "fitting" that God save them from slavery.⁶⁹ Schmiechen explains, "What this means is that God's action is mandated by God's very nature, rather than any force or rationale outside of God."⁷⁰ While side-stepping some theological difficulties, however, this explanation alone is no protection from imitative violence on the part of those who may rationalise their own violent actions as "fitting" and right.

The way the victory of Christ is depicted, however, is very different. Christ redeems by relinquishing aggression. As Marshall writes:

The God who is made climactically known in the cross of Christ is a God who secures justice not by violent imposition of his will on his enemies but by freely subjecting himself in suffering love to the violent impulses of humanity to liberate creation from its bondage to violence and to restore people to relationship with God and with each other.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 26-28.

⁷⁰ Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 126.

⁷¹ Marshall, "Violence of God," 79.

Jesus is armed with the obedience that led him to death (Phil 2:8), and it is that death that defeats Satan, sin and death itself (Heb 2:14). While Jesus speaks of binding and resisting Satan, in the end Satan's defeat is brought about, not through violence, but through Christ's self-sacrificial obedience (Rom 5:19; Phil 2:8).

Once again the imagery of light and darkness is helpful in understanding this. When the followers of Christ are told to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 13:14) the instruction stands in parallel with putting on "the armour of light" (Rom 13:12). This armour is "the breastplate of faith and love" and "the helmet [of] the hope of salvation" (1 Thes 8) and is only available to them because they are "children of light and children of the day," not children "of the night or of darkness" (1 Thes 5:4). Once armed with light they are to "struggle against . . . rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places," *rather* than against "enemies of blood and flesh" (Eph 6:12). Physical violence is not part of this equation. In putting on the armour of light, Christ's followers are putting on Christ himself, his life, his death and the work of his Spirit. That life was one of non-violence, that death was marked by forgiveness rather than retribution, that Spirit was the means by which he resisted and overcame evil.⁷² Notably, the "vengeance" and "fury" which had been a part of the Divine Warrior's armour in Isaiah, are absent from the Christian's armour, and are replaced with faith, hope and love (1 Thes 5:8).⁷³ These are not weapons of violence, but of the Christ who emptied himself of power and died out of love (Phil 2:5-8).

These texts indicate that the battle between light and darkness continues to rage, but with the difference that light is now in the ascendancy. John writes, "I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining" (1 Jn 2:8). Christ's atoning act may have brought "true light" into the world, but the darkness has not yet passed away completely. It is significant that when the Holy Spirit descends on the gathered disciples, it is in the form of a flame on each person's head (Acts 2:3). The symbolism is plain: they are to carry the light of Christ into the remaining darkness of the world.

⁷² Parsons, "Binding the Strong Man," 112.

⁷³ Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God*, 88.

The ancient service of the Easter Vigil reflects how this was understood in the early church. A new fire was lit in the darkness of the night, and the Paschal Candle, representing Christ, was lit from it and carried into the church. From that one flame each person lighted their own candle so that the light spread out through the darkness of the church and was maintained until dawn.

Jesus's own descriptions of the kingdom of God picture it spreading outwards in just this way: as yeast spreads through dough, or a tiny seed grows into a weed (Mt 13:31-33). Victory is thus both an initial act of atonement and an ongoing confrontation between the disarmed members of the Kingdom of Darkness (Col 2:15) and the children of the day and light.

c. Christ as ransom

On four occasions the New Testament speaks of Jesus bringing about victory by offering his own life as a "ransom" to set free those imprisoned by Satan.⁷⁴ Although a ransom "redeems" people from slavery, the idea of a payment is very different to the idea of God redeeming his people through the strength of his arm. The victory over evil or chaos may be won through God's will and word alone (as it was at creation), or his conquering of an enemy (as it was at the Red Sea and the tales of the Divine Redeemer), or even by the Light entering darkness and banishing it, but here it is achieved through a payment. In one sense it is a straightforward metaphor: humanity is enslaved to Satan and can be bought or granted freedom through a ransom (Lv 19:20). There are, however, complications associated with the way in which this means of victory has been interpreted.

The complications stem from the fact that the New Testament never states to whom the payment was made. The idea of God ransoming his people was a familiar concept, found in both the Psalms and Prophets.⁷⁵ In Isaiah 43:3 we are told, unusually, what God gives as a ransom (the surrounding nations), but we are never told to whom it is given. For the early Church Fathers, however, the question of to whom the ransom was paid was highly important. Initially the simple view was accepted that the ransom was paid to the one who kept the people imprisoned. In

⁷⁴ Mk 10:45; 1 Tm 2:6; 1 Pt 1:18; Rv 5:9; cf. 1 Cor 6:20, 7:23; 2 Pt 2:1.

⁷⁵ Ps 49; Is 43:3; Hos 13:14; Jer 31:11.

Irenaeus' view, "the ransom is always regarded as paid to the powers of evil, to death, or to the devil; by its means they are overcome, and their power over men is brought to an end."⁷⁶ Gregory of Nyssa agreed. He suggested that God, who knew that Satan was demanding a ransom for humanity, clothed Jesus in human form to deceive him into accepting him as that ransom. Unaware of the power of the Light that he was taking in, Satan accepted, and was then defeated by that Light.⁷⁷ There are, however, early signs of another idea developing: that the ransom should go to God who brings liberation. Gregory of Nazianzus dismissed both options:

I enquire to whom was the blood of God poured out? If to the evil one—alas! That the blood of Christ should be offered to the wicked one! But if you say "To God"—how shall that be, when it is to another (than God) that we were enslaved?⁷⁸

Despite Gregory's critique, the second idea gained precedence. In Anselm's writings, the ransom must be paid to God to atone for sins, since God's honour and justice had to be satisfied; forgiveness could not be offered without punishment and payment.

To remit sin [out of mercy alone] is the same as not to punish it. And since to deal justly with sin, without satisfaction, is the same as to punish it, then, if it is not punished, something inordinate is allowed to pass. ... It is, however, not seemly for God to let pass something inordinate in His kingdom. ... [I]f it is not fitting for God to do anything unjustly or inordinately, it does not pertain to His freedom or kindness or will to pardon without punishment a sinner who does not make recompense to God for what he took away. ... This however cannot be done unless there is someone to render to God, for the sin of man, something greater than everything that exists outside of God. ... But there is nothing that surpasses everything that is not God but God himself. ... Therefore no one but God can

⁷⁶ Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 30.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 52. See also Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 129.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 191.

make this satisfaction. ... It is evident, then, that we have discovered Christ, whom we acknowledge as God and man, and as one who has died for us.⁷⁹

Anselm provides a logical explanation of why Christ had to be fully divine in order to atone for humanity's sins. However, Satan is not part of the equation. The victory Christ wins in Anselm's schema is over the demands of God's honour, not the forces of Satan.

At the Reformation, Anselm's argument was reformulated as the theory of penal substitution. Here victory is won by God placing on his Son the punishment for humanity's sin in order to uphold God's justice. This neatly "allowed God to satisfy the demands of retributive justice by inflicting the penalty of sin on Christ, while at the same time satisfying his desire for mercy by conferring forgiveness on sinners."⁸⁰ Understanding the "ransom" Christ gave in this way has heavy repercussions. It influences interpretations of the place of blood in atonement (emphasising the idea of a blood payment) and exacerbates the problem of violence in the victory theory of atonement. The darkness of sin and death are supposedly defeated by the darkness of punitive violence and death. This, in turn, may be used to validate violence on the part of God's followers. If violent punishment is understood to be at the heart of how God deals with the world, there are implications for how believers in that God live in the world themselves.⁸¹

In the New Testament discussions of atonement, "ransom" is a metaphor, not a description of a financial or legal transaction. As with any metaphor, it is vital to seek to understand the ways in which the vehicle and tenor of the metaphor are linked, and the ways in which they were never meant to be joined. As Fiddes points out, the central point of the image is the *cost* to God of redeeming his people from slavery.⁸² Ironically, when the demands of Satan are replaced by the demands of God's justice, the point becomes one of God *requiring* payment.

If Satan is brought back into the equation, however, the metaphor is placed in the context of an enslaved humanity, bound by sin and death. In giving his life as a ransom to Satan, Jesus "buys"

⁷⁹ Extracts from Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, I.xii; II.vi, xv.

⁸⁰ Marshall, "Atonement, Violence and the Will of God," 73.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸² Fiddes, *Past Event*, 131.

his enslaved people for himself, which is equivalent to setting them free.

For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters (2 Cor 7:22-23).

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal 5:1).

The metaphor cannot be stretched too far. Alone it does not explain how Christ's death, which is quickly succeeded by his resurrection and escape from Satan, constituted sufficient payment for humanity. What it does suggest is the depth and efficacy of the price that was paid to release the human race from Satan's rule.

The complexities and uncertainties connected with the biblical understanding of Satan that this chapter has explored, may indicate why Christus Victor has had a chequered history in theological interpretation. Boyd suggests that Satan's role in the story of atonement has receded, particularly since the time of Augustine. He wonders if this is because Augustine typically attributed everything to the will of God, emphasising that there was a divine reason "for every particular event that transpires, including the activity of Satan." In that case, "the *ultimate* explanation for evil cannot be found in Satan. It must rather be found in the reason that God had for ordaining or allowing him to carry out his specific activity."⁸³ Boyd responds, "The New Testament, I submit, does not share this assumption."⁸⁴

As we have seen, however, we cannot be sure about the relationship in the New Testament between Satan and God. What we can affirm is that the idea of Satan as a figure of evil who opposes God appears frequently. This figure needs to be bound in order for the children of the Light to defeat the followers of darkness. This is necessary for the world to be set to rights and for the relationship between God and humanity be restored—for atonement to occur.

⁸³ Boyd, *Satan and Evil*, 37.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

The martial nature of the language of kingdoms at war creates unease in many contemporary readers. Boersma voices the view of many theologians: “At first glance, the Christus Victor theme may seem to do little to enhance our view of God as a hospitable God. It seems that instead we have God as the warrior, violently slaying the principalities and powers and so casting Satan himself into the pool of fire.”⁸⁵ Boersma proffers instead the language of “divine hospitality.”⁸⁶ Yet, as we will see, however much the idea of two cosmic armies at war concerns theologians, it does not appear to worry writers of teenage fantasy. It is also important to note that the metaphors used to speak of Christ’s victory over Satan are not all martial. Christ is described as giving his life as a ransom to rescue humanity from Satan’s slavery. He is depicted as undoing the sin of humanity, turning each area of darkness into one of light. Even the images of battle are clothed in the language of light and darkness, not of physical violence. Each of these images could be interpreted to communicate the love of God rather than his wrath. However, they do so at the risk of casting doubt on his omnipotence, which Augustine was so careful to protect. In the stories of Satan, the battle is still raging.

As we move to look at two fantasy worlds, we will find that the notion of the reality and *separateness* of evil, so central to the idea of Satan and of opposing kingdoms, is being reclaimed in today’s fantasy books. In these works absolute good and threatening evil are at war to an ultimate end. Final victory may be assured, but in the meantime the call is to fight the darkness whenever it arises, even when the battle appears to be hopeless.

“Yes sir. Well, Voldemort’s going to try other ways of coming back, isn’t he? I mean, he hasn’t gone, has he?”

“No, Harry, he has not. . . . Nevertheless, Harry, while you may only have delayed his return to power, it will merely take someone else who is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle next time—and if he is delayed again, and again, why, he may never return to power.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality*, 183.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 216.

Chapter 9

“Victory” in Two Fantasy Worlds.

In the New Testament, Satan is the centre of the evil that needs to be defeated for atonement to take place. From Satan come sin and death, and in conquering Satan Christ also conquers these signs of the world’s need for atonement. Defeating Satan, then, has more cosmic repercussions than defeating a corrupt but mortal leader would have. The majority of teenage fantasy works also include an antagonist whose powers exceed those of normal humanity. Occasionally these powers are gained by otherwise normal mortals (e.g. Drakan in the *Shamer* series by Lene Kaaberbol [2002 – 2004]) but more often the powers are innate: for example, a Titan lord in Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* series (2005 – 2009), a magically “graced” individual in Kristin Cashore’s *Graceling* (2008), a wizard in the Angie Sage’s *Septimus Heap* series (2005 – 2013), a fully divine being in Nix’s *Abhorsen* trilogy, or an enchantress in the *Squire’s Tales* by Gerald Morris (2005 – 2011).⁸⁸ The superhuman qualities of these characters enable the authors to explore atonement on both earthly and cosmic levels, to trace the potential for a single being to bring about world-wide destruction and another to bring about world-wide restoration, and to draw links between earthly events and cosmic results.

Imagery of light and darkness is used to varying degrees in many of these works. Although wars and individual physical battles are common and sometimes decisive, this imagery allows the authors to explore other, less violent ways in which evil might be conquered. Cornelia Funke’s use of dark and light in *Inkheart* trilogy (2003 – 2008) is complex and profound enough to warrant its own study. The first book, *Inkheart*, is named after Capricorn “whose wicked heart is black as ink, filled with darkness and evil,”⁸⁹ and as each evil character succeeds the last, the darkness continues. Dustfinger is a fire-dancer for whom light and warmth are “brothers, inseparable.”⁹⁰ He offers himself to the White Ladies of death as a substitute for his adopted son, Farid, killed by Capricorn’s equally dark friend, Basta, and is then himself released by the Ladies

⁸⁸ Kaaberbol, *Shamer's Daughter*; Riordan, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*; Cashore, *Graceling*; Sage, *Magyk*; Nix, *Abhorsen*; Morris, *The Squire's Tales*.

⁸⁹ Funke, *Inkheart Trilogy*, 201.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1108.

in order to set right the disorder and darkness of the world. In the final scenes he must face and defeat the Night-Mare, a creature made “entirely of the blackness of the soul, of evil that could not be forgotten until they were snuffed out, consuming themselves and taking with them everything they had ever been.”⁹¹ Dustfinger recognises in the Night-Mare the soul of Basta, and approaches it “surrounded by flames—flames burning hotter and hotter, nourished by all the pain and despair he was bringing to mind. . . . Dustfinger made the flames bite into the cold, made them penetrate the blackness like swords,” and the Night-Mare dissolves “like ink, melting into the shadows.”⁹² The *Septimus Heap* series is another in which the dark, in the form of Darke Magyk, is fought against throughout the series and eventually defeated by the light and warmth of “Fyre.”

It could be argued that the use of light to symbolise goodness and dark to symbolise evil in these fantasy books is not in itself surprising given the influence of films and books such as “Star Wars” on Western culture. However, when the imagery is used for a battle between cosmic forces in which victory is won, paradoxically, through apparent weakness on the part of the protagonists, we are closely linked to the biblical mythologems of victorious atonement. To be killed by the evil that one is trying to conquer, as Christ was, should be the ultimate defeat. For the one who is killed to be deemed victorious is illogical in normal, everyday terms. Yet in both *The Mortal Instruments* and the *Harry Potter* series, the climactic scenes of atonement depict the power of voluntary self-sacrifice to defeat a personification of evil and conquer the darkness.⁹³ Although it is possible to understand the atonement of the *Old Kingdom Chronicles* in terms of “victory,” it is not a dominant motif. This chapter, then, will focus on the works by Clare and Rowling.

1. The Mortal Instruments

Just as the rebellion of the angels ended the world as it was—it split heaven in half and created hell—this could mean the end of the Nephilim as they currently

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 1109.

⁹³ In Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* series atonement is made through a similar victory, but I will look at this under the heading of covenant.

exist. This is our war in heaven, vampire, and only one side can win it. And my father means it to be his.⁹⁴

Many images and motifs of Christian atonement are woven subtly into the fabric of the fantasy works under consideration and may, to a casual reader, go unnoticed. Clare's use of the two "victorious atonement" mythologems is an exception: their use is neither subtle nor unintentional. The ideas of a figure in whom evil is focussed—a satanic figure—and a war between Light and Dark are central to Clare's trilogy. The antagonist openly models himself on the Satan of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and is happy to discuss the ways in which they are similar.⁹⁵ Likewise, the Nephilim (itself a biblical term) speak freely of their role in the everlasting battle between forces of Light and forces of Darkness.⁹⁶

Clare sets her works in the middle of the "battle that never ends," a war between the kingdoms of darkness and light in which darkness is in the ascendancy despite the undoubtedly superior power of light.⁹⁷ She suggests ways this kingdom of darkness might manifest itself today, how figures with too much in common with Satan might still imprison people in a type of "hell." Then, given that imprisonment, she explores the possibilities of light's final victory. What is necessary in order for the leader of the darkness to be conquered? How can the characters be set free? These are the central questions of atonement within Clare's trilogy.

a. *Personified evil*

"I forget how regrettably lax mundane education is," Valentine said. "Morgenstern means 'morning star.' As in 'How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!'"

A small shiver passed over Clary. "You mean Satan?"

⁹⁴ Clare, *City of Glass*, 60-61.

⁹⁵ Clare, *City of Bones*, 400-01.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

“Or any great power lost,” said Valentine, “out of a refusal to serve. As mine was. I would not serve a corrupt government, and for that I lost my family, my lands, almost my life.”⁹⁸

For the space of this trilogy, the battle between light and dark is focused on one particular figure: Valentine Morgenstern. Valentine is a charismatic and complex figure who has embraced the implications of his surname and self-consciously modelled himself on the “son of the morning” or “morning star” of Isaiah 14:12-15 and *Paradise Lost*. According to Valentine, “Some say Milton was on the devil’s side himself. His Satan is certainly a more interesting figure than his God.”⁹⁹

Although Valentine is cold blooded and ruthless, Clare avoids creating the stereotypical, purely evil villain of many fantasy books. Rowling’s Voldemort has completely destroyed his humanity. The protagonists need not feel a glimmer of sympathy with him, nor with Orannis of the Old Kingdom, Capricorn of *Inkheart*, the “bad” vampires of *Twilight* or Drakan of the *Shamer* series, all of whom are unrelentingly dark.¹⁰⁰ Valentine performs atrocities worthy of any of these, yet he believes he is noble and the persuasive powers he uses on other characters mean that even the heroes may be cornered into seeing his point of view.¹⁰¹

Clary’s head was ringing. ... But she had begun to see what Luke had meant when he’d said you couldn’t argue with Valentine. Somehow he’d made it impossible for her to disagree with him without feeling as if she were standing up for demons who bit children in half.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Ibid., 400-01.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 237.

¹⁰⁰ Nix, *Sabriel*; Funke, *Inkheart Trilogy*; Meyer, *Twilight*; Kaaberbol, *Shamer’s Daughter*.

Notably, Harry does feel some sympathy for Voldemort after seeing what he will become after death. Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 566-7, 578-9.

¹⁰¹ Valentine can say, “I gave my word. I’ll stand by it,” and keep that vow, yet feel no compunction about lying. Clare, *City of Glass*, 434.

¹⁰² Clare, *City of Ashes*, 366.

As such, Valentine is considerably more dangerous than an unrelenting and unreasonable dark character would be. He has on his side subtlety, intelligence, and Satan's apparent conviction of the justice of his cause. As Jace understands, Valentine is ruthless because he "absolutely believes in what he's doing. You think he's evil. But he thinks he's *right*."¹⁰³

One of the ambiguities surrounding Satan in the Bible is whether he is truly rebelling against God or doing God's will, intentionally or not. The ambiguities around Valentine are slightly different. Valentine claims he is doing God's will, but he has apparently managed to deceive even himself.¹⁰⁴ He sees his likeness to Satan yet imagines that heaven will approve of him.¹⁰⁵ It cannot. Like Milton's Satan, Valentine is ultimately driven by pride and a refusal to serve, and after his "fall" he returns in order to corrupt and destroy.¹⁰⁶ Like Satan or the evil messengers of the Hebrew Scriptures, Valentine is a tempter (cf. 2 Chr 18:18-22; 1 Chr 21:1) a deceiver (cf. 1 Kgs 22:22-23; Rv 12:9; 2 Cor 4:4; Jn 8:44), a divider (Jb 1, Zec 3:2), a murderer (cf. Jn 8:44), and yet charming and intelligent. He is a master at appearing to be an angel of light while sowing darkness (2 Cor 11:14), and for the duration of this trilogy the darkness he brings into the world threatens to overthrow the light altogether.¹⁰⁷

Through Valentine, Clare traces the *journey* from light to darkness, paralleling it with Satan's journey from being the beloved of God to an inmate of hell. As a young man Valentine had been someone who "seemed to give off light, in a way, like there was some special and brilliantly illuminated part of the universe that only he had access to."¹⁰⁸ By the time these books begin, there is no doubt about the "hell" Valentine dwells in, even while on earth. Wherever he goes, hell goes with him.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 280.

¹⁰⁴ Clare, *City of Glass*, 493.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 492-494.

¹⁰⁶ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 1, line 263; bk. 3, lines 90-92.

¹⁰⁷ Clare, *City of Glass*, 387.

¹⁰⁸ Clare, *City of Glass*, 387.

This is evident in the darkness that so often surrounds Valentine. When Jace is imprisoned in the dungeons of the Silent City, Clare's "underworld," Valentine arrives with his Fear Demon and massacres every Silent Brother. As Jace lies there, imprisoned in darkness and hearing the screams of terror, a voice "spoke out of the blackness: slow, dark, familiar as pain."¹⁰⁹ It was Valentine. When they next meet, they are in Valentine's own realm: a boat he is using as his base. This ship has "black metal sides, unmarked and almost lightless, its prow a narrow blade scything the water ahead."¹¹⁰ If the imagery of darkness and death's scythe were not enough to suggest hell, it is also unnaturally cold. "Waves of cold seemed to roll off the boat like freezing air off an iceberg."¹¹¹ This is the cold of the inner circle of hell as Dante envisaged it. The darkness, too, is a particular kind of hellish darkness, a substantial darkness, the darkness of *Paradise Lost*'s hell: "darkness visible."¹¹² Clare builds on Milton's strange image when describing the Mortal Sword that Valentine has transformed. It "glowed with a blackish light, almost an absence of illumination: a radiant, visible darkness."¹¹³

This hell is a darkness that Valentine has entered so fully that it is now within him as well as without.

It was strange, Clary thought with a detached sort of horror, that when she had seen her father before ... his considerable personal charisma had been on display for Jace's benefit. Now he wasn't bothering, and without the surface patina of charm he seemed—empty. Like a hollow statue, eyes cut out to show only darkness inside.¹¹⁴

It is also a hell that speaks volumes about the books' contemporary setting. Valentine lives after the Second World War and the genocides of Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, Pol Pot and Rwanda. He

¹⁰⁹ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 89.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 331.

¹¹² Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 1, line 63.

¹¹³ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 352.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 378. Cf. "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell." Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 4, line 75.

lives in a time when many are acutely aware of the atrocities that can be committed when one section of the community is dehumanized in the eyes of another. Clare shows this attitude developing in Valentine in his descent to hell; she shows its plausibility and appeal, its horrors, its darkness. At the heart of Valentine's crusade are his immovable belief in Shadowhunter superiority and his fear that the Accords, which limited the unbridled killing of Downworlders, might undermine such superiority. To support his belief he ignores the humanity of these Downworlders and focuses only on their demonic origins. He literally "demonizes" them. As a result, he is able to perform atrocities on Downworlders (strongly reminiscent of some of the worst horrors of the Nazis) with the clinical detachment of a scientist dissecting a rat.

The hidden reason behind Valentine's hatred is something he does not admit to anyone except the angel, Ithuriel, whom he captures and tortures. His fanatical desire to cleanse the world of Downworlders is driven by fear of the strengths they have that Nephilim do not, fear that they are a real threat to Nephilim supremacy.¹¹⁵ This is central to his actions. His hatred of Downworlders becomes greater than his hatred of demons.¹¹⁶ With the Mortal Instruments he can control a host of demons, but Downworlders pose a far greater threat to everything he believes about himself. As a result, true evil is ignored, or even enlisted to help him defeat the evil he projects onto others.

Throughout the trilogy there is an underlying battle between the darkness of Valentine's fears and dehumanizing attitudes and a growing acceptance amongst others of the humanity of Downworlders. When Valentine sees Clary with vampire-Simon, his comment is, "When things have settled a bit, we really must discuss your choice of pets."¹¹⁷ In contrast, Jace, the figure of light, defiantly gives those Valentine despises a human identity. Valentine dismisses a warlock he used and killed as "a young and hubristic warlock." Jace replies, "His name was Elias. He was sixteen."¹¹⁸ Valentine slits Simon's throat open as carelessly as he would a letter. Jace uses his own

¹¹⁵ Clare, *City of Glass*, 372. Note that the motto of the Circle was *In Hoc Signo Vincas*, which was (amongst many other things) the name of a book written by the founder of the American Nazi Party.

¹¹⁶ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 156.

¹¹⁷ Clare, *City of Glass*, 306.

¹¹⁸ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 235. Elias is a Latinised form of Elijah.

blood to revive him, and later faces Valentine's comments about the "degenerate" with, "He's a vampire, that's true. ... But his name is Simon."¹¹⁹ Jace's words are a powerful counterbalance to Valentine's, dragging the humanity of individuals out from the blanket of dehumanizing generalisations with which Valentine attempts to cover them.

Valentine argues:

This isn't about specific Downworlders, Jonathan. This is about the survival of every living creature on earth. ... We are the closest thing that exists in this world to gods—and we must use that power to save this world from destruction, whatever the cost to us.¹²⁰

Jace replies, "In the old tale ... Satan said to Adam and Eve, 'You shall be as gods' when he tempted them into sin. And they were cast out of the garden because of it." For a moment Valentine pauses, and then laughs. "See, that's what I need you for, Jonathan. You keep me from the sin of pride."¹²¹

Valentine deludes himself. Pride, a determination that nothing will rule him or be stronger than him and fear that they might, are the true reasons behind Valentine's dark crusade.¹²² Yet since he justifies it to others and to himself in terms of saving the world and maintaining the purity of the Shadowhunter race, he almost succeeds in his planned genocide which, by the end of the trilogy, has expanded to cover not only Downworlders but all Shadowhunters who do not come over to his side. As Valentine continues to follow his satanic path he gathers an army around him, not of Shadowhunters, but of a host of demons. Valentine has gone from being the bright leader of those who defeated demons to one who uses demons to destroy others; Satan has gone from being the bright star of morning to the leader of a dark demonic army.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 382.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 241.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Cf. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 1, lines 111-15.

b. Kingdoms of Light and Darkness

Valentine's darkness is like that of Milton's fallen angel who finds that he takes hell with him wherever he goes.¹²³ His light has become darkness. Much of the darkness in this series comes from him, but there is also the "pure" darkness of demons against which Shadowhunters fight with angelic light. Finally there is Clare's "grey" area. Grey is not the darkness of demons, but of a rigid adherence to law with no space for mercy. The Kingdoms of Light and Darkness, then, battle on multiple levels.

"In the name of the Clave ... I ask entry to this holy place. In the name of the Battle That Never Ends, I ask the use of your weapons. And in the name of the Angel Raziel, I ask your blessings on my mission against the darkness."¹²⁴

In the Bible, there is a clear expectation that Light will win the battle with Darkness. One single Light entering the Kingdom of Darkness defeats it, and gives power to the followers of the Light to do likewise. In this trilogy, Clare has hideous and vicious demons running rampant throughout the series on the dark side, as well as the powerful figure of Valentine, whereas the angelic counterpart to them does not appear until the very end. Yet Clare still maintains the hope and expectation that Light will win.

This is evident in the simple fact that, although the darkness of demons is a constant, real and sometimes lethal threat, they cannot survive even the gentlest daylight. When Valentine attacks Alicante, the capital of Idris, his demon army brings carnage overnight but must leave at daybreak. Even the Greater Demon, Abaddon, cannot endure the sun.¹²⁵ When Jace, Clary and the Lightwood teenagers Alec and Isabelle encounter Abaddon, it says, "I am Abaddon. I am the Demon of the Abyss. Mine are the empty places between the worlds. Mine is the wind and howling darkness. ... You cannot hope to defeat me."¹²⁶ They very nearly do not. None of the

¹²³ Ibid., bk. 4, line 75.

¹²⁴ Clare, *City of Bones*, 235.

¹²⁵ The term "Abaddon" appears in the Hebrew Scriptures as a place or state of destruction (Jb 26:6, 28:22, 31:12; Ps 88:11; Prv 15:11, 27:20. It is linked with Sheol in each case. In Rv 9:11 Abaddon has become the "angel of the bottomless pit," which correlates to Clare's description of him as the demon of the "abyss."

¹²⁶ Clare, *City of Bones*, 324. Cf. Rv 9:1-11

weapons used upon lesser demons have any impact on Abaddon. It is not until mundane Simon enters and coolly shoots the murky skylight with Alec's bow and arrow that they are saved. "Dirty black glass fell like rain and through the broken pane streamed sunlight, quantities of sunlight, great golden bars of it stabbing downward and flooding the foyer with light."¹²⁷ Abaddon, monstrous, powerful and terrifying, cannot survive the simple touch of light and is sent back to his home dimension.

Until the angel Ithuriel appears, Jace is the closest we have to an angel figure through whom the powers of angelic light and demonic darkness can be contrasted.¹²⁸ While Jace's laconic, mocking style of speech makes "angel figure" a questionable designation, he acts with selflessness and love. It is not Clary's bias alone that gives her dreams in which he is a glowing angel, or enables her to sense that he has an "unlikely halo" in certain lights.¹²⁹ Jace, like all Shadowhunters, is equipped to fight the darkness of demons and Downworlders. Unlike other Shadowhunters he has within him an extra concentration of angelic blood. He is also given a bigger challenge than any of the others face: to defeat his dark opposite, a person whose human blood has been consumed by demonic blood—demonic life—itsself.

Despite being the most accomplished demon-hunter of his age, Jace is not a killer. Sending demons back to their home dimension is what Nephilim do, and is completely compatible with Jace's "light." Killing anything else is not. Given the chance to kill Valentine at the end of *City of Bones*, he cannot do it, and Valentine knows it. Afterwards Jace says miserably, "My father got away ... with the Cup. ... I failed. ... I couldn't do it. I couldn't kill him." "The only way you would have failed," Clary replies, "is if you had."¹³⁰ The character we know as Sebastian is a direct contrast to this, and his joy in taking life from others is a sign of the depth of the darkness within him. He appears in *City of Glass* and is revealed late in the book to be the "real"

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ithuriel is linked to the Kabbala literature which also speaks of Raziel. In addition, Ithuriel is an angel in *Paradise Lost* who is sent to seek out Satan when Satan is attempting to tempt Eve in her sleep. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. IV, lines 786-874.

¹²⁹ Clare, *City of Bones*, 126. See also Clare, *City of Ashes*, 172., and Clare, *City of Glass*, 285.

¹³⁰ Clare, *City of Bones*, 424.

Jonathan—Valentine’s real son. Sebastian/Jonathan was Jocelyn’s first child, and Valentine’s first foetal experiment. Valentine obtained blood for him from Lilith herself, presented as the Queen of Demons, who gave it willingly, knowing she would be creating a Shadowhunter of unexcelled, but demonic, powers: “‘Though I warn you,’ she added, ‘it will burn out his humanity, as poison burns the life from the blood.’”¹³¹ It does. “That was the difference between Sebastian and Valentine; though they shared the same cold marble looks, Sebastian had an air about him of something ruined—something eaten away from the inside.”¹³² The dark blood of the demon, a blood that Simon notes “tastes foul—like poison,”¹³³ had eaten the human life from his blood.

Sebastian is thus even darker than Valentine. He is pure demon, not the “fallen angel” that is Valentine. Valentine kills coolly because he believes he has to; Sebastian kills for the fun of it. While many people die in the trilogy, the greatest tragedy is when Sebastian kills the innocent young Lightwood son, Max.¹³⁴ Although Valentine and Jace battle with each other, each in his own way loves the other, but there is no flicker of love in Sebastian. He is the antithesis of Jace. Clary sees this last point most clearly. She dreams of white angels and black angels: Jace and Sebastian. Sebastian smelt of “black pepper ... very different from Jace’s smell of soap and sunlight.”¹³⁵ Clary “tried to imagine Valentine raising two children at the same time, one part demon, one part angel. One shadow boy, and one light.”¹³⁶ The symbolism is anything but subtle here. It means that one key showdown between light and dark is the final battle between Jace and Sebastian. Valentine had always known Sebastian was the better killer. By all that anyone could expect, when it came to that final battle, Sebastian should have won. Yet Jace does.

For much of Book 3, Jace is tormented with the belief that, as Valentine’s supposed son, he is the one who had been the victim of Valentine’s foetal experiments and was therefore filled with demon blood. Sebastian, who does not understand how this torments him and cannot resist an

¹³¹ Clare, *City of Glass*, 201.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 453.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 286.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 290-291.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 404.

opportunity to torture another, pauses with his dagger already in Jace to taunt him with not being Valentine's *real* son. The taunt, meant cruelly, frees Jace from the fears about himself that had built up over the three books, and thus sets him free to love Clary. Mortally wounded as he is, the memory of Clary gives him the strength to kill Sebastian just as Sebastian is sure of victory.¹³⁷ Clare sets the Light up against its opposite, the Dark, and enables it to win against all odds.

When we move away from demons and those with demon blood, we strike Clare's "grey area." The motto of the Covenant is "The Law is hard, but it is the Law."¹³⁸ In *City of Ashes* we meet the Inquisitor, a representative of the Covenant-following Clave, who is summoned to deal with the problems of Valentine's supposed son and the disappearance of the Mortal Cup. Everything about the Inquisitor is grey: "a thin grey someone" with "dark grey cloak," "slate-coloured suit" and eyes like "flinty grey chips."¹³⁹ The Inquisitor obeys the Law exactly, but is merciless, particularly where Valentine's son is concerned. Valentine had caused the death of her son, Stephen Herondale (who was, unbeknown to her, Jace's real father) and she is consumed with bitterness over this.¹⁴⁰ It blinds her to reason and she treats Jace with unwarranted cruelty—all within the bounds of the Law as she twists it. She plans to give Valentine an ultimatum: Jace's life in exchange for the Mortal Cup and Sword. Jace, who knows Valentine, knows he will never agree; he knows that he would see him die rather than relinquish the power of the Instruments. Jace is right.

When she puts her ultimatum to Valentine and he refuses, grey meets black. Valentine sees the Inquisitor more clearly than she sees herself, pointing out that she is as single-minded and ruthless as he is. She replies:

"I am nothing like you. I follow the Law—"

"Even when it instructs you to kill a boy still in his teens just to punish his father?"

This is not about the Law, Imogen, it is that you hate and blame me for the death

¹³⁷ Ibid., 465-66.

¹³⁸ Clare, *City of Bones*, 104.

¹³⁹ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 75.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 321.

of your son and this is your manner of recompensing me. It will make no difference. I will not give up the Mortal Instruments, not even for Jonathan.”¹⁴¹

The Kingdom of Darkness comes in many shades. The Inquisitor is not an essentially evil character. Her hate and fear come from the pain of deep loss, and when she discovers both her own mistake, and (on glimpsing Jace’s family birthmark) her relationship to Jace, she sacrifices herself to save him from a demon. She is a character of basic goodness whose obsessive adherence to justice, tinted with the desire for revenge, darkens the Law and herself.

The Silent Brothers are equally ambiguous. They are Nephilim who live a completely silent life underground where they guard the Mortal Sword, study deep mysteries, and come out to heal injuries of body and mind amongst the Shadowhunters. These are all good things, yet when Clary met Brother Jerome, “Silence itself seemed to flow from him like a dark tide, black and thick as ink. It chilled her bones.”¹⁴² Darkness and chill are not positive images. To make it worse, the Silent Brother’s home is presented as a sort of “underworld” with an entrance like “an open grave,” and it is this “Silent City” that marks the hero’s descent to “hell.”¹⁴³ The city is in fact the titular “City of Bones” for this is where the bones and ashes of dead Shadowhunters are brought. There are also dungeons in its depths where criminal Shadowhunters and Downworlders are held. As Clary descends to these dungeons, she enters “even denser gloom,” with the witchlight in her hand “pulsing” like a “dying star.”¹⁴⁴ It is a place of darkness, not light.

As with the Inquisitor, this is not the darkness of demons nor of one who has chosen evil. It is the darkness of Law without mercy. The Brothers do what they do silently, without passion, without compromise, without any of the emotion of the Inquisitor. Yet their home is a place of darkness and, eventually, horror.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 329.

¹⁴² Clare, *City of Bones*, 157.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 170.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 105.

In the Inquisitor and the Silent Brothers, Clare makes “Light” close to mercy, something far wilder and more flexible than the rigid laws of justice. As Terry Eagleton writes, “Justice . . . can be quite as lunatic as revenge. There is something properly absolute about it which can easily become intransigent.”¹⁴⁵ Valentine’s obsessive pride is single-minded and immovable, but so are the Inquisitor’s quest for justice and the Silent Brother’s adherence to Law.¹⁴⁶ All are narrow and dark. Eagleton describes mercy, in contrast, as a quality of “excess,” something that breaks the bounds and is therefore, like the Angel Raziel, both awesome and “potentially a form of terror”—yet also of light.¹⁴⁷

c. The state of the world

At the start of this discussion, I asked how the Kingdom of Darkness might manifest itself in this contemporary story, and how a character with too much in common with Satan might still imprison people in a hell from which they needed saving. The world of *City of Bones* and *City of Ashes* is one in which the Kingdom of Darkness is in the ascendency. The sheer darkness of demons is a constant threat and a physical war takes place on the level of reality not seen by mundanes. But the characters are also imprisoned by the subtler web of darkness that Valentine weaves: a darkness created largely by deceit.¹⁴⁸ This is how Clare envisages the Darkness invading our world. On the level of the community, Valentine’s lies engender suspicion and hatred between Shadowhunters and Downworlders. On the level of individuals, Valentine’s lies cause mistrust between those who had previously been close—and even, in Jace’s case, mistrust about Jace himself. The visible, physical darkness is far easier to fight than the subtle deceptions of a powerful and charismatic leader. It is Valentine, not the demons, who drags Jace and Clary into the “hell” and confusion of the second book.

¹⁴⁵ Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, 18-20.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 1, 97-99: Satan’s “fixed mind” that will not be changed.

¹⁴⁷ Eagleton, *Holy Terror*, 18-20.

¹⁴⁸ *City of Ashes* opens with a description of the Statue of Liberty hidden by cloud. Just as *City of Bones* was full of references to truth and lies, *City of Ashes* is full of references to imprisonment. Imprisonment, Clare implies, is the natural result of the dark network of deceit Valentine has created.

Valentine's handling of the young Shadowhunters' tutor, Hodge, is illuminating as an example of his manipulative skill. He plays on Hodge's fears and deepest desires, torturing him with hope and driving him to a betrayal to which he has been terrified he would succumb. Hodge's desk is held up by four agonized-looking marble angels, and "For a moment his face was the face of one of [them], pained and grave and crushed beneath a terrible weight."¹⁴⁹ Valentine in effect brings about the "fall" of another "angel" in Hodge, who cannot bear the weight of temptation held out to him, and discovers, too late, that the promises had all been lies.¹⁵⁰

Through Jace and Clary, Clare depicts the state of those living in the Kingdom of Darkness who battle against it, seeking redemption. Theirs is not a tale of original sin leading to a fall, but rather the tale of those who enter the human story half way through, when the darkness is already around them. They enter the "fallen" world which is shared by the New Testament writers: a world in need of atonement. It is a world in which the leader of a dark army can imprison people's minds. It is a world in which people need to be freed from their bonds and rescued from darkness. In *City of Glass* the characters ascend from hell, are set free from imprisonment, conquer the Deceiver—images of redemption, salvation and victory. None of it happens without a cost, however. There must be atonement.

Clare has a delicate balance to keep in portraying Valentine. It is important that he is not "Satan in disguise"; it is important that he is a human being, since the darkness that Valentine creates is a darkness that humanity has created in the past and is still creating today. Yet it is also important that Valentine's parallels with Satan are strong, in order to give evil the cosmic significance and power that it has in this series, constituting as it does a threat to the world. Valentine is angelic enough to fall further than ordinary humans, but human enough for his darkness to be recognizable as human darkness.¹⁵¹ By building the cosmic and human into one person, Clare prepares the way for the acts of atonement in her series that involve both divine and human elements.

¹⁴⁹ Clare, *City of Bones*, 339.

¹⁵⁰ Clare, *City of Glass*, 274.

¹⁵¹ Clare, *City of Bones*, 343.

Lies are Valentine's most powerful tools of darkness, able to imprison people in a web of hatred and misunderstanding. Any atonement in the series, then, will involve this particular darkness being conquered by light. According to Jesus, it is truth that will "make you free" (Jn 8:32), and in *The Mortal Instruments* truth is a key element of light. Discovering the truth about their complex family relationships sets Jace and Clary free from the grip of the hell of Book 2 and leads the way to "heaven" in Book 3. Discovering the truth about Valentine's crusade, Sebastian's identity, and the humanity of Downworlders enables the Nephilim and Downworlders to unite against the demonic hordes. In terms of this imagery, the light of truth enters the darkness of deceit and destroys it.

A central aspect of truth in both the Bible and Clare's books is integrity. When Maryse is struggling with doubts over Jace's loyalty she says, "I can't believe this. ... It's insane." Jace "felt the tremor in his hands increase" and replies, "So don't believe it. Believe *me*."¹⁵² We can assume that the New Testament writers wrote of things they believed "really happened," that were "true" in that sense. Yet fundamentally Jesus' followers were to believe "in him" and, through that, believe his words. In the New Testament, Christ is himself the truth who brings freedom (Jn 14:6). It is the truth *of* Christ (2 Cor 11:10) that redeems people from slavery to the devil who is "the Father of Lies" (Jn 8:44).¹⁵³ In *The Mortal Instruments* the extreme lack of integrity in Valentine is contrasted with the determined integrity of Jace. When Clary asks Isabelle if Jace lies, she replies, "He's not a liar at all. Not about important things. He'll tell you horrible truths, but he won't lie."¹⁵⁴ Not only will he tell the truth, but he is determined to seek the truth, "Absolutely. ... Always," at whatever cost.¹⁵⁵ The decisive moment in *City of Ashes* is when Jace is tested on exactly this point. He has to decide between retreating behind a comfortable façade of lies or face the devastating truth that his "father" lacks any integrity—that Valentine's words and their life together had been based on betrayal and falsehood. The truth shatters his past like the mirror-portal that Valentine destroys in front of him. It also, however, shatters one layer of the lies that had bound him.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Clare, *City of Ashes*, 26.

¹⁵³ See also Jn 1:14, 17, 14:6, 17:17; Eph 1:13, 4:21; 2 Thes 2:10; 1 Tm 2:4.

¹⁵⁴ Clare, *City of Bones*, 146.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 415, 24.

Jace is the key player in the atonement themes of the trilogy. In *Jace*, Clare has created another character who combines the human with the divine: Jace is both an angst-ridden teenager and the unique bearer of divine blood, someone whose links with Christ are hinted at but ambiguous. The name Jace believes is his—Jonathan Christopher—shares initials with Jesus Christ, and the nickname “Jace” is built from these two initials. Yet in fact his second name is not Christopher, and the true Jonathan Christopher is nothing like Christ.¹⁵⁷ Clare gives us the parallel and takes it away again, leaving no more than a suggestion. There are, however, other, clearer hints. It is Jace who has to face and defeat his “dark brother” as Christ faced and defeated the rebel member of the *bene ha-elohim*, Satan; it is Jace who gives life and daylight to vampire-Simon through his own blood; and it is Jace who, in the final scene of atonement, is killed by a satanic power and raised by a divine power.

The importance of the climactic scene by the Lake has already been discussed in terms of blood and atonement. It is also highly significant in terms of light and darkness, truth and lies, and of how victory can be won through apparent defeat. When Jace arrives, it looks at first as if light will win quite simply, with Jace killing Valentine. He even has the point of his sword against Valentine’s throat, demanding the truth, demanding that the last tangles of darkness caused by Valentine’s lies be cleared away.¹⁵⁸ But then, in a final act of deception, Valentine summons a sword to his hand and kills Jace. “It left a tracery of black light on the air as Valentine drove the blade of it into Jace’s heart.”¹⁵⁹

The darkness appears to have won at this point, just as darkness takes over the world at Jesus’ death (Mt 15:33). There are numerous other parallels between the two stories here. Like Jesus in Gethsemane, Jace did not have to be at the Lake that night, but chose to come to rid the world of an evil. Clary watches Jace arrive at the scene of his coming death already beaten and in pain, with ripped clothes and skin that is “crisscrossed with white lines” almost as if he has been whipped (cf.

¹⁵⁷ Clare, *City of Glass*, 528.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 485.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 487.

Jn 19:1-3).¹⁶⁰ Like the women around the cross, Clary watches while he dies, and believes it is final. It is not. While Jace's death is only one element in the book's depiction of atonement, it is a vital one. When Jace dies, he does so in Clary's place: the blood that fills the Mortal Cup was to have been hers, but is, in the end, his. Jace's blood thus enables the Angel Raziel to rise from the lake, which, in turn, brings about Valentine's death and Jace's own return to life.

With an irony that is present, too, in the Christian atonement stories, victory is lost by violence and won through the one upon whom the violence is afflicted. As discussed above, Satan in the gospel stories appears to engineer Jesus' betrayal and death (Lk 22:3; Jn 13:27) which leads to his own defeat. In *The Mortal Instruments* Valentine deliberately raises the Angel with Jace's blood, thinking that he will thus be given power to destroy all Shadowhunters who do not follow him. Yet killing Jace means he unwittingly brings about his own death. But the irony goes back further than this: Valentine's clinically inhuman experiments on two fetuses created the very people who contribute to his defeat. Valentine's foetal experiments give Jace and Clary abilities that they turn against him, as he himself recognises when he witnesses Clary using a single rune to destroy his ship in *City of Ashes*. "There was a look on his face, ... a look that mixed triumph and horror, despair and delight. 'It says,' he said, '*Mene mene tekel upharsin.*'"¹⁶¹ The words come from Daniel 5:25-28.

And this is the writing that was inscribed: mene, mene, tekel, and parsin. This is the interpretation of the matter: mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; tekel, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

Although Clary is tearing his ship apart, Valentine's "triumph" and "delight" show that, while he is beginning to realise the power he has unleashed through Clary, he is not yet convinced that it is his

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 483.

¹⁶¹ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 384.

kingdom that will be divided and destroyed. It is not until Clary writes the words themselves in the sand next to the lake that Valentine realises what he has brought on himself.¹⁶²

Jace's self-sacrificial death is a key element in the victory over Valentine. However, as it is in the Bible, a number of threads interweave and overlap to make up the full act of atonement. Once Jace and Clary have done all they can, the Angel Raziel appears with the power of the Divine Warrior, bringing justice with a word. This is not the first moment of divine intervention in the series. Clary receives dreams, visions and ancient runes from the angel Ithuriel throughout the series, although she only discovers their source in the final book. Jace finds that "the Angel" knows his mission and is speeding him on his way.¹⁶³ But the scene where Valentine summons the Angel Raziel to rise from the "mirror" of water is the point of most powerful intervention.

Raziel has the multitude of eyes on his wings that the four angels bearing Christ's chariot have in *Paradise Lost*, as well as Clare's own addition: runes all over his body, "golden and alive, moving across his white skin like sparks flying from a fire."¹⁶⁴ He has more in common with the fiery and awe-inspiring seraphim of biblical witness than the angels of popular culture, being so bright and terrifying that he is hard to look at. When he speaks, his voice is "like a cry and a shout and like music," with just the "force of his breath" almost knocking Valentine over.¹⁶⁵ He speaks the judgement of heaven.

Valentine tells him he wants to return the Nephilim to their former glory. "*Glory?* The Angel sounded faintly curious. ... *Glory belongs to God alone.*" Undeterred, Valentine tells of his desire to cleanse the world of the taint of Downworlders, and Raziel responds:

Demons do not possess souls. But as for the creatures you speak of... all are souled. It seems that your rules as to what does and does not constitute a human

¹⁶² Clare, *City of Glass*, 495.

¹⁶³ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 55.

¹⁶⁴ Clare, *City of Glass*, 491. See also Ez 10:12.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 492.

*being are stricter than our own. ... Do you intend to challenge heaven like that other Morning Star whose name you bear, Shadowhunter?*¹⁶⁶

Valentine's pride is recognized for the pointless thing it is and dismissed; his crusade is seen to be false and also dismissed; his sacrifice of Jace is condemned: "... *no one asked you to sacrifice your son, Valentine.*" The combination of all the battles up to this point have brought Valentine into the position of vulnerability in which he finds himself, but in the end it is the Angel who kills him with a single arrow of white fire coming from his mouth. "*That was the justice of heaven. I trust that you are not dismayed,*" Raziel tells Clary.¹⁶⁷

This is not a tame, "nice" angel. He is an object of terror, dispensing the justice of heaven that may be swift and lethal. Yet he is also merciful, healing the runic and physical wounds Valentine had given Clary with a brushing-over that was "soft, softer than any silk ... softer than a whisper."¹⁶⁸

Given that Clare draws so heavily on biblical ideas here, how are we to understand this crucial intervention on the part of something heavenly? Two questions arise. First, does Raziel's intervention remove the point of all the battles Jace, Clary and the others had undergone up until this point? Was this all that was needed? Second, does Raziel killing Valentine once again raise the problems of violence in victorious atonement?

The idea of the Divine Warrior redeeming his people through the strength of his arm is an image that some theologians have been concerned emphasises the divinity of Christ at the expense of his humanity by removing any necessary human participation in atonement.¹⁶⁹ Yet within Clare's books, the human input in atonement continues alongside the divine. It was Jace's blood that drew Raziel from the lake. If Jace had not died in Clary's place she would not have been able to thwart Valentine's attempt to control Raziel. As it is, Clary, by replacing Valentine's runic name with her

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 494.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 494-5.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 495.

¹⁶⁹ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 184.

own on the sand, is herself granted the one request of Raziel with which Valentine would have destroyed the Shadowhunters.

She could ask for anything, she thought dizzily, anything—an end to pain or world hunger or disease, or for peace on earth. But then again, perhaps these things weren't in the power of angels to grant, or they would already have been granted. And perhaps people were supposed to find these things for themselves.¹⁷⁰

The journeys the characters have taken were amongst those things they had to “find for themselves,” and which play a vital part in the defeat of the darkness. In the end, however, something more is needed.

This “something more” gives rise to the second problem. It would have gone against all the underlying warnings in this trilogy about how close “justice” often is to “revenge” for Jace to kill Valentine. Jace is, after all, a fallible human being. Instead, the all-knowing angel brings the “justice of heaven” on Valentine, destroying him and thus banishing the army of darkness. In allowing Raziel this action, Clare introduces an idea that many find problematic in atonement theology, that “[p]ut crudely ... Christian nonviolence is sustainable only if there is a violent God giving ultimate backup.”¹⁷¹ There is no avoiding the conclusion in Clare's story that, while vengeance is dangerous in a human being, it is allowable in a divine being, due in part to that being's complete knowledge, and in part to the sense of distance Clare paints between the Angel and humanity. Although Raziel has helped humanity in the past, he is a being so remote from them that he is able to judge impartially and rightly. Despite Valentine's defeat, this is the point where Clare moves furthest from the story of Christian atonement; furthest from an incarnate God intimately involved with humanity; furthest from the story of Christ conquering death by allowing it to conquer him.

Yet, through it all, the sense of light conquering darkness does persist. What comes from Raziel's mouth is a shaft of light, and Raziel himself is too bright to look at directly. Valentine is conquered

¹⁷⁰ Clare, *City of Glass*, 496.

¹⁷¹ Marshall, “Violence of God,” 76.

because he dared to think his darkness was stronger than the light of heaven. Instead, he discovers a power in the light he had not anticipated, and his own darkness is destroyed before it. Here Clare comes close to Gregory of Nyssa's theory that Satan was defeated because he underestimated the power of Christ's presence.¹⁷² This does not solve all the problems associated with Raziel killing Valentine, but does suggest that his death was more the unavoidable outcome of darkness seeking to conquer light than of violent retribution. Raziel did not seek Valentine out in order to kill him; Valentine sought him, and found that the darkness within him could not withstand the light he had sought to control.

Raziel has a second role in this atonement scene. When it comes to Clary's one "wish," she realises that there is a difference between those things it is possible for humanity to "find for itself" and those things that are never within its grasp. Given the rare opportunity of an angel waiting to grant her request, she asks an impossible thing of him: that Jace be brought back to life. He is. This is not only important in order to provide a romantically happy ending. If Jace were to remain dead, the darkness would have defeated the central figure of light in the trilogy. As it is, Jace makes his final ascent back to a world where Valentine is dead, the demons have fled, and not only death, but the whole present darkness has been defeated.

Imagery of light and darkness could easily be used to depict a world in which everything is simply good or bad, white or black. In Clare's world this same imagery is used to suggest the complexity of good and evil. In Valentine she creates someone persuasive, reasonable, even idealistic, and shows how the light in him darkens to the point of hell. She makes both Clary's cold satisfaction at his death and Jace's sorrow, believable. She also creates sympathy for those who had joined Valentine in his "Circle," and even the traitor Hodge—not because the Circle's choices or Hodge's betrayal of his friends are excusable, but because they are understandable. Evil in *The Mortal Instruments* is all the more dangerous because the heroes are able to understand it, because it is not something that "bad people" fall into but rather something that well-meaning, idealistic and blinded people could be deceived into following. The movement between light and darkness includes many shades of grey.

¹⁷² Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 52. See also Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 129.

The ease with which humanity can be lured into darkness is thoroughly biblical. The power of Satan and his ilk, from the subtle persuasions of the serpent in the garden to the devil's reasonable suggestions in the wilderness to Jesus, lies in their ability to deceive people, to tempt them into situations they do not at first recognise as evil. Not all darkness in the Bible is as obviously evil as the presence of a demon. Jesus certainly casts out demons with a word, but his strongest warnings are against the religious establishment of his day: against people who believed they were doing God's will by following the Law but who, like the Inquisitor and Silent Brothers, had unwittingly darkened that Law by stripping it of mercy.

Clare uses the ideas of Satan and the kingdoms of light and darkness to highlight the fallen state of humanity. Humanity needs to be rescued; atonement must be made. It is a state in which genocide is possible, one in which lies, deception and pride have created mindless hatred between peoples, where enemies are dehumanized and the dehumanized are willingly scapegoated.

The battle to overcome this darkness also brings about deaths, both heroic deaths such as the Inquisitor's, and completely innocent deaths, brutally inflicted, such as Max's. Clare does not shrink from violence itself. These deaths indicate the depth, reality and danger of the darkness that is being fought. But Clare is careful to differentiate between the destructive violence of Valentine and the weapons used in atonement. Demons—inhuman forces of darkness—are simply killed, but the human darkness of Valentine is only defeated by truth, love and the power unleashed by Jace's death. As it is in the biblical story, divine and human interaction transform death into a means of atonement. Evil is defeated, and light proves itself more powerful than violence, darkness and death.

2. Harry Potter

Rowling's locus of evil, Voldemort, is known as the Dark Lord. The students of Hogwarts learn "Defence against the Dark Arts." Once again we have a fantasy world in which "light" and "dark" are in opposition, and in which darkness has its own lord to lead the battle against the light.

Whereas Valentine specialises in deceit, Voldemort pursues power openly. He seeks, and achieves, power over anyone he chooses (with the exceptions of Dumbledore and Harry), but his greatest desire is to take power over death itself. He chooses a name for himself that contains the French word for “death”; he calls his followers “Death Eaters”; he channels his magical abilities into learning how to make horcruxes in which to store his soul and achieve immortality; he seeks the Philosopher’s Stone. Finally, he devotes three years to finding a way to wipe out the two greatest threats to his life: Dumbledore and Harry.

Voldemort attempts to murder Harry as a baby because he hears of a prophecy suggesting that Harry alone could kill him. His desire to kill Dumbledore has a different cause. It can only stem from a fear, often denied, that Dumbledore possesses some magic that Voldemort does not. Dumbledore has often told him what it is, but Voldemort does not understand how love—which does not seek power over another—can yet be more powerful than the Dark Arts, which do.¹⁷³ The story of victorious atonement within this series suggests that Dumbledore is right.

a. *The use and misuse of power*

I know it's unfashionable to use this word, morality, and I never set out to preach, but I think the books do explore the misuse of power, and there's an attempt to make some sense of death.¹⁷⁴

We have seen that the misuse of power is a prominent issue in both the “Old Kingdom” and “Mortal Instruments” series. As Rowling represents it, the temptation to misuse power is subtle and dangerous, particularly since it is not confined to the “evil” characters. However heroic Snape turns out to be, we are never meant to condone his bullying tactics. The Ministry for Magic demonstrates that it is capable of abusing power almost as thoroughly as Voldemort, and even Mr Weasley allows for the place of Dementors in defending Harry and Hogwarts.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 592.

¹⁷⁴ Rowling, “Face to Face with JK Rowling.”

¹⁷⁵ The Ministry’s misuse of power is apparent in both *Order of the Phoenix* and *Deathly Hallows*. For Mr Weasley’s comment, see Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 54.

Most significantly, the idea that the young Dumbledore could have been lured by Grindlewald into contemplating genocide for “the greater good” shows how insidious power can be.¹⁷⁶ Even he may give in to it, with fatal consequences.¹⁷⁷ Yet we discover that since that time he has successfully resisted power, both by consistently refusing invitations to become Minister for Magic, and, more impressively, by the potent symbol of temptation he carries constantly without ever giving in to it. Dumbledore owns the Elder Wand, a wand and symbol of unsurpassed power with generations of murders behind it. He was “permitted” and “fit” to have the Elder Wand only because, as he says, “I took it, not for gain, but to save others from it.” In doing so, he “tamed” it.¹⁷⁸

For much of the series, Harry knows instinctively that this is the only way to treat power: to use it, when needed, not for gain, but to save others from it. The reason he is able to retrieve the Philosopher’s Stone from the Mirror of Erised, for example, is because he sought to save the Stone from Voldemort and the world from the repercussions of Voldemort finding it.¹⁷⁹ There is no hint of desiring it for his own ends. It is not until the final book that Harry truly wrestles with the lure of power himself.

Before Harry can face and defeat Voldemort, he has to face and defeat Voldemort’s greatest temptation. The Resurrection Stone, the Philosopher’s Stone, and the Elder Wand, all symbolise temptation to ultimate power: power over death. Dumbledore admits he was tempted to become a “Master of Death,” able to reverse and control death’s affects, but he learns of the danger of power and resists it.¹⁸⁰ Voldemort does not. His life is dedicated to achieving this mastery. Yet it is Harry alone, the owner of the Invisibility Cloak, who is given the opportunity to unite the three Deathly Hallows for the first time since their mythic formation, and it is a powerful temptation.¹⁸¹ With that mastery he could lift the weight of all the losses he has suffered in his life, he could once

¹⁷⁶ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 573-4.

¹⁷⁷ The first failure led to the death of his sister; the second led to his own death. *Ibid.*, 572-77.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 720.

¹⁷⁹ Rowling, *Philosopher’s Stone*, 217

¹⁸⁰ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 571.

¹⁸¹ The “Deathly Hallows” are the Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone and the Invisibility Cloak.

again see his parents and Sirius, once again talk with Dumbledore. Harry comes very close to succumbing and seeking hallows over horcruxes, seeking his own power rather than the destruction of evil.¹⁸²

But he resists. At the point of decision, he is saved by the devoted, simple love of Dobby, who puts that love above death. Dobby relinquishes the power of life itself for Harry, and in response, Harry relinquishes power over death. In doing so he discovers the true mystery of power. It is the fact that Harry allows Voldemort to seize the Elder Wand rather than taking it himself that saves him. Even more surprisingly, in relinquishing power Harry becomes the true Master of Death, “because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying.”¹⁸³ It is something Voldemort, obsessed with power itself, can never learn.

b. The powers of darkness

In Harry’s world, there is a great deal of darkness, and although it is not all caused by Voldemort, Voldemort personifies darkness itself; he is the “greatest dark sorcerer of all time.”¹⁸⁴ He is so completely dark that he can no longer perceive, let alone understand, light or goodness. There is no good or evil for him, “only power and those too weak to seek it.”¹⁸⁵ Like Satan, he gathers an army of darkness around him: Death Eaters, giants, Dementors, an “army of creatures whom all fear.”¹⁸⁶ He communes with snakes, looks snake-like himself, and is able to possess people who are “willing to let [him] into their hearts and minds.”¹⁸⁷ He may have been born human, but evil is real, present, dangerous, and satanic, in Voldemort.

In some of the Satan stories, Satan is a “son of God” who is jealous of God’s love for humanity, or jealous of *the* Son, Jesus.¹⁸⁸ He becomes the dark image of the true Son’s light. This idea plays out

¹⁸² Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 389-392.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 720.

¹⁸⁴ Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets*, 9.

¹⁸⁵ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 211.

¹⁸⁶ Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, 564.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 555-56; Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 213.

¹⁸⁸ See Nielsen, *Satan the Prodigal Son?*

in Rowling's work in the dark parodies of Christ that Voldemort enacts. Voldemort, too, rises from a form of death, but does so by exerting brutal power over others, not by relinquishing power himself.¹⁸⁹ He talks about his followers as his "true family," as Jesus did (Mk 3:34) but in the graveyard he ignores the suffering of his follower, Wormtail, acknowledging him only by torturing him further.¹⁹⁰ Even as he calls the remaining Death Eaters by pressing the Dark Mark on Wormtail's arm, he wonders, "How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it? ... And how many will be foolish enough to stay away?"¹⁹¹ The majority of his followers do not come out of love, but fear. When they crawl forward to kiss the hem of his robes, they do not do so seeking healing, as Christ's followers did when touching his robes, but in order to avoid punishment. In one final irony, the risen Voldemort tells them calmly, "I do not forgive. I do not forget."¹⁹² Voldemort is the ultimate, dark anti-Christ.

The other characters respond to Voldemort's darkness in one of three ways. The Death Eaters see following him as a way of self-protection and power: they join the darkness. Others fight the darkness with light. Still others try to fight the darkness with darkness. That the third way is illogical does not occur to these characters, any more than it does to many who choose that path in reality. In *Chamber of Secrets*, the idea circulates that Harry must be a powerful *dark* wizard to have withstood the dark curse, despite it being common knowledge that the only wizard whom Voldemort fears, Dumbledore, is certainly not dark. Nor is it only children who mistakenly think darkness can conquer darkness. Sirius tries to explain to Harry what it was like when Voldemort rose to power the first time:

Well, times like that bring out the best in some people, and the worst in others. Crouch's principles might've been good in the beginning—I wouldn't know. He rose quickly through the Ministry, and he started ordering very harsh measures against Voldemort's supporters. The Aurors were given new powers—powers to kill rather than capture, for instance. ... Crouch fought violence with violence,

¹⁸⁹ Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, chap. 32.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 561.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 560.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 563.

and authorised the use of the Unforgiveable Curses against suspects. I would say he became as ruthless and cruel as many on the Dark side.¹⁹³

Later Harry sees the council members, “their faces full of savage triumph,” condemn the le Stranges and Barty Crouch.¹⁹⁴ Instead of conquering Voldemort, they bring in more darkness; they are, unwittingly, joining forces with the dark “principalities and powers.” The true way to victory in this series is very different, and far more biblical.

The light that conquers the darkness is love. This message is woven through all seven books of the series. Love is an “ancient magic” that repeatedly thwarts Voldemort.¹⁹⁵ Although he acknowledges this, noting that it provided Harry with “a protection I admit I had not foreseen,” realising that it ensured Harry’s safety while in his relation’s care, so that “not even I can touch him there,” yet still he underestimates it.¹⁹⁶ Even in his last moments, he mocks the power Harry claims to have that Voldemort does not have, and he is mocking it still as it destroys him. While magic is everywhere (understandably, in this world of wizards), the deepest magic—that which surpasses all other magic—is, for Rowling, love.

Light symbolically defeats the darkness in a number of different ways in the series, but each time it is linked to love. Many times it is linked symbolically to the love of Christ, with the Phoenix (a medieval symbol of Christ) responding to Harry’s faith in the Chamber of Secrets, encasing Harry in a cage of gold in the graveyard, and healing his wounds in Dumbledore’s office; or the bright stag Patronus (another Christ symbol) chasing away the dark Dementors by the lakeside; or Dumbledore defeating death in the form of the Inferi after drinking the cup of suffering and “rising” to encircle Harry in the light and warmth of fire.¹⁹⁷ Even within Harry himself, the battle between light and darkness hinges on love.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 457.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 517.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 570.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 556, 70.

¹⁹⁷ John Granger has argued that at the end of every book, Harry is rescued from “death” by a Christ symbol. Granger, *How Harry Cast his Spell*, 23-25.

Harry carries within himself a part of Voldemort, which is how he can sense Voldemort's feelings and even share thoughts with him. Dumbledore seeks to protect him from this by a particular form of magic, occlumency, which would enable him to block his mind from intruders. With Snape as his tutor, unsurprisingly he does not succeed in learning this skill. Yet in the Ministry for Magic, when Voldemort enters Harry fully to possess him, curling inside him like a snake, it is the rush of love Harry feels for his godfather that forces Voldemort to leave.

Let the pain stop, thought Harry ... let him kill us ... end it, Dumbledore ... death is nothing compared to this. ... And I'll see Sirius again. ... And as Harry's heart filled with emotion, the creature's coils loosened, the pain was gone ...¹⁹⁸

For all Voldemort's power, he could not withstand the onslaught of this simple love. In the end, as Dumbledore says to Harry, "it mattered not that you could not close your mind. It was your heart that saved you."¹⁹⁹

One powerful advantage of Rowling setting her books in a magical world is how it enables her to talk of love. In a world where the mystery of magic is everywhere, love is able to take on mysterious, magical powers as well. It becomes "magic at its deepest, its most impenetrable" and therefore its powers do not have to be explained.²⁰⁰ In the midst of all the bewildering mysteries of the Department of Mysteries, there is one room "that is kept locked at all times." The reason for this is that it "contains a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than the forces of nature."²⁰¹ That force, that deep mystery, that light, is love.

The idea that love is both a mystery and a power means that the greatest expression of love—dying for another—is also able to take on mysterious power. The light of love defeats the darkness wherever it arises, but has a particular potency when the giver chooses to love even when the cost of doing so is great. Both the element of "choosing" and the element of "cost" are vital here. One

¹⁹⁸ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 721.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 730.

²⁰⁰ Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 311.

²⁰¹ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 743.

of the marks of Voldemort's followers is that they have no choice about following him if they wish to stay alive. The Dark Mark that summons them is branded into their skin; they cannot choose to remove it. In contrast, when Hermione designs a way of summoning "Dumbledore's Army," she uses coins which the bearer can choose to carry or leave behind.²⁰² The most faithful members, Neville and Luna, continue to carry them long after the DA has disbanded, and when they risk their lives by responding to them, it is a choice.

The importance of choice makes it highly significant that Harry can resist the Imperious curse. In general, Harry is of average ability as a wizard, but he is the only one of the class who is able to maintain freedom of choice when "imperioused." Voldemort finds he can torture him, but—astonishingly—cannot force him to obey him.²⁰³ This means that Harry is able to *choose* to face Voldemort, to choose to "defend himself, even if no defence was possible," to choose to continue to fight the darkness to the end, even if it seems hopeless.²⁰⁴

Hogwarts students study divination, a fatalistic practice that, if genuine, affects free choice. The plot hinges on a prophecy that appears to limit Harry's choices still further. Yet divination is the only subject held up to ridicule by Rowling. Harry is faced with numerous death omens, but none—not even the predictions of the wise centaurs—come to pass. The prophecy, however, does. It predicts that only one person will be able to kill Voldemort, and from the moment Voldemort marks Harry "as his equal" Harry seems doomed to fight him. Yet even here choice is vitally important. Despite all that Harry must learn before Dumbledore dies, the one thing that Dumbledore is desperate for Harry to grasp is his freedom to choose. Yes, the prophecy pointed to Harry as the one who must defeat the Dark Lord, but with Dumbledore's help, Harry comes to see that it is also something he *chooses* to do—and he finds freedom in that knowledge.

"But sir ... it all comes to the same thing, doesn't it? I've got to try and kill him, or—"

²⁰² Ibid., 353.

²⁰³ Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, 574.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 575.

“Got to?” said Dumbledore. “Of course you’ve got to! But not because of the prophecy! Because you, yourself, will never rest until you’ve tried! We both know it!”²⁰⁵

For Harry, realising that he is marching to his probable death with his “head held high” and of his own volition rather than being dragged there by fate, makes “all the difference in the world.”²⁰⁶

Harry’s choices reflect a process of recapitulation happening within this series. To Harry’s discomfort, he becomes increasingly aware in the first five books of the number of parallels between his life and that of Voldemort: both are orphans, both are Parseltongues, both are invited to join Slytherin House, both have wands with feathers from the same phoenix at their core. Yet, as Dumbledore tells him, it is the choices he makes that decide whom he will be.²⁰⁷ Voldemort felt betrayed by his parents and killed his father; Harry is fiercely loyal to his parents’ memory. Voldemort uses parseltongue to control a basilisk and an enormous snake in order to kill; Harry’s only uses of parseltongue at Hogwarts are to protect a student during a duel and effect Ginny’s rescue.²⁰⁸ Voldemort seeks to be in Slytherin; Harry desperately asks not to be sent there. Voldemort uses his wand for Dark magic; Harry’s “signature” spell is one of self-defense, “Expelliarmus.” Voldemort seeks the Philosopher’s Stone for himself; Harry seeks it for another.

This last example shows one of the crucial differences between the choices they make. Voldemort seeks to be Master of Death. Harry, who alone has the chance to unite the three Hallows and become that master himself, chooses instead a path that allows death to take him. Having already faced this choice does not remove the grief he feels when he reaches his own Gethsemane scene, but it does mean there is no question in his mind as to what he has to do. He does not want to die, but knows that he will choose to, out of love for those who are still fighting. It is a choice he shares with Jesus, who could have chosen not to die but to summon legions of angels to escape the

²⁰⁵ Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*, 478.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 479.

²⁰⁷ Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets*, 245.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 145, 222.

call of love on his life.²⁰⁹ Harry does not have that option, yet his choice is still a genuine one. “I meant to let him kill me!” he tells Dumbledore. “And that,” replies Dumbledore, “will, I think, have made all the difference.”²¹⁰

At every point in the story, Harry makes choices that reverse or undo the choices made by Voldemort. We learn in this final choice that in order for self-sacrifice to release the mysterious and victorious power that Harry’s does it must be freely chosen. The Gospel that emphasises Christ’s victory on the cross most strongly, the Gospel of John, is also the one that emphasises his deliberate choice to love even to the point of death.²¹¹ Jesus is the victim of scapegoating, but death is not forced upon him against his will. He chooses to let it to happen, not because he desires death or pain but because his love is stronger than his fear of what is before him (Mt 26:36-39). This is what transforms death into victory. Voldemort tells Harry, “your mother needn’t have died . . . she was trying to protect you,” and it was that which gave Harry the protection Voldemort had not dreamed of, which continues to shield Harry even in the face of Voldemort’s second direct death curse.²¹² In turn, Harry’s willingness to die to save his friends unleashes a mysterious magic that forms a protective barrier between those friends and the evil unleashed against them. Voldemort’s dark powers have been vanquished—victory has been brought about—by the antithesis of violence, by something as gentle yet powerful as light: by willing, self-giving love.

At the beginning of the previous chapter, we noted the discomfort many theologians feel about the association of violence with Christ Victor, which has been exacerbated by the prevalence of penal substitution teaching. Such discomfort has led Denny Weaver, along with others, to seek to do away with the need for Christ’s death in atonement.²¹³ One of the gifts *Harry Potter* gives to theologians is to illuminate how a death can be necessary for atonement without glorifying violence or victimhood. Harry walks to his death knowing he is free to avoid it, but choosing to

²⁰⁹ Mt 26: 53-54. “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?” Jesus clearly chooses to fulfil the “prophetic” scriptures.

²¹⁰ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 567.

²¹¹ E.g. Jn 10:17-18.

²¹² Rowling, *Philosopher’s Stone*, 213.

²¹³ Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*.

allow it. Vitally, he seeks no revenge; he even feels compassion for what Voldemort will become after death. His victory over Voldemort is victory over the darkness in humanity that seeks to defeat darkness with darkness.

Christian thinkers for centuries have tried to understand the mysterious atoning power of Christ's death and resurrection. The idea of recapitulation does not so much explain it as provide another way of viewing it. Similarly, Rowling makes no attempt to explain the "how" of the power of love and self-sacrifice within her books. The fortunate circumstances surrounding the Elder Wand are part of the answer, but the central "how" remains. The blood myth provides a possible conceptual framework for some of this power, but is in no way an explanation of it. If anything, Rowling exults in its inexplicability. It is, quite simply, a mystery that she has prepared the reader for over seven books: the mystery of the power of love. The light of love conquers darkness. The light of ultimate love—giving oneself for another—conquers the ultimate darkness of evil and death. How? It just does. That is the way magic works.

If, in summary, we consider both series together, the influence of the biblical depiction of personified evil is clear in the characters of both Voldemort and Valentine. Interestingly, the particular ways in which the satanic figures spread their evil in the twenty-first century are also common to both series. Like Satan, Voldemort and Valentine use deceit and violence to lure or threaten people into following them. Both create discord, which in these series takes the form of one portion of humanity being "demonised" (Downworlders and those who sympathise with them, Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers). Satan is believed by the writer of the Wisdom of Solomon to have brought death into the world; both Valentine and Voldemort not only kill freely but add deceit by justifying massacres of people in terms of the "greater good." Like Satan, they rally a dark army to support them. Both enact dark parodies of Christ's life and actions: Valentine in the black Eucharist by the lake, Voldemort in his graveyard resurrection. Both, like Satan, rebel in their pride against the powers of those around them and seek to take that power themselves.

Valentine seeks power over Downworlders, and Voldemort seeks power over death. Although both dedicate their lives to their quest, neither achieves it. In contrast, those who relinquish their own power to Downworlders find they can share the Downworlders' powers without losing their own,

and once Harry gives up his desire to be Master of Death, that mastery is given to him unsought.²¹⁴ Those who use their power violently not only fail to achieve what they seek, they are eventually defeated through their own violence. As in the Christian story of victorious atonement, the personification of evil in both these books kills the self-sacrificing hero and in doing so brings about his own defeat.

The violent deaths of the antagonists are, then, brought on themselves. In one important sense the violent deaths of the protagonists are also brought on themselves, inasmuch as those who die to save the world choose their paths freely. Jace sets out to find Valentine well aware that it is likely to lead to his death; Harry knows without doubt that his walk into the forest will lead to his. The atoning self-sacrifices of heroes and heroines in *The Last Olympian*, *Inkdeath*, *Abhorsen* and *The Legend of the King* are likewise voluntary, and in each case is driven by love.²¹⁵ They are not dragged there unwillingly, bullied into it, or made victims of blind mob violence. Each story is careful not to confuse the voluntary self-sacrifice which is driven by love, with the violent sacrifice of a victim. The first is light, the second is darkness.

Light and darkness are used in these books to produce vivid, powerful and surprisingly nuanced depictions of love and goodness defeating violence and evil. Clare and Rowling show how tempting it is to fight darkness with equal darkness, but also show the futility and danger of this choice. Instead, they use this imagery to suggest that light has power that is so far beyond that of darkness that it does not need violence for victory. Darkness simply cannot remain in light's presence. It takes only a gentle light to push back the darkness; it takes only a shaft of sunlight to banish a demon; it takes only the thought of love to make it impossible for Voldemort to possess Harry's mind.²¹⁶ Atonement in Clare's and Rowling's worlds turns the idea of a violent victory upside down, depicting instead worlds where evil is defeated and atonement made in the manner of Christ's *kenosis*: through self-emptying love (Phil 2:5-11).

²¹⁴ Nephilim and Downworlders share their powers when they take on the binding rune Clary designs. Harry is given the two Hallows he needs to be Master of Death when he willingly enters the forest to die, and when Voldemort is killed by his own rebounding curse.

²¹⁵ Riordan, *The Last Olympian*; Funke, *Inkdeath*; Nix, *Abhorsen*; Morris, *The Legend of the King*.

²¹⁶ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 720.

Chapter 10

Covenantal Atonement

There are four accounts of Jesus' last supper with his disciples, three in the Synoptic Gospels and one in Paul.¹ Each account has at its heart the word "covenant." "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28; cf. Mk 14:24). "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk 22:20; cf. 1 Cor 11:25). When Jesus ritualises one specific meaning of his death, it is in terms of covenant.

Clearly, then, covenant is an important element in atonement theology. It is also a highly complex topic that has been the source of debate for millennia. Within this complexity, I will focus on two covenantal motifs that reappear in a number of teenage fantasy works. One is covenant as a means of holding back chaos, the other the power of covenant curses. As we will see, these fantasy books show an awareness of both the fragility of creation and our own potentially destructive role within it. "Atonement" in these stories may appear as the restoration of a "charter" that holds the creation together, or as the lifting of a curse that aberrant humanity has brought upon creation. Both these mythologems have roots in biblical stories.

As with "blood" and "victory," I will start with the Hebrew Scriptures and then move to consider the use of these mythologems by the New Testament writers. I will need to be highly selective in the material covered. Many debates concerning covenant theology are not relevant to understanding these two mythologems and will not concern us here. Nor will source critical divisions, commonplace in biblical scholarship since the time of Wellhausen. The issue at hand is not the historicity of covenant stories but the mythical reflection on covenant: that which expresses a particular understanding of its underlying reality.² This emerges most clearly from the final form of the text. As Thomas Mann writes, "The Pentateuchal narrative is certainly not *J or P*,

¹ Mt 26:26-30; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:14-23; 1 Cor 11:23-26.

² Westermann, *Creation*, 12-13.

nor is it even J and P, for the combination of these two units has created a ‘new narrative’ that includes but also transcends both units.”³ It is this new narrative we will address.

1. Covenant and Chaos

The first instance of *berit* in the biblical narrative is in the story of Noah. This story has frequently been overlooked in scholarly discussions on covenant, maybe because it was long believed to be of post-exilic origins, and scholarly interest was focussed on finding the earliest sources, or maybe because the story was seen as less important than later covenant stories in the formation of Israel as the people of God.⁴ In recent years, however, an increased interest in the relationship between covenant and creation has brought new attention to the primeval stories. Some even suggest that the act of creation forms the Bible’s first covenant in the biblical story.

For creation to be conceived of as a covenant, the term would have to have a broader meaning than parallels with the Hittite treaties of the time suggest. Yet Craig Bartholomew claims that many definitions of covenant are “reductionist,” that confining covenant to “a commitment and a self-maledictory oath ... undermines the relational element in the semantic range of the word.” He suggests instead that “the predominant sense of covenant in the Old Testament is of an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation established under divine sanction.”⁵ It is this relational aspect that W. J. Dumbrell picks up when he argues that the “relationship of obligation” between God and creation began at the act of creation, and that the Noahic covenant deals with a “confirmation of what was in fact an existing covenant,” one “brought into existence by the act of creation itself.”⁶

³ Mann, *Book of the Torah*, 18. See also Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, 126.

⁴ Dell, “Covenant and Creation,” 111. For example, Fensham writes of three covenants, starting with Abraham. Fensham, “Covenant as Giving Expression,” 87. Wright discusses the blessing to Adam being given again to Abraham and his descendants without mentioning it being given to Noah. Wright, *Climax*, 21. For covenant’s role in the formation of the people of God see Barr, “Reflections on the Covenant with Noah,” 11.

⁵ Bartholomew, “Covenant and Creation,” 21-22.

⁶ Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 43.

John Goldingay rejects this suggestion. He points out that in Genesis 1 God is not talking to others or relating to others as he creates. He does not speak to light that is already there but speaks light into being. Not being relational, the process cannot be covenantal.⁷ Yet as Westermann explains:

Clearly, what is proper to each and every creature does not consist in its material and specific existence, but in its relationship, in its belonging to a whole, in its position before its Creator. It can only mean that it shares in the whole in a way that is not completely demonstrable. But it is there from its very origin, an origin which is also ours.⁸

Westermann's words suggest that the creation of creatures meant the creation of relationships, both between creatures themselves and between creatures and God. If relationship is there, then there is at least the possibility of covenant being built into the story of creation itself.

It is only a possibility, however. While Jeremiah implies that God is now in a covenantal relationship with all creation, it is uncertain whether he meant that covenant began at the act of creation.⁹ What is clear from the Genesis account, however, is that *the order and balance of the world* began at creation. This may not constitute a covenant in itself, but it is the state which subsequent covenants seek to recreate. Consideration of initial creation is therefore necessary in order to understand what constitutes the order and balance that covenants seek to restore and protect.

Previously we noted how the calm and rhythmic controlling of chaos in Genesis 1 is portrayed elsewhere as God actively grappling with and subduing chaos monsters.¹⁰ In Job even the sea is

⁷ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 51.

⁸ Westermann, *Creation*, 63.

⁹ Jer 31:31, 33:20-21; cf. Hos 2:18; Gn 9:1-17.

¹⁰ See pp. 135-6.

personified (Jb 7:12, 38:8-11).¹¹ Yet in Genesis 1 chaos is the state into which God speaks light and limit. Chaos is carefully not personified; as Piet Schoonenberg notes, it shows “no activity or life whatsoever ... no resistance.”¹² It is nothingness, the opposite of being. Schoonenberg continues, “[I]n the bible ‘being’ means ‘being present,’ which also includes the ordering and thus the usefulness of the world. It is precisely in opposition to this that the chaos stands.”¹³

God’s word subdues chaos and orders the world through acts of limitation and separation. Light sets limits on darkness. The firmament and land set limits on water. Plants and creatures are made within the limits of “their kind,” and finally humanity is given a prohibition that requires it to keep to the limits of creatureliness. Another way to describe the same process is to say that light is *separated* from dark, sea from sky, sea from land, species from each other, and faithfulness from disobedience. The limits are essential to creation, for it is by remaining within its ordained limits that creation is able to be what it was designed to be and “functions according to God’s creational plan and purpose.”¹⁴

As Goldingay notes, in both the cosmic battle story of creation and the story of creation by spoken word, the forces of chaos are contained, not eliminated. God is able to use them if God so chooses.¹⁵ Their continued presence thus presents an ongoing threat which is only tempered by belief in God’s faithfulness. In the book of Job, illness, exile and attack are like the forces of chaos returning, and Job seeks comfort in the belief that God has set clear limits around these forces, however it may appear to the contrary (Jb 26:10).¹⁶ If God were to lift these limits, chaos would return and creation be undone. In the biblical narrative, then, limits are put in place through an act of faithfulness on God’s part and held there only by God’s commitment.

¹¹ Murray points out this means God could indeed have entered into a relational covenant with the cosmic elements. Murray, *Cosmic Covenant*, 2-3.

¹² Schoonenberg, *Covenant and Creation*, 64.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁴ Och, “Creation and Redemption,” 225.

¹⁵ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 74.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

The importance of this is underscored by Mann, who argues that the concept of God imposing limits to create order is one of the three main themes of the Pentateuch.¹⁷ A second theme results from the first. Humankind is distinctive in that it is made in God's image and is given a role in naming the other creatures, thus becoming a co-worker in the creation of limits and roles. However it is also because it bears that image that humankind is given a prohibition. The introduction of a prohibition means there is the possibility of choice on the part of the human creature: the possibility of acting independently of God. The other limitations of this creation story can be placed or lifted by God alone. The limit set on humanity is unique because humans have power to break it.¹⁸

Which, of course, they rapidly proceed to do. In eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve overstep their limits as creatures. What transpires may be understood as the beginning of a de-creative process, of chaos leaking back into the world. The human choice of disobedience "disrupts the order and harmony of Divine creation and unleashes anti-creational forces which enmesh man and nature in an ongoing process of decreation."¹⁹

Chaos thus enters creation and God's blessing of fruitfulness is replaced with curses, thorns, thistles, dust and fruitfulness only through pain (Gn 3:14-20). Chaos enters the divine-human relationship as Adam and Eve, created to live with God, initially distance themselves from God and are then distanced by God. They are thrown out of the garden and alienated from God and their rightful place on earth. Mann sums up the story post-Eden in this way:

The plot of the Pentateuchal narrative, to its very end, will be concerned with the attempt to find *another* way human beings can live with integrity before God, at home on the earth, and within the security of divine blessing. For much of Western culture, at least, this adventure sets in motion what will become the quintessential quest story.²⁰

¹⁷ Mann, *Book of Torah*, 14-15.

¹⁸ Och, "Garden of Eden," 151.

¹⁹ Och, "Creation and Redemption," 229.

²⁰ Mann, *Book of Torah*, 19.

Covenant is a key part of that quest.

Human beings continue to overstep their limits after being expelled from Eden. They seek forbidden power by taking the life of others in ever-increasing bloodshed (Gn 4:8, 23; cf. Jub 5) and by intermarrying with the sons of God (Gn 6:2). Instead of filling the earth through fertility and life, they fill it with violence (6:11, 13): a decreative process that culminates in the ultimate decreation of the flood. God and humanity had worked together creatively when Adam was given the role of naming the creatures. Now they work together to decreate.²¹

Noah is introduced, significantly, as someone who is righteous and faithful (6:9). These terms recur throughout the biblical accounts of covenant, indicating the qualities of the covenant partners when living within covenant bounds. Noah alone is living as humanity was created to live, and he is therefore saved from the coming chaos through God's "establishing" a covenant with him (6:18) and with all creation (9:1-17). God unleashes chaos in the flood and effectively undoes creation, but then he recreates and promises in the covenant that chaos will never overwhelm the world again.²² The first uses of *berit* in the biblical narrative, therefore, are associated with the outbreak and control of chaos. Dell suggests that covenant may thus be seen as "a way of controlling chaotic forces, binding human and divine together in the struggle against evil."²³

The consequences of both personal and communal limit breaking continue to be demonstrated in the Genesis account.²⁴ There is always the possibility that humanity may refuse its covenantal role and allow chaos to return. It does so at the Tower of Babel when again it seeks to overstep its limits, and God intervenes by releasing social chaos, a "babel" of languages. It is not until the story of Abraham that a new covenant appears, when God—continuing to create by separating—takes Abram from the mass of humanity to be the seed of a new people.

²¹ Och, "Creation and Redemption," 231.

²² Mann, *Book of Torah*, 23.

²³ Dell, "Covenant and Creation," 127.

²⁴ For further discussion on this, see Westermann, *Creation*, 18.

Abram is separated from his home and his people so that he can be a human with whom God can start again.²⁵ Unlike Adam, Abraham obeys God's commands. Like Noah, he is "righteous," denoting humanity's ideal, covenantal state of being.²⁶ Och continues the story: "Taken out of the land of confusion and chaos, Abraham is placed on a road which leads to the land of reconciliation and reunification with God. The road from Haran to the land of Canaan symbolizes the return of humanity to Eden and God."²⁷

Abraham's symbolic role indicates that God's purpose is broader than the separation of one individual from the crowd of limit-crossing humanity. God declares, "I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (Gn 18:19). Here again are the covenantal terms "righteousness and justice." When Abraham is instructed to take the sign of the covenant onto his own body in circumcision, it is a physical sign that his offspring are set apart as God's people (17:8-14), to live within these limits of righteousness and justice. But Abraham not only enacts in himself humanity's return to God, he is also intended to be the means of bringing blessing to the world (12:2-3). Through the Abrahamic covenant God prepares a people to counterbalance the de-creating mass of humanity.

The next stage of this preparation corresponds to the next mention of the covenant theme at Sinai. Once again covenant and re-creation are closely aligned. Och argues that the Exodus

is to be primarily understood not as an act of liberation and redemption but as an act of creation. Through liberating events (Exodus) and a covenant commitment (Sinai), God engages in a *creatio nova*, a new creation which is the culmination and consummation of His original act of cosmic creation.²⁸

²⁵ Och, "Creation and Redemption," 233.

²⁶ Mann, *Book of Torah*, 29.

²⁷ Och, "Creation and Redemption," 233.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.

In Egypt, the Hebrew people had become “nothingness.” In a creative act of separation, God takes them from nothingness to become a people again, to be God’s people, the people of Israel.²⁹

It is important to note that God does so, not primarily to liberate them, but so that they, like their ancestor Abraham, could be mediators of a “blessing to humanity.” As Childs puts it, “Israel, as God’s chosen servant, has a mission to extend God’s creative redemption throughout the earth.”³⁰ Israel is not merely *chosen* for a purpose but *created* for that purpose. “Israel’s creation is its election.”³¹ This puts a great weight on the importance of covenant commitment to the very existence of the people of Israel. Israel has been created in order to obey the covenant and thus be a blessing to the world. By upholding the covenant, she was to provide a stronghold against chaos, a means by which creation could become again what it was meant to be in Eden. She was humanity’s chance to live again the life of Adam and right the mistakes he had made. Israel is now God’s “true humanity” and the land she is promised is God’s land, the new Eden.³² She may choose to overstep the detailed limitations placed on her through the covenant at Sinai and thus choose *not* to be a blessing to the nations. In that case, however, she is no longer a people, the people of God, and returns to the chaotic state of being “no people” (Hos 1:9). Her choice is between being a part of resisting chaos, or returning to it herself.

The covenants embedded in the nation’s history are reflected upon in depth in the Psalms and Prophets. Murray believes that these writings provide “biblical evidence for a belief which ancient Israel shared with neighbouring cultures, one well documented especially from Egypt and Mesopotamia: the belief in a divinely willed order harmoniously linking heaven and earth.”³³ This is in accord with the theme of Genesis 1, but in the Psalms and Prophets the emphasis changes slightly. While covenant “serves the creation” by maintaining its harmony and peace, creation is also a sign of that covenant through the witness of its stability and order.³⁴

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 427.

³¹ Och, “Creation and Redemption,” 234.

³² Wright, *Climax*, 23.

³³ Murray, *Cosmic Covenant*, xx.

³⁴ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 101, 92.

Thus says the Lord: If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night would not come at their appointed time, only then could my covenant with my servant David be broken, so that he would not have a son to reign on his throne. (Jer 33:20-21)

Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the Lord of hosts is his name: If this fixed order were ever to cease from my presence, says the Lord, then also the offspring of Israel would cease to be a nation before me for ever. (Jer 31:35-36)

God's covenants are secure; however, humanity's response to them continues to remain uncertain. If humans choose to exhibit covenant virtues, they can contribute to the harmony of creation.³⁵ In Psalm 85, when the covenant virtues of "righteousness and steadfast love" meet, "the Lord will give what is good" and "our land will yield its increase" (85:10, 12). When righteousness and steadfast love are absent, the security of creation is threatened. Although John Bright argues there was a common belief in Israel "that the nations' survival was unconditionally assured by the promises of God," the prophets and psalmists focus on the consequences of humanity breaking the covenant and being the means by which creation is undone.³⁶ The act of breaking the covenant brings a curse upon the earth, and that curse *is* the undoing of creation, the in-breaking of chaos, the destruction of peace.

The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers;
the heavens languish together with the earth.
The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed laws,
violated the statutes,

³⁵ Murray, *Cosmic Covenant*, 49, 60-66.

³⁶ Bright, *Covenant and Promise*, 17.

broken the everlasting covenant.
Therefore a curse devours the earth,
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt. (Is 24:4-6)

The social and religious faithlessness of the people breaks the covenant and leads to desolation in the land.³⁷

The highways are deserted,
travellers have left the road.
The treaty is broken,
its oaths are despised,
its obligation is disregarded.
The land mourns and languishes. (Is 33:7-9a)

There is a tension, therefore, between the guarantee of God's faithfulness provided by the regularity of times and seasons, and humanity's unfaithfulness with its resulting present hardships. Psalms 74 and 89 reflect this tension. They are mixtures of praise and declarations of faith, bewilderment and lament: praise for God's victory over chaos; faith that his covenant with David will be as steadfast as his control over creation; bewilderment and lament at how little evidence there is of that present faithfulness. The psalmist reminds God of his covenant, appealing to the steadfastness of creation as the guarantee they believe it to be.

How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?
Is the enemy to revile your name for ever? ...
Yet God my King is from of old,
working salvation in the earth.
You divided the sea by your might;
you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters ...

³⁷ See Moo, "Romans 8:19-22," 80-83.

You have fixed all the bounds of the earth;
you made summer and winter ...
Have regard for your covenant,
for the dark places of the land are full of the haunts of violence. (74:10, 12, 13, 17, 20)

This writer does not doubt God's ability to restore nature and to fulfil his covenant. When it will happen is unknown, but Jeremiah declares there will one day be a "new" covenant and the world will return to its Edenic state (Jer 31:31). This new covenant will be unlike the old, in that it will be written on human hearts, which implies that this time the people will not break it (31:32-34). Their surety for this is that it is promised by the Lord "who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night" (31:35). The steadfastness of creation is the sign for the beleaguered people of Israel of the steadfastness of God's promise, despite all evidence to the contrary.

The first covenant mythologem suggests that creation is held together and chaos controlled by covenants between God and Israel. In the biblical story, both the act of creation and the acts of recreation through covenants involve separation and limitation. Humanity alone repeatedly breaches those limits, bringing chaos on itself and the world. God then works at creating a people who would choose to obey, a people separated out and holy, committed to God in their flesh (through circumcision) and their actions. While they uphold the covenant they hold chaos at bay; when they break the covenant, chaos returns. The inevitability of Israel's failure is countered throughout by elements of hope, based on the faithfulness of God as seen in the regularity and order of creation.

2. Covenant and Curse

Covenant curses are another way of understanding the consequences of breaking a covenant. Curses are regular features of the Hittite suzerainty treaties, but are surprisingly inconspicuous in the first two Pentateuchal covenants in which blessings are far more prominent. Yet each covenant-formation story makes it clear that there will be evil *consequences* from breaking the covenant. In some cases there appears to be something innate in the covenant itself which produces blessing or curse. While Westermann communicates some discomfort at the "magical"

aspects of this understanding of how covenant functions, it makes it of particular interest for this study.³⁸

A common theme in the divine blessings portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures is that of fertility and life. The creatures of the sea and sky are “blessed” before humans arrive (Gn 1:22) and told to be fruitful and multiply. The blessing is active: it fills creatures with life and with the capacity to produce further life.³⁹ Mann suggests blessing should be understood as both a grace and a command, in the way that “charge” can be understood both as an enablement, as in “charging a battery” and a command, as in charging someone with a task. Blessing involves both God’s enabling of, and the obedience of, the one blessed.⁴⁰ When humankind is created, it is similarly blessed, with the additional charge to “fill the earth and conquer it, and hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and every beast that crawls upon the earth” (Gn 1:28). Within this state of Edenic blessing there is adequate food for all with no bloodshed necessary, and it is all “very good” (1:31).

Adam and Eve’s disobedience affects the blessing. For Westermann, God’s apparent curses are descriptions of what life separated from God will be like—the natural consequences of that separation—rather than a curse or even a punishment as such.⁴¹ Yet two things *are* cursed in the story: the snake and the ground. Although the snake can be said to have brought it on itself (Gn 3:14-15), the ground has done nothing wrong. One consequence of Adam and Eve’s choice is a curse on creation.

And to the human he said,
‘Because you listened to the voice of your wife,
and ate from the tree that I commanded you,
“You shall not eat from it,”

³⁸ Westermann, *Creation*, 99.

³⁹ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 54.

⁴⁰ Mann, *Book of Torah*, 15.

⁴¹ Westermann, *Creation*, 98.

cursed be the soil for your sake,
with pangs you shall eat from it
all the days of your life. (Gn 3:17)

Covenants offer renewed blessings, but warn that the blessings will be removed should the covenant be broken. There is, then, usually, a sense of mutual obligation in covenants. Even the Noahic covenant, which is sometimes thought of as unilateral, includes mutual obligations as indicated through the formula “And you ...” and “As for me ...” found in Genesis 9:7-8.⁴² God only gives his promises after detailed instructions on Noah’s correct relationship with creation (9:1-3). These are the obligations inherent in the covenant, and the results of breaking them are outlined in verse 4-7.⁴³ Human obligations are even clearer in the case of Abraham who, unlike Noah, is specifically told to “keep” the covenant (17:9) and to carry evidence of that covenant in circumcision.

There is no warning of any curse if Noah or Abraham breaks the covenant. Even the consequences are more implied than stated: keep the covenant and you will be blessed; fail to keep it and the blessing will be lost. The only specific warning in the Abrahamic covenant is that any male who is not circumcised will be “cut off from his people” (Gn 17:14). Yet the idea of a covenant curse does appear in two curious forms in the Abraham story. First, while Abraham is called to “be a blessing” by remaining within the covenant, when he compromises his integrity in a show of poor faith in God, he is also the means of bringing a curse on Pharaoh and halting the fertility of Abimelech and his people (12:17-20, 20:17-18).⁴⁴ Abraham is unharmed, but as it was with Adam and Eve, his breach of the covenant brings down a curse on those around him.

Secondly there is the rite of Genesis 15. The sacrifice of animals at the point of covenant-making is probably intended to symbolise the death of those making the covenant should they break that

⁴² Cf. Gn 19:4, 9; 1 Kgs 9:1-5; Jer 30:8-10, 46:25-28 where God again makes promises followed by an “As for you ...”

⁴³ For a discussion on the bilateral nature of the Noahic covenant, see Mason, “Another Flood?,” 84-5.

⁴⁴ Mann, *Book of Torah*, 33.

covenant (cf. Jer 34:18-20).⁴⁵ What is remarkable about the scene in Genesis 15 is that it is God who symbolically passes through the bisected carcasses in the form of a moving fire pot and smoking torch (15:17). The first clear covenant curse enacted in the Genesis story is one that God takes on himself.

In the Sinai covenant, the curses and blessings are made explicit. In Deuteronomy 28, the blessings revolve around the themes of being God's people in God's land, of fertility, and of life, but they are immediately followed by curses which threaten to reverse the blessings, anticipating a state of being cut-off from God and the land, of disease, barrenness and death. Leviticus 26 includes a string of curses relating to disease and death, of loss of land and separation from God. These curses are not randomly chosen. Israel's relationship with God is the central blessing and therefore separation from God is the central curse. In relationship with God there is life, fertility and peace, so in alienation from God there is death, disease, barrenness and war.

All the nations will wonder, "Why has the Lord done thus to this land? What caused this great display of anger?" They will conclude, "It is because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their ancestors, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt. They turned and served other gods, worshipping them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them; so the anger of the Lord was kindled against that land, bringing on it every curse written in this book." (Dt 29:24-27)

The curses have a single purpose: to make Israel return to her God and her covenant commitment.

Within the narrated story itself, there is a sense of sad inevitability about this. Even as God makes a covenant with Israel, he knows that Israel *will* break the covenant and *will* be cursed.

The Lord said to Moses, "Soon you will lie down with your ancestors. Then this people will begin to prostitute themselves to the foreign gods in their midst, the

⁴⁵ Hahn, "Broken Covenant," 427-28.

gods of the land into which they are going; they will forsake me, breaking my covenant that I have made with them.” (Dt 31:16)

The appalling curses of Deuteronomy 28 will fall on the people should they break the covenant. There is no option for leniency. Yet Leviticus 26 holds out some small hope: here the curses will still fall on the people, but if Israel is brought by them to the point of repentance, God will intervene and reach out to his people again (Lv 26:40-45). There is hope here that curses are not the end of the story. When a curse is exhausted, God will allow Israel to start again, renewing his covenant with her.

This same hope is seen in a pattern that becomes familiar in the prophetic writings: a movement through covenant formation, unfaithfulness, wrath (which manifests itself in the destruction and barrenness of the covenant curse), return, and renewed covenant. In Hosea 1-2, Israel is personified as God’s wife, bound by the “covenant” of marriage. She is unfaithful, and God’s wrath is unleashed, leading to barrenness in the land (2:12). Yet before all is lost, God “allures” her again and promises a covenant that will bring peace: a betrothal in righteousness, justice, love, compassion and faithfulness (2:14-23). The land will respond to God’s promise, fertility will return, and once again Israel will be his people and he will be her God (2:23). After the covenant is restored, the faults of the wife are replaced by covenant virtues. The broken marriage between heaven and earth is healed and even the children’s names are reversed (2:23).

The same pattern can be found repeatedly in Isaiah. Moo traces it from chapters 24 to 27, starting with the state of the earth due to the sins of the people (24:1-20) and moving to a time when God will reign on Mt Zion, wiping away tears and “swallowing up death forever” (24:23, 25:6-8). There the “righteous,” those who are within the covenant, are waiting (25:1-5, 9).⁴⁶ Similar patterns recur in chapters 58-59, and 50-54. The latter refers to a “covenant of peace,” a phrase echoed in Ezekiel where judgement gives way to promises of safety and fertility to come (Ez 34:25-30, cf. 37:26). It seems that, while a broken covenant cannot be restored or made new until the curse is exhausted or fulfilled, when that happens there is hope again.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Moo, “Romans 8,” 84.

⁴⁷ For more on the covenant of peace, see Batto, “The Covenant of Peace.”

Isaiah 50-54 contains another significant feature, a third party, the Servant of the Lord, on whom the wrath of the broken covenant falls. The narrative sequence is as follows:

- (a) *Covenant and unfaithfulness*. Israel is an unfaithful wife whom God divorces because of her sins (50:1). Some peaceful reflections follow, extolling God's redeeming work in the past and future, but the curse cannot be put off forever.
- (b) *Wrath*. This time, however, the curse falls only on the "Servant" (53:1-12).
- (c) *Return*. Once the curse has been absorbed by the Servant, the image of marriage is taken up again in chapter 54. This time Israel is portrayed as a pitiful, abandoned, and childless wife to whom God promises to return despite his "brief" anger (54:7-8) and to whom God will give fertility and life (54:1-3).
- (d) *Renewed covenant*. Just as he swore never to flood the earth again, now God swears never to "rebuke" Israel again (54:9-10). Despite everything, Israel will be held fast in God's unfailing love and his covenant of peace.

For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (54:10)

Here are the seeds of a particular covenantal hope that becomes central to atonement in both the New Testament and later fantasy works. It is the idea that the curse may be focussed on one person on behalf of all the people. Wright points out that the concept of one person representing the nation as a whole inheres in Israel's idea of kingship. Kings and people were "bound together in such a way that what is true of the one is true in principle of the other."⁴⁸ To say "We have no portion in David" is essentially a metonym for separation from David's kingdom (2 Sm 20:1), and the covenant blessing given to David is applicable to the whole of Israel (Is 55). Nor is David

⁴⁸ Wright, *Climax*, 46.

alone as Israel's representative. As already noted, Abraham is chosen and Israel created to be God's "true humanity" in the way Adam was meant to be.⁴⁹ In Second Temple Jewish writings, it is Adam's "evil heart" that lives on in Israel (2 Esd. 3:21) and in Jubilees, all that applies to Adam applies to Israel (Jub 2:23-24, 3:30-31). There is a continuity and identity between them.

This idea is explored in Isaiah 11, where God's faithfulness to the Davidic covenant is the basis for a future hope. A king who comes from Jesse's root (11:1) will embody all David was meant to be and therefore all Israel was meant to be (11:2-5).⁵⁰ Through this figure the earth will finally be restored to the harmonious state of Eden (11:6-9) and the blessing that Israel was supposed to be to the nations will be fulfilled (11:10).

The figure of the Servant in Isaiah 42, 49, 50 and 52-53 is more ambiguous. The identity of the Servant is never disclosed, but there are royal overtones in God's public designation of him.⁵¹ His task is to bring justice to the nations (Is 42), and the process will involve suffering on his part. His is the suffering of a mediator between God and humanity, like Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah, but his role exceeds any of these.⁵² In Isaiah 53 he is portrayed as a man upon whom all the consequences of the broken covenant have fallen in Israel's place:

But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (53:5-6)

⁴⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁰ Bright, *Covenant and Promise*, 109.

⁵¹ Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 93, 94.

⁵² Ibid., 227.

The consequences of breaking the covenant are essentially inevitable. Israel *will* bring a curse on the earth if she oversteps the covenantal limits. However, there are signs here of how the covenant hope could become a messianic hope: a hope for one person who would be all Israel was meant to be, who would bear the curse on her behalf, and thus heal the covenant.⁵³

So far in this chapter we have focussed on two motifs within covenant theology: covenant as a means of controlling chaos and the power of the covenant curse. Both are woven through the Hebrew Scriptures from Genesis to the prophets, shaping story, law and faith. In this story, both God and humanity have covenantal roles in controlling the chaos that hovers on the brink of creation, and covenants have power to bring both blessings and curses on people. The story is one in which Israel repeatedly, almost inevitably, brings the curse on herself and therefore chaos into the world.

However, the New Testament writers found a hope embedded in this story that helped to make sense of Christ's atoning work: a hope that a new covenant could be made with new power to restore creation's relationship with God and defeat the chaos in the world; a hope that the inevitable curses that came from the broken covenant could be focused on and transcended in one representative person.

3. The New Covenant

One of the most striking things about the Abrahamic and Sinaic covenants is that God takes the unusual step of committing himself, as the stronger party, to accept the curse were he to break the covenant. It is a light from God that passes through the bisected animals in God's covenant with Abraham, and at Sinai both the people and the altar are splashed with blood.

Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said,

⁵³ For the link with a messianic hope see Fensham, "Old Testament and New Testament relationship," 89.

“See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.” (Ex 24:6-8)

At the Last Supper, something even more remarkable is implied. Jesus, the one who has remained faithful to the covenant, indicates that he will assume the curses of those who have been unfaithful. Jesus takes the cup and declares, “This is my blood of the new covenant” (Lk 22:20). It is Jesus’ own blood that is figuratively “splashed on the altar.” It is his blood the disciples are instructed to “drink,” marking their commitment to a new covenant. Similarly, Jesus’ taking of bread as a symbol for his “body” and breaking it parallels the bisection of the animals in the covenant with Abraham (Gn 15). The new covenant is instituted through the divided body and “dashed” blood of Jesus himself. To understand the significance of this symbolism, we must explore further the questions of why curses have to be executed when a covenant is broken, and how these curses could come to bear on one person.

a. *The Covenant Curse*

The power of a covenant lies in its ability to bring blessing or curses depending on the faithfulness of the participants. As Scott Hahn points out, if a covenant is broken, the curse has to be borne or else the covenant is proven to be powerless.⁵⁴ If it does not bring the promised curse, there is no certainty that it could bring the promised blessing. Hahn illustrates this with Hebrews 9:15-22 which he believes to be speaking about a covenant, rather than a “will.” The NRSV translates it as follows:

For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant (*diatheke*), so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant (*diatheke*). Where a will (*diatheke*) is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will (*diatheke*) takes effect only at death (9:15-17).

⁵⁴ Hahn, “Broken Covenant,” 434.

In the first century death was not necessary for wills to take effect, so it makes little sense to translate *diatheke* as “will” in verses 16-17.⁵⁵ It is better translated as “covenant” throughout. Hahn suggests this translation: “Since there is a covenant . . . the death of the covenant maker must be borne.”⁵⁶ A death is absolutely necessary for a broken covenant or the covenant will be rendered invalid. However, as is the case in Isaiah, Hosea and Leviticus, once the curse has been executed, the covenant can be renewed or a new covenant formed. According to the writer of Hebrews, the curse of the broken covenant was executed on Jesus, allowing a new covenant to emerge.

The blessings that come through obedience to the covenant are expressed in terms of relationship with God, healing, restoration and fullness of life. In the Gospel narratives, Jesus is portrayed as the embodiment of these covenant blessings.⁵⁷ Finally there is a human being who exhibits the response to the covenant that Israel was meant to give.⁵⁸ He is not only a model of Israel’s ideal faithfulness, however; his life and death are also the “decisive manifestation of *God’s* faithfulness to his covenant promise to Abraham.”⁵⁹ He displays God’s unbreakable commitment to his people, a commitment which leads God to focus the curse of the broken covenant upon himself as God incarnate, and “exhaust” it through Christ’s death.⁶⁰

There are a number of biblical precedents for this understanding of Jesus vicariously taking the curse for Israel. As discussed above, if Jesus is “King of the Jews” (Mt 2:2), whatever happens to Jesus could be understood to happen to his people; as the Servant of Isaiah (Mt 12:15-25; Is 53:5-6), Jesus is understood to bear the iniquities of the whole people; as an ideal human being, he is considered a new Adam, the “true humanity.”⁶¹ There are at least three other precedents and illustrations of this idea. The Day of Atonement rituals involved both a sacrificial goat and a second goat on which the sins of the people were laid, the “scapegoat” (Lv 16:7-10, 21). That goat

⁵⁵ Ibid., 418.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 432.

⁵⁷ Westermann, *Creation*, 122.

⁵⁸ Shelton, “Covenant Concept of Atonement,” 99.

⁵⁹ Hays, *Faith of Jesus Christ*, 274 (emphasis added).

⁶⁰ Dunn, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 177.

⁶¹ Wright, *Climax*, 21.

was driven away into the wilderness, thus, like Christ, taking away the sins and curses of the people (cf. 2 Cor 5:21).⁶² There is also the concept of the temple. In our earlier discussion on blood we saw how the sins of the people were thought to be drawn into the temple as if by magnetic attraction, or in the manner of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.⁶³ When focussed in one place, sins could be dealt with in that one place. We observed how Jesus identifies himself as a new temple that could attract the “sin of the world” onto himself, and as the sacrificial “lamb” whose blood can “take it away” (Jn 1:29).

Finally, there is the idea underlying Paul’s description of Christ as the *hilasterion* (Rom 3:25), a probable reference to the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was the central site of atonement in the Jerusalem temple where the deep, rebellious sins of the people were cleansed by the blood of God’s goat, at the hand of a priest representing God. There, too, the stone tablets of the covenant words were held. If Christ is the *hilasterion*, he is both the place of atonement and the place that holds the covenant. Nicholas Lunn argues that the stories of Jesus’ death and the empty tomb in the Gospels are also full of allusions to Jesus as the Ark of the Covenant. Apart from several linguistic links, there are visual ones. The Ark had cherubim at its head and foot, as did the slab on which Jesus lay when the disciples arrived (Ex 25:18, Jn 20:12; cf. Heb 9:5). The Ark was behind a veil, a veil was torn in two at Jesus’ death (Mt 27:51), and Jesus was behind a stone that was rolled away. The Ark was covered with cloth before being moved, as was Jesus (Nm 4:5; Jn 19:40), and both were anointed with spices, specifically myrrh (Ex 30:26, 23; Jn 12:3, 39).⁶⁴ The thought, then, is that Jesus holds within himself the covenant. Just as the sins of the people were drawn to the Ark of the Covenant, so they are drawn to Jesus, and just as atonement was made there, so it is made in Jesus.

b. Covenant and at-one-ment

One way of understanding Christ’s atonement in covenantal terms, then, is that he fulfilled the covenant curse through his own death: one man dying for the people (Jn 11:50; Rom 5:7-17). The second mythologem of covenant controlling chaos is equally important. In this case, the

⁶² Note that the goat is sent to “Azazel”, the angel bound deep in the desert. See p. 135.

⁶³ See p. 86.

⁶⁴ Lunn, “Jesus, the Ark and the Day of Atonement,” 731-46.

atonement brought about through a new covenant means that creation is set right, chaos is returned to its bounds, and the world is brought into a state of “at-one-ment.” As the New Testament writers take up this mythologem, key elements of its use in the Hebrew Scriptures are clearly recognisable. Covenants are made or renewed in order to control the chaos that has broken out in the world and to create a people who will continue to resist that chaos.

One of the difficulties in Christian theology is how to understand Christ’s atonement when creation still “groans” to be “set free from its bondage to decay” (Rom 8: 21-22). The New Testament does not claim that death and decay have ceased in the world, but that they have nevertheless been controlled. Their proof is Christ’s resurrection. Christ, the “beginning, the first-born from the dead” (Col 1:18) is for them the promise that what had happened once for one man would eventually happen for the whole creation (Rom 8:21; 2 Pt 3:13; Rv 21). If Christ’s atonement had replaced death with life, chaos’ greatest power had been defeated. As Wright says:

Death—the unmaking of the creator’s image-bearing creatures—was not seen as a good thing, but as an enemy to be defeated. It was the ultimate weapon of destruction. . . . If the creator god was also the covenant god, and if the covenant was there to deal with the unwelcome problem that had invaded the created order at its heart and corrupted human beings themselves, it was this intruder, death itself, that had to be defeated.⁶⁵

Since death is the “ultimate weapon of destruction,” Christ’s defeat of death is seen as the ultimate act of controlling chaos, an act of “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). The resurrection is the sign that atonement has been made and a new covenant formed in which even the chaos of death is set within new limits.

The formation of a chaos-resisting people is central to this new covenant as it was to the old. Mendenhall points out that the Last Supper, like the covenant at Sinai, “created a people of God out of those who were no people.”⁶⁶ Earlier covenants formed the people of Israel; the new

⁶⁵ Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 727.

⁶⁶ Mendenhall, “Covenant,” 723.

covenant is revolutionary in forming a people out of Jews and Gentiles alike. Because the one who was cursed through hanging on a tree has been resurrected by God, those “cursed” for being outside the covenant may now be accepted.⁶⁷ Because Jesus achieved salvation “apart from the Law,” its repercussions must extend to those outside the Law.⁶⁸ God’s covenant with Israel now extends to embrace the entire world, and Israel’s God becomes God of the world.⁶⁹

The New Testament hopes that new covenant people will demonstrate the peace of atonement through unity and harmony.⁷⁰ A vital sign of this unity is the Eucharist, the re-enactment of the formation of the new covenant (1 Cor 11:17-34). Those who fail to “discern the body” (1 Cor 11:29)—that is, the unity of the body of Christ which is the people of God—eat the Eucharist “in an unworthy manner” (1 Cor 11:27). Just as each created thing had its place in a harmonious Edenic creation, so each member of Christ’s church has its place in a harmonious body of Christ (Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor 12:12-17).

The repercussions of Jesus’ atonement ripple beyond the covenant people themselves. The restored people of God are the “ministers of the covenant” (2 Cor 3:6) working with God to recreate rather than de-create the world, to “reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:20). From the beginning, covenant had been integral to creation. Covenantal atonement does not simply provide way to wipe out individual sins, but rather involves a process of bringing the world back into harmony with God.⁷¹

Christ in the New Testament is both the representative who takes on the curse that should fall on the covenant-breakers, and the broker of a new covenant which forces death back into the limits God set on it in Eden. The biblical hope is that the new covenant will one day bring the whole of creation back into its created order.

⁶⁷ Dunn, *Galatians*, 178.

⁶⁸ Hays, *Faith of Jesus Christ*, 284.

⁶⁹ Wright, *Climax*, 42.

⁷⁰ Jn 10:16, 17:11, 17, 21-22; Rom 12:16; Eph 2:14, 15, 4:3; Col 3:14; 1 Pt 3:8.

⁷¹ Finlan, *Options on Atonement*, 40.

The genre of fantasy literature welcomes such cosmic concepts. The existence of the Old Kingdom depends on a web of laws holding creation together, and chaos is an active force waiting to break through into the world in a number of other fantasy series. Even the “magical” concept of a curse being the inevitable outworking of a broken oath can be accepted in fantasy works without raising any question of how an omnipotent, loving God would let it happen that way. That is how oaths work and is one of what Tolkien refers to as the immovable and unquestioned laws of a fantasy world.⁷² The threats of chaos and curses give rise to crises in many fantasy worlds, and we will find that the ways the creators of those worlds bring them back to a state of at-one-ment resonate strongly with the stories of biblical covenant.

⁷² Tolkien, “Tree and Leaf,” 32-33.

Chapter 11

Covenantal Atonement and Fantasy

So far we have traced mythologems connected to blood and victory through the Hebrew Scriptures and examined how they are re clothed in the stories of Christian atonement, and then in three recent fantasy series. Now, having examined two major covenantal mythologems in the Bible, we turn to consider how they too are integrated into these fantasy series. The mythologem of covenant controlling chaos is central to the *Old Kingdom* series, while the mythologem of a death having the power to exhaust a covenant curse is central to the *Harry Potter* series. Both mythologems are also present, if less important, in the *Mortal Instruments*.

1. The Old Kingdom

There is no supreme deity in the *Old Kingdom* trilogy: no “God.” Yet atonement within this world hinges on an understanding of a “Charter” which shares with biblical covenants the role of holding creation together. Its purpose is to keep chaos, “Free Magic,” at bay, to restrict it within certain bounds and thus maintain the right order of the world. Whenever that right order is reversed or the limits overstepped, the result is death and destruction. Throughout the trilogy small breaches are made which need healing, but when a force arises whose desire is to destroy the Charter completely, the whole of creation is at risk. The force must be overcome and the Charter restored to its original strength for creation to be saved.

In fantasy works the difficulties sometimes associated with the mythic nature of the biblical creation stories do not arise. What is mythic when speaking of our world can be accepted as “literally” true within the scope of a fantasy world, and may impact on the lives of characters thousands of fictional years later. In the *Old Kingdom* the boundaries set in place by the Charter at the Beginning are still held by the Charter in the present. When these limits are respected and maintained, humanity is given a sense of meaning, purpose, and connectedness with the Charter and thus with creation. The results of crossing or breaking the boundaries are worked out in physical terms (chaos beasts arise from the clay; pollution, death and destruction seep into the land) and in relational terms (characters lose their sense of connection with the Charter, creation

and each other).

The Charter, and the repercussions that come from breaking it, may be understood as a re-clothing of a biblical covenant mythologems where each breach of the covenant results in physical manifestations of chaos; the spiritual realm has direct impact on the physical, as all is interconnected. As Margaret Barker writes:

Sin, by definition, was anything that broke a covenant bond, and the word translated “iniquity” means, literally, distortion. If too many bonds were broken or distorted, the whole system would collapse. This is the origin of those terrifying pictures in the Apocalypse: stars falling, mountains moving, the sky rolled up like a scroll. (Rv.6.12-4)¹

The Old Kingdom’s images of creation being “broken or distorted” when the Charter is breached are thus closely aligned to the mythic heritage of the Bible. Evil, lived out in corrupting the covenant or “sinning,” is not an individual thing. It affects creation, splitting the protective boundaries and moving outwards in contaminating circles. Therefore the “salvation” acted out in the *Old Kingdom Trilogy* is not an individual one, but the salvation of creation, for each individual is linked with and affects all others in creation.

This “connectedness” is something experienced by those who have, and maintain, a Charter Mark. Since the Charter “describes,” “contains” and “joins” all life (except for Free Magic beings), to belong to the Charter is to belong to Life itself.² Old Kingdom people may be “baptized” at birth with a Charter Mark, drawn on their foreheads with ash and consecrated with the will of the Charter. An individual’s identity is established by their link with the Charter, with the “bonds” that “held [all life] together,” and therefore they are named, identified, at their Charter baptism.³ When

¹ Barker, “Can Religion Help Save the Planet?,” 3.

² Nix, *Lirael*, Author’s Notes.

³ Nix, *Sabriel*, 9.

a desperately lonely Lirael touches her own mark, it “pulsed lightly under her touch and she felt the sense of connection, the feeling of belonging to the great Charter that described the world.”⁴

Where Ancelstierre and other kingdoms fit in this connectedness is never clarified. They would have been destroyed along with the Old Kingdom if the Charter had been dissolved and Orannis allowed to rise, but they have no understanding of the Charter and no sense of the vital nature of being connected within it. Nick refers to Charter marks as a sign of Sam’s “peculiar religion”: an interesting collection of rituals.⁵ Like the people of Israel with their covenantal responsibilities, the Old Kingdom citizens, and particularly the Charter Mages, appear to be responsible for maintaining the Charter even for those who are unaware of its existence.

Those who belong to the Charter have a particular role in maintaining the harmony, balance and unfolding pattern of creation. The phrase that finishes the Abhorsen’s “Book of the Dead” is quoted frequently: “Does the walker choose the path, or the path the walker?”⁶ Part of the role of the inhabitants of the Old Kingdom and, more particularly, those of the Charter bloodlines, is to maintain the Charter at whatever cost, both for themselves and for those who are unaware of it. Within the biblical story, those who were responsible for maintaining the covenant were “chosen” for the task. In the Old Kingdom, the fact that there is no god directing affairs means that people are described more frequently as being “destined” to their task. Yet such a destiny still implies something with purpose establishing it. All those who have been baptised into the Charter are, in essence, a chosen people.

Some characters are chosen for more specific destinies. While free choice is always present (shown by the fact that the Clayr, who “See” the future, almost always do so in terms of many possible futures), for some characters the survival of the Charter itself depends on their discovering and obeying that particular destiny. When individuals find their destined path and thus maintain the Charter’s pattern, even the lights around them may shine brighter, while if they try a

⁴ Nix, *Lirael*, 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁶ Nix, *Sabriel*, 46.

different path they may become physically ill, as Sameth, Sabriel's son does when trying to force himself to become an Abhorsen.⁷ Lirael feels she has no place in the world yet is hit by an "itch" to do something when her proper place and role comes close to her.⁸ For Lirael, indeed, the destined "path" becomes a literal one. As she explores the Clayr's glacier with the Disreputable Dog, she comes across a door with "Lirael's Path" written on it. Everything beyond it has been waiting for her for over 1000 years.⁹ Lirael, Sameth, Sabriel—each character has been created for a particular purpose. Like the people of Israel, their creation and their purpose are inseparable.

This sense of an outworking purpose, brought to fruition through submission to one's destined role, crystallises in Lirael. She is the daughter of a Clayr and of Sabriel's father, the previous Abhorsen. With those two bloodlines within her she learns that she is able to step into Death and See the dead past. She is uniquely able to discover what had been done to bind Orannis at the beginning and therefore how to do it again. Both for Lirael's sake and for the preservation of life itself it is vital that she follow her destiny: "Seeing" at once both past and present and drawing them together.

The health and very existence of the Old Kingdom world depends on people living within the equivalent of biblical "righteousness and faithfulness," living within the boundaries of the covenant, in right relationship with the divine. The "religion" of the Old Kingdom people, being magical, is worked out physically, not metaphysically, so the impact of stepping outside the Charter is powerfully presented in physical terms. As it was for the ancient Hebrews, someone's decision to refuse the role he or she is destined for has physical and potentially catastrophic effects on creation.

In the Old Kingdom people usually break the Charter in response to the lure of Free Magic. Free Magic is still present in the Charter-controlled world, just as darkness is still present in Genesis 1. The Disreputable Dog makes this clear in a description which beautifully echoes the biblical creation story:

⁷ Nix, *Lirael*, 515.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

In the Beginning, all magic was Free Magic—unconstrained, raw, unchannelled. Then the Charter was created, which took most of the Free Magic and made it ordered, subject to structure, constrained by symbols. The Free Magic that remained separate from the Charter is the Free Magic of necromancy, of Stilken ... and all the other fell creatures, constructs and familiars. It is the random magic that persists outside the Charter.¹⁰

The appeal of Free Magic is that it is unbridled, limitless power. In Nix's hands, this wild power becomes the source of all evil, the chaos threatening to destroy existence.

With all its power, Free Magic yet cannot create life. It pretends to when necromancers use the Living to give life to the Dead, but this “stolen” life is warped and temporary. Life itself stems from the Charter which creates by setting *limits* on power, on Free Magic. Evil, which wants unlimited power, cannot create something of itself. All it can do is twist and deform that which is created by the Charter. Even the powerful necromancer called Kerrigor (himself of the royal line before he became one of the Greater Dead) is described as a “twisted” and “warped” version of the original man, his very name a reversal of the man he once was.¹¹ Kerrigor's sarcophagus is made of “metal crawling with Free Magic perversions of Charter marks,” while the mark of Orannis on his followers looks initially like a Charter mark, but when touched cracks in two “like a broken scab,” “revealing an ugly scar that crawled and wriggled on his skin.”¹²

As the series starts, Free Magic is on the increase. The Royal Line has been “twisted” and halted, and Kerrigor has destroyed two of the Great Charter Stones and many of the lesser ones.¹³ The Charter itself is thus deeply weakened. *Sabriel* is the tale of how she, an Abhorsen, together with a member of the Royal Line she awakens from a 200 year sleep, rebind Kerrigor and repair the Charter at great cost. Worse is to come, however. In *Lirael* and *Abhorsen*, it is Orannis (the

¹⁰ Ibid., 417.

¹¹ Nix, *Sabriel*, 289. Kerrigor's original name had been Rogirrek. In the *Septimus Heap* series, all “Darke” magic spells consist of words said backwards. Sage, *Magyk*.

¹² Nix, *Sabriel*, 302; Nix, *Lirael*, 12.

¹³ Nix, *Sabriel*, 108.

Destroyer) Itself who is controlling the rise of Free Magic and orchestrating Its own rise. The Beginning must be repeated and Orannis re-bound, the Charter essentially re-formed, and life sacrificed for the Old Kingdom (and Ancelstierre) to survive.

Free Magic, then, threatens the order, control and life of the Charter and therefore life itself. Those who are aware of the urgency of the situation have to find the way to overcome this danger. Here we come to atonement. Salvation in the Old Kingdom means the restoration of the Charter, and atonement is that which makes such restoration possible: the means, the method and the cost. As we saw in our discussion on blood, those of the Charter bloodlines discover that a force which seeks to *take* life can only be conquered by the willing *offering* of life. This pattern, which is also at the heart of Christian atonement, has long been the norm in the world of the Old Kingdom. The Charter was formed, evil held at bay, and chaos can once again be controlled, only through self-sacrifice.

Self-sacrifice in our world generally has an impact on a particular group of people at a particular time. People die in a particular war in the hope of aiding victory. Individuals die attempting to save a particular person from fire or drowning or aggression. These acts are heroic and noble, and usually limited in their effect to the one temporal goal. This is one of the many reasons that the concept of Jesus dying “once for all” is so alien to our understanding of the world. Yet within the world of the Old Kingdom, such a definitive and universal atonement makes sense.

In the Old Kingdom, patterns of self-sacrifice are part of how the world is.¹⁴ The Seven put themselves into the Charter, and the Wallmakers put themselves into the Wall and Stones, at particular times, but the effect continues as long as the Charter exists. It is not limited to their time and place. Similarly, whenever Sabriel enters Death to restore balance by re-binding the Dead into Death, it may be one creature she is binding, but it is the balance of the whole Charter she is protecting. When Lirael faces her own death, it is not just to save the Six who are with her, but creation itself. Past, present and future are as connected as humanity, creation and the Charter are.

¹⁴ See pp. 110-111.

As the trilogy reaches its climax, Lirael must enter death, leaving her ice-covered body vulnerable on earth. She and the Disreputable Dog go through Death to the Ninth Gate: that gate which necromancers do not dare enter in case they are swept away to the Death from which there is no return, even for them. Lirael uses a drop of her blood on her Dark Mirror to see in that Mirror how Orannis had been bound in the Beginning, and is taken through a history of Orannis' destructive power.

Six times, Lirael saw a world destroyed. The seventh time, it was her own world she saw. She knew it, though there was no landmark or feature that told her so. She saw the Destroyer choose it, but this time others chose it too. This would be the battleground where they would confront the Destroyer; this was where sides must be chosen and loyalties decided for all time. ... Orannis existed solely to destroy, and the Charter was the enemy that had stopped It doing so. Only Lirael knew how Orannis could be bound anew. ... She had to make it happen. For herself, for the Dog, Sam, Nick, Major Greene and his men, for the people of Ancelstierre who would die without even knowing their danger, and for all those in the Old Kingdom.¹⁵

In returning to the Beginning, Lirael sees what is necessary now for the sake of the entire world. The original binding of Orannis had meant breaking It in half so that It could not resist at full strength, and then burying and binding the halves separately. While Lirael is in death, the two silver hemispheres that contain Orannis draw energy from a fierce, artificially-formed lightning storm. Orannis uses this wild power, unleashed by Free Magic, to draw Its hemispheres back together. As a result, the renewal of the Charter requires the same process it had at the Beginning: both a breaking of Orannis' renewed power, and a separation of Its broken halves.

These two tasks are focussed in a new sword that Sam must make. Taking blood from each of the seven representatives of the original Seven Bright Shiners, he "built a spell of forging and binding in his mind, knitting the marks together into one long and complex net. When the blade was fully

¹⁵ Nix, *Abhorsen*, 325.

blooded, he would lay the pipes upon it and the spell over it all entire.”¹⁶ The pipes, like the Bells, held the voices of the original Seven. Blood, voice and commitment on the part of both mortal and divine, form the weapon for re-establishing the Charter. But the degree of power necessary for this weapon’s task—forged by “thousands and thousands of Charter marks that filled his head with light”—is so strong that it will be “as deadly to its wielder as to its target.”¹⁷ The Charter can only be restored by one willing to die for it. The Seven surround Orannis and combine their oaths and the voices of the bells to begin the binding.

Together, the bells and Dog sang a song that was more than sound and power. It was the song of the earth, the moon, the stars, the sea, and the sky, of Life and Death and all that was and would be. It was the song of the Charter, the song that had bound Orannis in the long ago, the song that sought to bind the Destroyer once again.¹⁸

The renewal of the Charter means the renewal of the bounds around Orannis and therefore the renewal of what makes Life possible. Like covenant, it is an act of re-creation.

At this point, something happens that makes this Charter formation different to the original. The representatives of the Seven (six of them being mortal and the seventh only “what’s left over” of Kibeth) are weaker than the original Seven had been, and Orannis stops their advance. It seems that they have failed, until Sam pulls the Charter collar off the “cat” Mogget and shouts, “Choose well!”¹⁹ Mogget had been bound by this collar since the Beginning. As the Bright Shiner Yrael he had refused to choose a side, and the Seven had had to control his unpredictability. Now, released, he hesitates, but at Lirael’s quiet pleading, joins his own oath and power to that of the Seven. The unleashed power of a Bright Shiner tips the balance, and Orannis is controlled. Orannis “spoke then, in bitter, cutting tones. ‘Why, Yrael?’” Yrael answers, “Life. . . . Fish and fowl, warm sun and

¹⁶ Ibid., 348.

¹⁷ Ibid., 351.

¹⁸ Ibid., 364.

¹⁹ Ibid., 366.

shady trees, the field mice in the wheat.” The Charter meant life, and Yrael, resisting the lure of Free Magic, chooses life, thus adding his divine power to the human powers around him.

Orannis is now bound but not yet broken. Lirael must strike It with the sword, and face her own destruction. The Dog bites off the hand that holds the sword when Lirael can no longer release it, and “all that remained free of Orannis’ vengeful power was directed at the Disreputable Dog” as she completes the binding—and dies.²⁰ The Charter is complete at the cost of a life because the power of the evil it controls requires no less a price.

Since her arrival in the series, the Dog has been a kind of “divine helper” to Lirael, and here her links with Christ culminate in her giving her life for the new Charter. She is even given a halo: as she talks with Nick, “bright marks ... surrounded her head with a corona of golden light.”²¹ She shows herself able to raise someone from the dead (Nick)—something forbidden to anyone else—and then trots happily along the permeable border between Life and Death.

While the above discussion has concentrated on the first covenantal mythologem, the idea of the covenant curse is also present, though less developed. The atoning power of the Disreputable Dog’s death can be understood in terms of the power of blood, in terms of forging a new covenant to control chaos, and also in terms of the biblical idea of the curse being able to be focussed on one person and conquered there. When the Disreputable Dog absorbs the “curse” of the evil being and takes it into death with her, she “fulfils” that curse and destroys it, setting creation free from its power and allowing a new Charter to be formed.

It is the mythologem of covenant’s role in controlling chaos, however, which is most fully developed in this series. This is the role of the Charter. Without it, Free Magic would destroy creation, and it is only when limits are set around chaos, darkness, death and power that life is able to form and grow. The chaos of Genesis becomes the Free Magic of the Old Kingdom; God’s limiting, creating words become the song and signs of the Charter; humanity’s temptation to seize power and its destructive results rebound on creation in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Old

²⁰ Nix, *Abhorsen*, 368

²¹ *Ibid.*, 373.

Kingdom; and in both worlds a people is formed with a particular role in protecting and maintaining the divinely created limits and therefore life itself.

Many live unaware of the impact they are making on creation, but others are chosen to battle against the encroaching chaos and maintain the Charter for the sake of all. They do not work alone. The divine is part of the interconnectedness of all life. The Bright Shiners who imbue the Covenant are no distant, remote philosophical gods, but are as vigorously involved as the God of Genesis, who fought with chaos or released the flood, and upheld creation through the covenants. Creation matters deeply for Nix's divine figures and the salvation they offer is not just for individuals. Through the interconnectedness of the Charter, divine and human self-sacrifice may be both necessary and efficacious for all in the Old Kingdom. It is able to bring back balance, to cleanse, to restore the Charter, *atone*, for the whole creation.

2. The Mortal Instruments

The *Mortal Instruments* involves something explicitly called a "covenant." While the Covenant that formed the Shadowhunters as a people is not as important for atonement within the story as the mythologems associated with victory and blood, it is nevertheless significant.

When, 1000 years ago, a warlock called on Raziel for assistance in fighting the influx of demons on earth, Raziel performed a ritual with clear covenantal overtones.

[He] mixed some of his own blood with the blood of men in a cup, and gave it to those men to drink. Those who drank the Angel's blood became Shadowhunters, as did their children and their children's children.²²

At the same time he gave them the Mortal Instruments and the Book of the Covenant.²³ Ever since that time the Shadowhunters have considered themselves to live under that Covenant, complete with a Law and covenant signs. It is the Book of the Covenant that contains the Runes, the language of heaven (referred to as "Covenant Marks") that enables Shadowhunters to fight

²² Clare, *City of Bones*, 77.

²³ *Ibid.*, 216.

demons.²⁴ The power of these runes is apparent in how few copies of that original Book exist. The copies are called “Graymarye,” meaning “magic, hidden wisdom.” Jace tells Clary, “There aren’t many copies because each one has to be specially made. Some of the runes are so powerful they’d burn through regular pages.”²⁵

The Law is not mentioned in the original story of Raziel, but it is the part of the Covenant that has the most immediate impact on Shadowhunters and Downworlders alike. The motto of the Covenant is *Sed lex dura lex*, “The Law is hard, but it is the Law.” As far as Downworlders are concerned, Shadowhunters are little more than “the arcane world’s secret police force,” existing primarily to ensure Downworlders adhere to this Law.²⁶ Yet the Covenant is far more than the Law and exerts more power over its members than simple law enforcement implies. If Jace makes a vow, he will “be bound forever” to any oath he makes, and if he offers to talk “under the seal of the Covenant” he has no choice but to maintain confidentiality.²⁷ Downworlders may disobey the Law, but when Shadowhunters take on Covenant marks it becomes part of who they are.

The runes of the Book are more than illustrations. They become part of you. Part of your skin. Being a Shadowhunter never leaves you. It’s a gift that’s carried in your blood, and you can no more change it than you can change your blood type.²⁸

The Covenant binds Shadowhunters, with unnamed but unpleasant consequences were they to break it. This is a sign that the mythologem of a covenant curse has been woven into the story here. Clare’s use of this mythologem is not, however, consistent. A Shadowhunter who breaks the Covenant by putting Marks on a mundane is not cursed, despite it being a “crime against the Covenant,” but the mundane is cursed, becoming a tortured, ghastly monster: a Forsaken.²⁹ It could be argued there is biblical precedent for this, since Adam and Eve’s sin resulted in the

²⁴ Ibid., 72.

²⁵ Ibid., 216.

²⁶ Ibid., 105; Clare, *City of Ashes*, 34.

²⁷ Clare, *City of Bones*, 255, 209.

²⁸ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 71.

²⁹ Clare, *City of Bones*, 93.

ground being cursed and Abraham's sin resulted in Pharoah and Abimelech being cursed (Gn 12:17-20, 20:17-18). However, when both Hodge and the Lightwoods break the Covenant by joining Valentine's Circle, the results are even more inconsistent. Hodge is cursed and the Lightwoods are merely punished. The Lightwoods are sent to live in New York, but they are not banned from Idris. Hodge, however, has a curse lodged in his heart that seeps out as black liquid, a curse that means he cannot leave the New York Institute without dying.³⁰

The case of Hodge is interesting, as his curse is both distinctly biblical (involving as it does exile from his homeland and the infertility of childlessness) and the only covenantal curse that is lifted in the course of the narrative. However, the means he chooses to lift it end in tragedy. His curse is not atoned for. Instead, he seeks to escape it by bringing a dark power to bear on it: Valentine. Although Valentine enables him to leave the Institute, that apparent freedom leads to him "rotting in the cells of the Gard," more estranged from Idris than ever.³¹ The mythologem of a covenantal curse, then, appears in this trilogy, but we see only how it should *not* be resolved, not how it should be.

Covenant is more important for the *Mortal Instrument's* atonement process through the movement the characters make towards a "new covenant," one that creates a new "at-one-ment" between people who were previously estranged and enables them together to resist the chaos (in the form of demons) that breaks through the restricting wards around the world. There are two major steps in this process. The first involves Law and human processes; the second revolutionises the Covenant and is instigated by an Angel.

Stage one was the Accords, which were struck in Victorian times. At the Accords, Downworlders agreed to submit to the Law that forbade them from killing mundanes.³² In return, Shadowhunters agreed to refrain from arbitrary killing of Downworlders and to protect them from each other and from demons.³³ At this point the Law is treated as something distinct from the Covenant.

³⁰ Ibid., 340; Clare, *City of Ashes*, 340.

³¹ Clare, *City of Glass*, 274. See also Clare, *City of Bones*, 340.

³² Clare, *City of Bones*, 255.

³³ Clare, *City of Ashes*, 38.

Downworlders who submit to the Law neither belong to the Covenant nor are bound by a Covenant oath.

The Accords improved relations between Shadowhunters and Downworlders in that they provided a degree of control over violence, but they did nothing to increase mutual respect or reduce the sense of being “set apart” that the Nephilim felt. As Luke, the Shadowhunter turned werewolf, tells Valentine:

The Accords you dreaded so much didn't make Downworlders equal to Nephilim. They didn't assure half humans a spot on the Council. All the old hatreds were still in place. You should have trusted to those.³⁴

Even those Shadowhunters who did not actively hate Downworlders continued to believe the Covenant set them apart from both Downworlders and mundanes. In fact, the presence of the Accords was a tool Valentine could use to feed his obsessive hatred of Downworlders. Although Raziel had separated out a group of men from other mortals, he had done so in order that they protect other beings on earth, that they be, in biblical terms, a blessing to the world. Valentine understands the separation to be the end in itself and the Accords to be an abomination. He is willing to sacrifice any number of mundanes, Downworlders, Nephilim, and even the Angel Ithuriel, to overturn the Accords in the supreme cause of Nephilim purity.

We have to look no further than Hitler's campaign of “racial hygiene” to see that, although this is a fantasy story, Valentine's crusade is not fantastic. But this is also an echo of a central issue surrounding covenant in the New Testament. In the Gospel narratives, the religious leaders are eager to maintain signs of distinction from Gentiles and upbraid Jesus for failing in matters of ritual purity. Jesus responds with some of his strongest language (Mt 15:2, 10-20; Mk 7:1-23; Lk 11: 37-41). In Acts, Peter has a vivid vision in which God says to him plainly, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (10:15), a viewpoint Clare echoes in Raziel's words to Valentine, “*It seems that your rules as to what does and does not constitute a human being are*

³⁴ Clare, *City of Glass*, 308.

*stricter than our own.*³⁵ Paul contrasts a gospel of exclusion through the Law and one of inclusion through faith (Rom 2:17-3:30; Gal 3-4). Even those without the covenant mark of circumcision may be drawn into the love of God (Rom 4:9-12) through the new covenant mark of baptism (Col 2:11-12).

This inclusiveness is at the core of the second step towards atonement in the world of the Mortal Instruments. As the trilogy reaches a climax, the Shadowhunters are given a choice of two “new covenants” to follow: one initiated on a human level, the other on a divine. When Valentine’s early efforts to rule the Clave fail and later ones are thwarted by Clary and Jace, he decides to blackmail the present Shadowhunters into signing over to him unlimited power, accepting his “unequivocal sovereignty and rule” and taking on a permanent binding rune to that effect.³⁶ If they do not, Valentine will slice through the protective wards and release untold demons on the earth. The elements of covenant are here: a loyalty oath, a covenant “sign,” and the threat of the curse of chaos should the covenant not be upheld.

The Angel Ithuriel, through Clary, provides the Shadowhunters with an alternative. Clary, like Jace, has more angel blood in her veins than other Shadowhunters, and her blood link with Ithuriel enables him to give her visions. Ithuriel puts a new rune in Clary’s mind: a rune of joining, incomplete in itself, but completed when two people draw it on each other. If a Downworlder is thus joined with a Shadowhunter, each will share the other’s abilities and have double the chance of surviving Valentine’s demons. At first Clary’s suggestion is not received well. It is an utterly foreign concept to both parties, who have always remained fiercely separate. The Shadowhunters in particular see this as a threat to their divinely set-apart and favoured state.

Yet the alternatives offered by Valentine of subjugation or chaos finally drive them to agree. In making this decision, they overturn all Valentine’s efforts to create dissention and division, replacing them with a unique sign of unity. Ithuriel’s rune is the first new Mark Shadowhunters have used since Raziel’s gifts, and it reshapes the whole Covenant. For the first time

³⁵ Ibid., 493.

³⁶ Ibid., 311.

Downworlders can wear a Covenant Mark, blowing apart the exclusiveness of the Shadowhunters and opening the Covenant up to all. It is a Mark of binding, joining “like and unlike” so closely that the qualities of one become the qualities of the other.³⁷ This new Covenant Mark creates a new people and a magical at-one-ment between them. Appropriately, the purpose of the new Covenant is the same as the old: to fight the encroaching chaos and evil. But now Downworlders and Shadowhunters are fighting together.

The links with biblical covenant are clear here: an agreement, a covenant “mark” or sign, and the creation of a new, chaos-resisting people out of those who were previously separated or “no people” (Dt 32:21). There is even a shared meal at the end of the battle, the first meal and party celebrated by Downworlders and Shadowhunters together in Idris. The permanence of this change is shown by the new make-up of the Council. Previously it had been open only to Shadowhunters. Now each species of Downworlder has a seat on the governing body.

The cosmic dimensions of atonement are arguably less important in this series than at-one-ment on a human level. The primary disharmony in the world is in the relationship between Shadowhunter and Downworlder and the process of setting the world to rights must begin with healing the rift between them. This requires that the Law of the Covenant be infiltrated with mercy. In my earlier discussion on light and darkness, I noted Clare’s ambivalence towards the Law of the Shadowhunters, as shown in her “grey” characters. Clare does not condemn law and justice as such; she is not an anarchist. What she critiques is justice without mercy or laws that exclude, imprison or demonize a portion of humanity. Her story culminates in a “new covenant” marked by mercy, hospitality and freedom (cf. 2 Cor 3:6). Atonement in *The Mortal Instruments* starts on this earthly level, healing the breach between human and part-human creatures who together inhabit the earth. The physical demons are less important to the series than human beings’ demonization of each other, and Clare clearly wants her readers to recognise this problem and side with those who seek to overcome it.

³⁷ Ibid., 373.

Yet this is a fantasy book. The demons are also real, and while the earthly atonement is primary, even it relies on heavenly intervention and would not be complete unless it resulted in atonement on a cosmic level. The new covenant is struck and the battle is fought at the same time as Jace, Clary and Raziel are with Valentine by the lake. The story there, as discussed in previous chapters, has more to do with blood and victory than covenant. But just as none of these threads is completely distinct in the Bible, so in this series they are interwoven. The “new covenant” is only made possible because the dying Angel Ithuriel gives Clary the rune she needs to bind people together. As Raziel completes the victory over Valentine, the demons that had flooded through the ripped wards begin to flee back again and the combined strengths of Downworlders and Nephilim kill any who remain.³⁸ As a result, the protective Wards can be rebuilt and demons are once more occasional visitors rather than an invading hordes. In this story, as in the Old Kingdom, the atonement achieved through the restoration of covenant is the work of divine and human agents together.

3. Harry Potter

Of the two covenantal mythologems we are exploring, the one in which covenant controls chaos has so far been dominant. The propensity for chaos or “nothing” to break into a corrupted civilisation is also an important theme in Rick Riordan’s *Kane Chronicles*, Garth Nix’s *Keys of the Kingdom* series and the *Chaos Walking* trilogy of Patrick Ness. However, in both the *Harry Potter* series and Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* series we find atonement being accomplished by focussing a “curse” onto one person who willingly dies and takes that curse to death with him. In the case of Riordan’s work, the parallels between the “hero” and Christ end at Luke’s death. In Harry’s case, they go one step further. Harry’s death defeats the living curse that is Voldemort, but like Christ, Harry returns to life.

There are many ways of breaching covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures, but the fundamental interpersonal one is by taking the life of another. Likewise, there are a number of curses in the magical world of Harry Potter, but the fundamental and indefensible one is the killing curse,

³⁸ Ibid., 496.

Avada Kedavra. To kill another is an act of such atrocity that it tears the killer's soul.³⁹ As such, it is unique amongst evil acts.

Draco Malfoy is a dark character, yet when he is charged with the task of killing Dumbledore, Dumbledore's main concern is that Draco, who had not yet killed, could injure his soul beyond repair by doing so. Likewise, Harry instinctively senses the uniquely self-destructive nature of murder and stops Lupin and Sirius from killing Wormtail. This is out of concern for their own "being" rather than concern for the despicable Wormtail.⁴⁰ Voldemort, in contrast, not only accepts the tearing of his soul willingly, he utilises it to his own ends. He successively stores pieces of his increasingly decimated soul in other vessels for safe-keeping.

Voldemort does not, however, fully comprehend the results of these actions. In the Bible, every breach of the boundaries set around creation lets chaos in; every breach of the covenant brings with it a curse. That curse is understood as a state of being in which life is diminished. In Harry's world, the word "curse" refers to specific spells cast by witches and wizards that not only diminish the life of the one cursed, but also affect the one performing the curse. Every killing curse Voldemort casts destroys his own humanity, splits his soul, makes him a thing of death, not life. Ironically, Voldemort's purpose in life is to conquer death, yet the means he chooses takes him ever further from full life.⁴¹

Voldemort, for all his power, has no wisdom. Dumbledore indicates to the reader very early on that it is unwise for anyone to seek unlimited life, even through the relatively harmless Philosopher's Stone.⁴² Voldemort's method of doing so through killing others is so obviously self-destructive it is only his sheer terror of death that blinds him to it. He thinks of himself as "more than human," yet his restored body has a strong resemblance to a snake, indicating that he is less than human.⁴³ Even when he knows through magical lore that his actions will give him a "cursed

³⁹ Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*, 465.

⁴⁰ Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 275.

⁴¹ Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, 566.

⁴² Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 215.

⁴³ Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, 19.

life, a half-life,” he chooses to drink unicorn blood, preferring to be cursed and still clinging to life than submit to death.⁴⁴

The result is a being who not only curses but is himself a living curse. Every part of him—even those parts separate from his body—bears this curse. We see this in each of the horcruxes: the ring’s curse is so strong that it results, obliquely, in Dumbledore’s death; the diary drains the life from Ginny; the locket pollutes the mind of whoever wears it; the vault in which the cup is hidden tries to kill anyone who would remove it; the snake is a powerful satanic symbol of evil. And then there is Harry who carries not only a scar left by a rebounding death curse, but part of Voldemort himself. He is warned of this as early on as the second book, but its true significance does not become clear until the closing chapters of the final book.⁴⁵ Harry, too, carries a curse.

Throughout the series, the cursed part of Voldemort in Harry is held at bay by the love Harry carries within himself and by the choices he makes.⁴⁶ They are choices that repeatedly turn him away from the “dark” path that Voldemort followed and show that, despite carrying a fragment of Voldemort’s cursed being, Harry is completely opposed to him.⁴⁷ Yet ultimately the curse has to be dealt with. Simply opposing the curse is not enough; it must be lifted, and this can only be done through a death. It seems killing-curses cannot be fulfilled or “exhausted” until they have killed. That is how curses work. Every other killing curse had killed; the one directed at Harry had not, and so remains active.

Biblical curses also could not be lifted until they were spent.⁴⁸ Wholeness and the restoration of the covenant were only possible once the curse had been borne through a death. This is echoed in Harry’s story. Part of the curse—part of Voldemort—is still alive in Harry, and for it to be conquered, Harry will need to take it with him into death. In that way the curse is both fulfilled and exhausted; all it had the power to do has been done.

⁴⁴ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 187.

⁴⁵ Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets*, 245.

⁴⁶ See pp. 192-3.

⁴⁷ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 197; Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets*, 245.

⁴⁸ Hahn, “Broken Covenant,” 432. See pp. 215-16.

Harry thus embodies the mythologem of the covenant curse as re-shaped by the story of Christ. But he does not do it alone. The only curse-carrying horcrux Harry destroys before his own sacrifice is the diary. Two others are conquered after significant battles with temptation by Dumbledore and Ron, one by Hermione, and one in a spectacular act of faith and courage by Neville. One more is destroyed accidentally by Crabbe, who dies himself when seeking to use an evil too powerful for him to control.⁴⁹ It is not a case, then, of Harry “being” Christ. Rather, the mythologem is clothed in a new story, involving first one character, then another. Harry is not even the only one who takes a curse on behalf of someone else and dies for it. His mother does. The Phoenix and the centaur statue in the Ministry of Magic suffer death curses meant for Dumbledore. These latter two are indicative of the wealth of Christian imagery in this series. The phoenix and perhaps the centaur, are symbols of Christ. Like him, they take on the curse for another.⁵⁰ Both are part of the turbulent, multi-dimensional symbolic journey this series takes.

It has not, to my knowledge, ever been suggested that Jesus had a piece of Satan in him and for that reason had to die. Horcruxes in this sense are not a biblical concept. However, the invasive power of evil is wonderfully personified in Voldemort, and the curse Harry carries to death is the curse inflicted on the people through Voldemort’s flagrant use of darkness. The people are, in effect, cursed through the presence of Voldemort amongst them and can only be freed if that living curse is destroyed. The analogical connection between Harry’s actions and the atoning death of Christ is striking. Reflecting on Galatians, Dunn explains:

[T]he thought is not just of an action by one which had benefit for others (a man laying down his life for his friends or country). Much more the thought is of Jesus as acting in a representative capacity, so that his death and its consequences were an enactment of human destiny with effects on humanity: the law printing its curse on Jesus, as it were, so that in his death the force of the curse was exhausted, and those held under its power were liberated.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 510-11.

⁵⁰ Granger, *How Harry Cast his Spell*, 104. The centaur’s claim to represent Christ is not as well attested to as the phoenix. See Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, 14.

⁵¹ Dunn, *Galatians*, 177.

Harry, importantly, does not represent all humanity in his death. In some ways he exemplifies a “man laying down his life for his friends” rather than Christ laying down his life for the world.⁵² Yet Harry does bear the imprint of the curse, and through his death he achieves what Christ is credited with above. Through Harry’s death too the “force of the curse was exhausted, and those held under its power were liberated.”

This liberation is the sign the curse has been lifted. When Lily died for her son, neither the “curse” in the sense of Voldemort’s spell, nor the “curse” in the sense of Voldemort himself, had any power to touch Harry. When Harry dies for his people, Voldemort’s cursing power over them is also wiped out. His silencing charms are overcome and even his body-bind curse on Neville is broken. As Harry tells him:

“You won’t be able to kill any of them ever again. Don’t you get it? I was ready to die to stop you from hurting these people. ... I’ve done what my mother did. They’re protected from you. Haven’t you noticed how none of the spells you put on them are binding? You can’t torture them. You can’t touch them. You don’t learn from your mistakes, Riddle, do you?”⁵³

In this sense, Harry has indeed died “on behalf of” the people, disempowering the curse that was destroying them.

There is, of course, another vital sense in which Harry embodies this atonement mythologem as shaped by the story of Christ. He is killed, but lives on. The reasons Harry survives are complex. It is partly to do with wand lore, partly a question of blood, and partly the result of the power of love. But it is also, crucially, because of the curse. Harry survives because Voldemort is only able to kill the part of Harry that is Voldemort himself: the part of Harry that is the curse. The rest of Harry is protected by the magic of wands, blood and love. In the final chapters of *Deathly*

⁵² He is not a representative in the sense that Jesus was. He may well represent it in the sense of being an “Everyman” figure. See, for example, Granger, *How Harry Cast his Spell*, 233.

⁵³ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 738.

Hallows, Voldemort sends two killing curses at Harry. Through the first, Harry “dies” and takes the part of Voldemort that is in Harry to death with him. The second comes when Harry is in the full strength of his “resurrection,” and Voldemort dies himself, “killed by his own rebounding curse.”⁵⁴ The one who saw himself as Master of Death destroys himself in trying to destroy Harry.

Harry’s world is one that post-dates Christ’s own victory over death. The inscriptions on the gravestones in *Deathly Hallows* are biblical, and on them we read, “The last enemy to be defeated is death” (1 Cor 15:26). While characters strive to conquer death in this life, the actuality of the resurrected life beyond death is hinted at so strongly that it seems almost a certainty. Harry and Luna hear voices on the other side of the waving veil; Luna, for all her oddities, speaks with wisdom, and is confident of seeing her mother again; Harry meets with the “dead” Dumbledore and finds him strong and healthy and telling him that, should he choose not to return to life, he could “go on.”⁵⁵ Death, the ultimate curse, is already conquered.

Harry’s “resurrection” is the main sign that atonement has been made. However, there are also signs of a “new covenant” during the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts. The Great Hall holds a banquet at which Slytherins sit next to Gryffindors, house elves mix with centaurs and giants. A new people has been made in which divisions of house and species are gone: there is “at-one-ment,” marked by a shared feast. There are some unexpected people there, such as Draco Malfoy and his parents, but for now the years of terror are finished, the darkness of Death eaters and Dementors is over, the curse of Voldemort is lifted, and the result is a feast resembling the eschatological banquet of Isaiah 25.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.
And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;

⁵⁴ Ibid., 744.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 578.

he will swallow up death forever. (Is 25:6-8)

Covenant is a complex topic in fantasy books, as it is in the Bible, so it is worth pausing to draw together the ways in which it is used in the three fantasy worlds before moving on. Covenant curses in the Hebrew Scriptures have a sense of inevitability about them. They must be fulfilled or atoned for if the covenant is to be renewed. A similar sense of inevitability is apparent in all three fantasy series. Hodge, who attempts to seek another way to escape his curse, finds nothing but misery and death. Someone *must* die to destroy the curse that has come on the land through Orannis. Harry carries the curse of Voldemort, and the prophecy indicates that one or other *or both* must die in order for that curse to be lifted. Yet there is also a sense in which both Harry and the Disreputable Dog choose their fate. Their lives are given freely, not taken from them. As in the story of Christ, they freely take on the inevitable consequences of the curse for the sake of those they love. And in both these stories such a willing acceptance of death mysteriously conquers death.

The ways in which the second mythologem of covenant controlling chaos is developed in these series suggests five aspects of the mythologem that are particularly important to fantasy writers today. The first is how dangerous it is for humans to strive for godlike-power. Valentine, in his lust for a power that would even control angels, breaks the Shadowhunters' Covenant, slashes the protective wards around the world and allows the demons to flood through. When the Charter is weakened by those seeking the "divine" power of Free Magic, Death itself creeps back into life, and Free Magic monsters reappear and wreak havoc. Unbridled power is antithetical to life itself. It is when the chaos that such power-lust unleashes needs to be set back within its limits—when atonement needs to be made—that the central paradox of the Christian stories of atonement is highlighted. In all three series, it is by someone taking on the complete powerlessness of willing self-sacrifice and vulnerability that the wild power of chaos is controlled.

The second aspect is the sense of purpose or destiny that comes from being chosen for a particular role. In all three series, certain people are set apart by baptism or blood to maintain order for the rest of humanity. While this is not strongly developed in the *Harry Potter* series, even there

wizards are a group “set apart,” and the question of destiny and purpose is explored in Harry himself. Nephilim, under their Covenant, have an obligation to control the influx of demons to the world and protect the unknowing Mundanes. It is who they are, it is “in their skin.” In the *Old Kingdom* series, life itself depends on those who belong to the Charter maintaining the Charter, while individuals discover even more specific destinies to fulfil. In each case, one’s purpose is part of what one was created for. And that purpose is to control chaos.

Despite this emphasis on a people set apart, the process of atonement in these works involves extending the blessings and responsibilities of being “chosen” to those who had previously been excluded. Inclusivity is the third key aspect of this mythologem. Demonising others is the greatest wrong in the *Mortal Instruments*, and the divisions between houses and creatures in *Harry Potter* is a secondary but recurring theme. A sign that atonement has been achieved in the *Mortal Instruments* is when those who had once demonised others broaden their “inner circle” to include them, while the closing feast at Hogwarts is one where all divisions have been ended. The Hebrew idea of covenant setting one people apart gives way to the Christian idea of covenant drawing unlike people together.

The fourth emphasis is humanity’s interconnectedness with, and responsibility for, creation. Fantasy writers join recent theologians in connecting humanity’s hunger for power with damage to creation. Humans do not find it any easier to stay within covenantal limits in the fantasy worlds than they do in the biblical stories, and in both the repercussions of breaching limits rebound on the whole of creation. As Granberg-Michaelson observes:

Modern humanity has become too confident in its own power and has trusted too deeply in its dominance over the creation. It has constructed a world view that places human power and glory at the centre of the universe. We have become like gods, masters over creation’s destiny, and ready to demand any sacrifice for our enjoyment—even the destruction of the environment upon which all life depends.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Granberg-Michaelson, “Covenant and Creation,” <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2318>.

In both the Bible and our fantasy worlds, the destruction humans bring on the earth by overstepping their limits is the result of what Rosemary Ruether terms an “ethical judgement.”⁵⁷ This is portrayed with graphic immediacy through the magical connectedness of a fantasy world, where ethical choices have physical consequences. The vulnerability of those worlds and the interconnectedness of humanity and creation speak of the need for an understanding of atonement that is more than individual salvation.

Such interconnectedness is possible when there is an “other-worldly” or spiritual element binding and judging. This is the fifth aspect of importance. The Angel Raziel fills that role in the *Mortal Instruments* and Dumbledore hints at it occasionally, but it is most deeply explored in the Charter of the Old Kingdom. This Charter is not merely a set of laws or magical boundaries. It is a living thing, able to shape the course of events and to connect with creation. The life of the Charter stems from the Bright Shiners “putting themselves” into it. They are absorbed into the Charter and continue to give it life. In Nix’s world, creation is not only important to humanity, it is imbued with the world’s divine beings. The thing that holds the Old Kingdom world together, giving it its purpose and interconnectedness, is itself of a quasi-divine nature.

In this way Nix illustrates the contemporary appeal of a panentheistic understanding of God and creation; one that emphasises divine immanence without removing transcendence altogether.⁵⁸ In panentheism, the transcendent God imbues all creation with God’s being. Nix portrays this clearly through his Charter which is both that which creates and that which delineates creation, while not being creation itself. This degree of identification of the divine with the material world is a far cry from classical theism.⁵⁹ But Nix is not writing for a Christian audience; he is writing for twenty-

⁵⁷ Ruether, “Biblical Vision of the Ecological Crisis,” 4.

⁵⁸ Panentheism is the belief that everything is *in* God, or that God is in everything, while still being distinct enough from everything to be an agent of it. This is different to pantheism which teaches that everything is one, and everything is God.

⁵⁹ “In brief, classical theism asserts that God is transcendent, self-sufficient, eternal, and immutable in relation to the world; thus he does not change through time and is not affected by his relation to his creatures.” Cooper, “Panentheism,” 11.

first century teenagers who are likely to find some form of panentheism a more plausible way of conceiving of God than a traditional theism that separates God from God's creation.⁶⁰

This is a clear example of how the use of biblical mythologems in fantasy literature can provide a way of reimagining their biblical use. The Covenant, like the Charter, can be understood to contain both the power to hold creation together and divine life. The Hebrew writers had no difficulty in associating God closely with God's means of action, as we saw in our discussion of the "messengers" or "spirits" of God.⁶¹ The Gospel of John goes further. Christ is both God's creative Word *and* God (Jn 1:1). In Colossians, this understanding of covenant is hinted at strongly. Christ is both the one through whom heaven and earth were created and the one who continues to hold all things together.⁶²

For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:16-17)

If the story of the Charter is held in the imagination when reading of how Jesus referred to bread and wine as both his body and blood *and* the new covenant, it becomes easier to understand his atoning action as something of immense power and working on a cosmic scale. It is the covenant, the "Charter," that holds creation together, embodied in Christ and symbolized by bread that is broken; it is the covenant, the Charter, that must be re-established in his resurrection. Only in this way can chaos be held at bay.

The worlds of the Old Kingdom, the *Mortal Instruments* and Harry Potter are mythologically rich and engaging. The church's mythology, by contrast, is increasingly foreign and distant today. In the first century, words like "redemption," "principalities and powers" and "covenant" carried

⁶⁰ Towne, "The Plausibility of Panentheism."

⁶¹ See page 130-31.

⁶² Note that he is also the *hilasterion*, the place where the Ark of the Covenant is contained (Rom 3:25). See p. 211.

centuries of mythic weight and shared experience. Today “covenant” and “sacrifice” have either been secularised into property agreements and small acts of self-denial, or else evoke strange and distasteful rituals, while “victory” rings hollow after centuries of unending war. But while the biblical covenant may seem distant, teenagers who have read the Old Kingdom Trilogy will not find the concept of a Charter distant at all. Mysterious, yes, but still familiar. The Charter or the Shadowhunter Covenant are not the same thing as the new covenant of the Bible, yet there is enough imaginative background in common—enough shared mythology—for the first to bring life and recognition to the second. This re-clothing of a biblical motif can also remind the church of the power residing in its own mythology, a mythology that needs to be communicated if the Christian message in all its illuminating complexity is to survive. It is a reminder that the vividness and life and danger of the Old Kingdom have things to offer that are not found in the security of Ancelstierre.

Chapter 12

Summary and Conclusions

Of house elves and children's tales, of love, loyalty and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. Nothing. That they all have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped.¹

One of the many things Voldemort scorns is children's tales. Other wizarding children were brought up on *Beedle the Bard*, but of what use are fairy tales to a dark wizard whose only desire is power? Voldemort dies without discovering that the secret to the ultimate power he sought (to be Master of Death) was there to be found in one of Beedle's tales, if he had only looked.² We underestimate children's tales to our own detriment, Rowling declares, for along with love, loyalty, innocence and the oppressed, children's tales have a power beyond any magic.

What is this power of "children's tales"? What is the power of the fantasy works for older children we have been considering in this thesis? A key part of it, I propose, is their ability to speak of mysteries in a way that ignites the imagination. Imagination is a more powerful influence on our understanding of the world than is often acknowledged. As Ricoeur argues, it is our imagination that enables us to move beyond the sensory or immediate, into deeper levels where knowledge can become understanding.³ Imagination enables us to understand experiences that have never been our own; it enables our minds to understand possibilities we have never experienced and which may be opaque to the strictly rational mind.

The power of imagination alone does not explain why specifically Jewish and Christian myths should be called upon so often today by apparently secular fantasy writers, however. In this thesis, I have suggested that writers of teenage fantasy find in these biblical myths powerful ways of approaching some of the central questions teenagers grapple with today, questions to do with

¹ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 709.

² *Ibid.*, 344-53.

³ Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," 225.

death, evil and hope for the future. Their use of this material, in turn, provides new ways of expressing the significance of the myths undergirding biblical teaching on atonement and the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

1. What myths of atonement offer fantasy books

My study of three examples of teenage fantasy works has illustrated the extent to which authors of this genre grapple with the interconnected questions of death, evil, hope and purpose. Rowling is not the only author to seek to “make sense of death,” for example.⁴ Both Nix and Clare could be said to attempt the same, and there are numerous other examples. *Keturah and Lord Death*, a beautiful folktale fantasy, is about little else. The theme is also central to *Inkdeath*, and it recurs throughout *The Squire’s Tales* until their poignant climax.⁵ In seeking to communicate purpose and hope in the face of death and evil, these authors draw particular atonement motifs from the mythological heritage of Jews and Christians. Evidently they find them well suited to the purpose. Certainly the atonement stories that unfold in these “Other Worlds” frequently have two key elements: the role of self-sacrifice in conquering evil or setting the world to rights, and the hope that death is not the end. Both elements are an inescapable part of the Christian story. But there is more going on in these stories than the simple inclusion of these two elements in their plots.

When fantasy authors construct imaginary worlds in which an evil is conquered or a wrong set right or the world’s harmony restored, these must be worlds in which there are laws and possibilities that allow for such atonement to occur. If there is to be an efficacious death, its power must be believable within the created worlds. This is where fantasy authors make use of the deeper levels of atonement mythology. We have seen how Nix, Clare and Rowling tap into mythic elements of the biblical stories concerning the atoning power of blood, covenant and victory as they build their worlds. Blood becomes life, with cleansing or reparative abilities; it can also be used to pass life and protection between people; it can even pay for a life to be restored. The movement between life and death in the Old Kingdom depends on these mythologems, as do the atoning power of both Harry’s and Lily’s deaths, and the existence of Nephilim and vampires in

⁴ Rowling, “Face to Face with JK Rowling,” <http://www.accio-quote.org/articles/1998/1298-herald-simpson.htm>

⁵ Leavitt, *Keturah and Lord Death*; Funke, *The Inkheart Trilogy*; Morris, *The Squire’s Tales*.

Clare's world. In all three series, the efficacy of numerous small atoning acts, as well as the culminating acts of self-sacrifice, depend on this mythological framework of blood.

When Nix created a fantasy world held in existence and harmony through the boundaries set about it, he had a wealth of associations with biblical covenant to draw on. As in the Bible, atonement in the Old Kingdom requires a restoration of those boundaries or a lifting of the curse humanity has brought on creation by breaking those limits. Harry's defeat of Voldemort has its basis in a complex blend of mythological ideas, but it is the biblical idea of Christ taking the curse upon himself into death that makes sense of that act of atonement. In both Rowling's and Clare's worlds atonement is tied to the creation of what is essentially a "new covenant," resulting in a new unity between peoples who were previously estranged. Finally, through all three series, the battle between good and evil is a struggle between light and darkness, love and hate, self-giving and life-taking. Evil is focussed on one being who gathers a dark army around him, disseminating darkness and destruction while being challenged by light and love. Each time, as it was for Christ, the protagonists' path to victory lies through relinquishing both power and life itself.

Creating a fictional world *ex nihilo* is not easy. Even the most creative of fantasy writers extract building materials from the mythological traditions they inherit in order to construct a coherent world that is best able to support their story. What this study has shown is that when these fantasy authors want to explore the most profoundly difficult and mysterious areas of life, they find in the ancient Jewish and Christian atonement myths a way of shaping their narrative worlds that enables them to do so effectively.

All the appropriated mythologems, however, are presented with particular emphases that accord with their contemporary setting. For example, the way evil is presented as the demonization of one section of society reflects the influence of the genocides of the past century. Evil also has the power to seduce people into violence in the name of "the good": a seduction that must be resisted by refusing to enter into any form of retributive violence. Or again, in the context of our information-laden society, "truth" in these books is largely a question of integrity rather than fact. In a time when environmental debates rage, humanity's links with creation are emphasized, along with the impossibility of knowing precisely how widely our actions will affect others in the world.

None of these emphases is foreign to Christian theology. However, the prominence of these motifs in fantasy books not only enhances the “theological” relevance of these works for today’s teenagers, it also highlights neglected features of the Jewish and Christian myths they use. Such fantasy books are, potentially, at least as useful to Christianity as Christianity is to them.

2. What fantasy books contribute to an understanding of atonement

As discussed in the opening chapters, Ricoeur believes that imagination is a necessary tool for counteracting the increasing objectification of the world.⁶ As we demand that more and more is available to us and controllable by us, we lose contact with the deeper levels of meaning in those things, and thus lose the language with which to express it. Religion functions on one of those deeper levels, and the language with which we communicate its teachings is becoming steadily less accessible to many Western teenagers. What they understand to be “religion” is likely to be strongly influenced by moralistic and therapeutic concerns that remain on the level of the available and controllable. In contrast, fantasy books delve into deeper and more complex questions of death, evil, meaning and hope. This is one place that deeper imaginative language is still alive in the Western teenage world.

The books openly promote a language of mystery over a language restricted to mundane reality. Ancelestierre, a rational and scientific land in which technology is steadily advancing, is contrasted with the Old Kingdom, a land controlled by the Charter and threatened by Free Magic. Not only is the Old Kingdom a place of comparative colour and richness, its inhabitants prove to have a greater understanding of reality than Ancelestierrans. In both Clare’s and Rowling’s works, there are portions of humanity who can see layers of reality unknown to the majority of people. Mundanes and Muggles live in worlds of cosmic powers and magic yet are blind to them. In Clary and Harry we see how the lives of two teenagers are transformed as they are introduced to these unknown dimensions of reality. Their vision is clarified and expanded, and both joy and danger are greatly heightened, as they understand for the first time how much more there is in the world than the available and controllable.

⁶ See pp. 28-30.

The books go much further than this, however. It is not enough to be able to see through the “glamour” or “mist” that blinds so much of humanity.⁷ The evil characters in these books are well aware of the mysterious realities of existence, but are blinded in another way. A common trait of evil in teenage fantasy works is its inability to recognize power in the guise of anything associated with children (fairy tales, innocence, imagination) or love. Evil figures equate power, rather, with a capability for physical or emotional violence. Evil power seeks the life it can steal from others. Yet in these fantasy works evil power is ultimately defeated by the greater power of its opposite: by love and self-sacrifice, by giving life, not seizing it. Even magic, itself neither intrinsically good nor evil, bows before this gentle power. This is evident both in the series that have been a part of this thesis, and in many that have not. In the *Squire’s Tales*, for example, one person’s loving self-sacrifice destroys an ancient dark magic and changes forever the movement between this world and the Other World.⁸ Magic—the province of fantasy books—may represent an alluring power beyond that available to mundane people, but in the end the books themselves claim the existence of mysteries even more powerful than magic.

These are the very mysteries inherent in the Christian story of atonement, a story that subverts the scapegoating drive Girard has noted throughout humanity’s history. Like Christ, the protagonists of these fantasy books deliberately surrender power and thus achieve victory over those who wield it for their own gain; they give their lives and find those lives continuing beyond death; they submit, in love, to having their power restricted by the laws of creation, and find in that submission a path to renewed life. The power of light over darkness, the power of self-sacrifice, the power that holds the creation together—all are part of the atonement stories of these fantasy books and the New Testament alike. In reading the books and becoming imaginatively involved in their worlds, the reader gains a vicarious understanding of a way our own world could be. Ricoeur’s imaginative language of understanding and possibility has grown in the reader. By being given the words to express mysteries, the reader is enabled to recognize them when they are next encountered.

⁷ For “mist” see Riordan, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*.

⁸ Morris, *Legend of the King*, 201.

Fantasy works, then, employ imaginative language in a way which can expand the reader's capacity to understand and speak of the Christian mysteries. The fantasy works we have examined weave some central atonement mythologems through worlds that become familiar and appealing to the reader, worlds far closer to the reader's inner experience than much Christian teaching now is. This does not mean readers will automatically accept the Christian mysteries if they recognise them, any more than they accept the truth of the fantasy works themselves. That is not the point. What it does mean is that they may be better able to bring an imaginative repertoire of understanding to the Christian mysteries of atonement if and when they encounter them, and thus be better equipped to consider them.

The ways in which atonement themes are reincarnated in these books also provide particular insights for teachers of Christian theology today. As we have seen, some theologians question whether Jesus' death was necessary for atonement. Yet each fantasy work tells a story in which the death or apparent death of a protagonist is essential for atonement to occur; it conquers the evil, fulfils the curse, negates death with life, defeats darkness with light. Another puzzle for theologians is why a particular death should be efficacious on behalf of everyone or everything beyond that time and place. One answer is that of the "victory" myth, where an all-controlling evil lord is disposed of, so that people of all subsequent times and places are saved from his influence. But why does the victorious hero need to die in the process? The normal lesson of human history is that to subdue a destructive force requires a force of even greater destructive power. Yet the victory mythologems of Christian atonement subvert that pattern, and many teenage fantasy books follow suit. Victory is achieved through love, which leads, in extreme cases, to self-sacrifice. There is a clear message in the works of Nix, Clare and Rowling that darkness cannot be definitively conquered by darkness; destroying one destructive force with another does nothing to restore the balance of the world. There is also a clear warning to those who would try to do so: darkness eventually destroys the one who works within it.

Instead, all three authors emphasise the power of love and self-sacrifice to effect change. This is a power that works magically across time and space, enabled to do so through the particular mythological pattern each author has woven together for their worlds. For Nix and Rowling, life is something of substance that can be given, taken, shared or consumed, and passed on in a

thoroughly non-biological fashion across generations and between people. For Nix, there is a Charter that connects all time and all creation, enabling one action to have ramifications for the world. For Clare, there is an ongoing battle between cosmic forces of angels and demons, no less real because it is enacted on earth. While physical light plays an important part in the war, only love and self-sacrifice achieve lasting change. Two things are happening here. The power of violence is undermined, and love and self-sacrifice are given cosmic significance and efficacy. Within these created worlds, such strange ideas are plausible. Within their deeply mythological framework—a framework with profound connections to that of the Bible—we can see how the apparent pointlessness and finality of death can acquire meaning, purpose and power. Fantasy books, read appropriately, can serve to remind Christian theologians of both the subversive nature and powerfully mythological basis of their faith.

Both these qualities have come through strongly in our exploration of the atonement language of the New Testament. By exploring atonement in terms of myth, we have been able to see both the long-established power of mythological language in the communication of mystery, and how it has been taken up by the myth-makers of our present time. The presence of atonement motifs in the fantasy works of overtly Christian authors such as George Macdonald and C.S. Lewis has long been recognised. But this study is distinctive for its focus on contemporary secular fantasy literature and for its sustained attempt to trace and explain the great mythical themes of blood, covenant and victory, looking backwards to biblical origins and forwards through their contemporary narrative reincarnations.

3. Beyond Atonement

There is, of course, further work to be done in this area. In this project we have only considered a representative selection of mythological themes. There are many more strands of atonement thought that could be explored in a similar manner, and numerous other fantasy books that merit attention.

One issue in particular warrants deeper exploration. I have suggested that the two elements that are central to any “making sense of death” in our fantasy books are the role of self-sacrifice in conquering evil or putting the world to rights, and the hope that death is not the end. Of these two,

our focus throughout the thesis has been mainly on the first, though we have commented on aspects of the second when appropriate. A more detailed examination of how these books integrate the hope of life beyond death into their worlds would make a fascinating study of its own.

A handful of fantasy books for teenagers speak of the finality of death, but they are remarkably few.⁹ The majority of the books of this genre suggest numerous variations on the idea of life beyond death, and the door between Life and Death does not invariably open in one direction. We have seen this to be true in the works examined in this thesis as well. Sabriel and Nick return to Life from Death; a dead Jace is given life by the Angel; Harry is given the choice of returning to life or “going on.” In *Inkspell*, Dustfinger offers his life to the White Ladies of death in return for Farid’s life, and is, in turn, brought back to life through Mo’s bargaining powers.¹⁰ In the *Squire’s Tales* Gawain meets his sister in the Other World, alive and vibrant, despite her having died as a child.¹¹ Dina, the “Shamer’s Daughter,” enters the realm of death to meet with her father and, together with her mother, uses the combined powers of death and life to bring shame and repentance to her warring land before returning to life herself.¹² The efficacy of death in atonement means, in these stories, victory over every aspect of darkness—including death itself.

The resurrection of Jesus is the necessary conclusion to all Christian atonement myths, just as the act of atonement is the necessary precursor to his triumphant resurrection. The importance of the resurrection, too, is understood within the complex mythologies of many of the books today’s teenagers are reading, and provides an apt conclusion to this thesis. Of all the mysteries that religion and fantasy speak of, death is the greatest unknown. If the world—any world—is to be put to rights, as Harry discovers, “the last enemy to be defeated is death” (1 Cor 15:26).¹³ The atonement myths taken up by fantasy writers are carried through to this ultimate conclusion with a daring hope rarely encountered in the mundane world, but that becomes in that fantasy setting a thing of wonder and possibility.

⁹ In the world of *Fire*, all dead things are burned as a sign that everything ends except the world. Cashore, *Fire*.

¹⁰ Funke, *The Inkheart Trilogy*, 686-89.

¹¹ Morris, *Sir Gawain, his Squire and his Lady*, 190-91.

¹² Kaaberbol, *The Shamer's War*.

¹³ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 269.

“Tell me what it is like to die,” Keturah asks Lord Death.

“You experience something similar every day,” he said softly. “It is as familiar to you as bread and butter.”

“Yes,” I said. “It is like every night when I fall asleep.”

“No. It is like every morning when you wake up.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Leavitt, *Keturah and Lord Death*, 205.

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