Greek Myth and Christian Story
Articulating Christian Theology through C. S. Lewis’s Till We Have Faces

Christine H. Aarflot
PhD Fellow, New Testament Studies, Church of Norway
christine.aarflot@gmail.com

Abstract
Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold is one of C. S. Lewis’s last works of fiction. The book can be read as the rewriting of two different myths: The Greek Myth told in Apuleius’s The Golden Ass, and the Christian story, which Lewis himself considered a myth become fact. This article explores how a Christian theology of revelation and sacrifice is articulated through Lewis’s retelling. The article argues that revelation is always ambiguous because it is interpreted through its recipient, but also demonstrates how the demand for sacrifice can be understood as a divine act of love.

Keywords
revelation, sacrifice, C. S. Lewis, Till We Have Faces, The Golden Ass

Introduction
Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold (1956) was one of C. S. Lewis’s last works of fiction. As a Christian convert and long-time author and professor of English Literature, Lewis used...
literature as a vehicle for expressing and articulating questions pertaining to Christian faith and theology. This is also true of *Till We Have Faces* (*TWHF*). However, the book differs from Lewis’s previous works of fiction in that it raises theological concerns through the retelling of the main character Orual’s life story. We are here introduced to a version of the myth of Cupid and Psyche found in Lucius Apuleius Platonlicus’s *Metamorphoses* from the mid-second century CE, but retold from Orual’s first-person perspective.

On one level, *TWHF* is a conversion story, tracing the tensions and conflicts that arise when Orual’s sister Psyche begins to see the world through the eyes of faith. On another level, however, *TWHF* digs deeper: It raises questions about divine revelation and sacrifice, of how it is possible to know God, and about the relationship between discovering one’s true self and belief in God. The following article explores how the alterations that Lewis makes to the Apuleian myth in *TWHF* make this book a vehicle for expressing and understanding Christian theology. More specifically, it narrows in on two questions and asks: How does *Till We Have Faces* contribute to an understanding of the theological questions of revelation and sacrifice?

### A Myth Retold

The subtitle of *Till We Have Faces*, i.e. *A Myth Retold*, can be understood in more than one way: In one sense, *TWHF* is Lewis’s retelling and reworking of the Apuleian myth of Cupid and Psyche. On the other hand, however, *TWHF* could also be understood as a retelling of the “great myth” at the heart of Christianity, if we use Lewis’s own term. Lewis claims that the story of Christianity is a great myth that became fact: “The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history.” We may therefore say that *TWHF* is the product and retelling of two different “myths”: The Apuleian myth from *The Golden Ass* and what we may here call “the Christian story”.

While the Apuleian myth is a tangible object that exists before us as a concrete source and text, the Christian story is available only as a concept or mental construct in the mind of

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5. *Till We Have Faces* is far more realistic and psychologically nuanced than Lewis’s previous works of fiction, i.e. Lewis’s Space Trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet*, 1938; *Perelandra*, 1943; *That Hideous Strength*, 1945), *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), *The Great Divorce* (1945), and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956).

6. Lucius Apuleius Platonlicus’s work of prose fiction is known as *The Golden Ass* or *Metamorphoses*.

7. “The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact,” Lewis, “God in the Dock,” 43.


9. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact”, 43. See also Clive Staples Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Fount Paperbacks, 1980), 51: “[God] sent the human race what I call good dreams: I mean those queer stories scattered all through the heathen religions about a god who dies and comes to life again and, by his death, has somehow given new life to men.”

10. According to Lewis, myth is “a real, though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination.” See Miracles: A Preliminary Study (New York: Macmillan 1968), 134. A myth is, in McGrath’s interpretation of Lewis, “a story about reality which both invites its ‘imaginative embrace’ and communicates a conceptual framework, by which other things are to be seen”; see Alister McGrath, “An Enhanced Vision of Rationality: C. S. Lewis and the Reasonableness of Faith,” *Theology* 116.6 (2013): 410–417, 412. Understood in this way, a myth both engages our imagination and reveals something that allows us to see the world in a new way.

In terms of the Christian story, “for Lewis, many of the greatest myths anticipate and are fulfilled by Christianity, and he commonly uses the term to refer to a kind of story that he greatly valued for its power to communicate truth.” See Curtis Gruenler, “C. S. Lewis and René Girard on Desire, Conversion, and Myth: The Case of *Till We Have Faces*”, *Christianity and Literature* 60.2 (2011): 248.

the reader. “The Christian story”, as I use it here, is in one sense the gospel story as the reader remembers it, but it cannot be fully equated with the gospel narrative. We can rather define it as the gospel story as the reader understands it through the theological lenses (s)he has been raised to read the gospel story through. “The Christian story” may therefore take on different forms from reader to reader. This story is hinted at in *TWHF*, through significant allusions to different verses in the Bible. These hints, together with Lewis’s perspective on Christianity as a myth become fact, warrants a study of the book as a retelling of two different myths.

The biblical allusions and Lewis’s view of Christianity as a myth become fact make it possible to speak of *TWHF* as the Christian story retold both from the perspective of probable authorial intention and reader response. At the same time, it should be noted that when we speak about “sacrifice” and “revelation” in this article, these may well be elements that are part of the Christian story, but in *TWHF* they are contextualised as part of Orual’s story. When we speak of revelation and sacrifice in *TWHF*, these are not considered “Christian” concepts from the outset, but elements of a narrative that speak meaningfully to what revelation and sacrifice might mean in Christian theology. *Till We Have Faces* opens up for a continuous interaction between the reader’s “Christian” concepts of revelation and sacrifice and these elements as they appear in Lewis’s story. By looking at the alterations that Lewis makes to the Apuleian myth in *TWHF*, we shall see how this book becomes a vehicle for expressing and understanding Christian theology. Reading may, in short, be revelatory: In re-articulating elements of the Christian story through an ancient myth, Lewis allows his readers to re-articulate their version of the Christian story.

The Apuleian Myth of Metamorphoses

Lewis’s reworking of the Apuleian myth took more than three decades. To gain an understanding of revelation and sacrifice as key elements of his narrative, it is first necessary to have some knowledge of the myth in its Apuleian form. Apuleius tells the story of three daughters born to a king. The youngest one, Psyche, is the most beautiful of them all. Her beauty is so great that she is venerated as a goddess (4:28). This fills Venus with jealousy (4:29). However, the reverence for Psyche among the people is so great that even though her sisters are soon courted and married, Psyche does not receive any suitors (4:32). Instead, her father receives a prophecy from an oracle that Psyche is to die and marry someone who is not human (4:32–33). As a result, Psyche is sent away to be sacrificed (4:34). She is, however, rescued by Cupid, Venus’s son, who has been commanded by his mother to make Psyche

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12. Note particularly the following allusions: To John 11:50 in *TWHF*, 70: “It is only sense that one should die for many”; to Luke 23:34 in *TWHF*, 79: “She also does what she doesn’t know”; and to 1 Cor 13:12 in *TWHF*, 335: “How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?” For more examples, see the study of Rosemary Wright, “Biblical Allusions in C. S. Lewis’s *Till We Have Faces*”, MA Thesis, Florida Atlantic University (Boca Raton, Florida, 1982).

13. However, this interaction is not something I develop in this article.

14. *Till We Have Faces* also deals with themes from Christian life that we will touch upon in this article, especially such matters as faith and lack of faith. These are of course linked to – but not the same as – what I here define as the “Christian story”.

15. Lewis worked on the re-interpretation of the myth ever since his undergraduate years. In his diary, he writes that he tried to write it “once in couplet and once in ballad form”; Lewis, *All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C. S. Lewis, 1922–1927* (Harvest Books, 2002), before finally “its right form presented itself and themes suddenly interlocked”; Lewis, “Note” in *Till We Have Faces* (Glasgow: Collins: 1980).

passionate about the most loathsome husband he is able to find. Instead of following his mother’s orders, Cupid takes Psyche to be his own wife (5:2–4). There is one condition upon which their future happiness rests, however: Psyche must never look at her divine husband’s face (5:5–6).

Psyche’s sisters come to visit her, and upon seeing the palace she is now living in, they are filled with envy (5:7–10). Eventually understanding that Psyche has never seen her husband’s face, the sisters scare her by making Psyche believe that she and her unborn child will be devoured by the unseen god she has married (5:16–18). They are adamant she must catch a glimpse of her husband at night while he is sleeping, and then kill him (5:20). Following her sisters’ instructions, Psyche lights a lamp at night. She sees her husband’s face, and understands that she loves him (5:22–23). However, while she is standing there, she spills a drop of oil from the lamp, waking and wounding the god (5:23). As punishment, Psyche is abandoned by her husband (5:24). After many hardships, she is seized by Venus and set to perform four seemingly impossible tasks: To sift through a massive pile of seeds and lentils (6:10); to gather golden wool from a flock of fearsome sheep (6:11–13); to bring back water from a perilously steep mountain (6:13–16); and to bring back a box of beauty from the Underworld (6:16–20).

Psyche performs all of the above tasks with the aid of good helpers, but fails in the performance of the last one: She gives in to temptation and opens a box of beauty from the Underworld, upon which she falls into a deep sleep (6:21). Cupid, however, finds her, forgives her, and Psyche is ultimately raised to goddesshood (6:21–28).

**Till We Have Faces: Revelation and Sacrifice**

Lewis makes two major changes to the Apuleian myth: First, he tells the story from the perspective of Orual, Psyche’s elder sister. Secondly, Lewis makes it so that when Orual is visiting Psyche in the mountains, Orual is unable to see the palace her sister is now living in. As we shall see, these changes lay much of the foundation for Lewis’s narrative, and themes of sacrifice and revelation.

Orual’s story is told as a twofold complaint against the gods, thus making their perceived injustice towards her the central conflict of the story:

I will accuse the gods, especially the god who lives on the Grey Mountain. That is, I will tell all he has done to me from the very beginning, as if I were making my complaint of him before a judge (p. 3).17


Few scholars have noted, however, that there is more to this allusion than merely considering *Till We Have Faces* up as a comparison or contrast to Job’s complaint. It is worth looking at Elihu’s rebuke of Job, in Job 33:13–17:

Why do you contend against him, saying, “He will answer none of my words”?  
14 For God speaks in one way, and in two, though people do not perceive it.  
15 In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on mortals, while they slumber on their beds,
Orual’s accusation is shaped as a story in which she narrates and reflects on different episodes from her life. The main part of Orual’s story is set in the half-barbaric kingdom of Glome, a kingdom that worships the faceless Ungit, Glome’s version of Aphrodite/Venus. Orual is the eldest and ugly daughter of the king of Glome. When the king’s second wife dies in childbirth, Orual raises her beautiful and virtuous half-sister, Psyche. To a large degree, the story centres on Orual’s love for her sister. Her happiest days are spent together with Psyche and the Fox, the slave their father has procured as their philosopher-tutor from Greece. From their teacher, the princesses learn much about Stoic philosophy and a little about poetry. This becomes significant because the Fox’s tutelage impacts how Orual orients herself in the world and later interprets her initial encounter with the god.

Orual’s first charge is that the gods gave her “nothing in the world to love but Psyche and then took her” (p. 283) away from her. Secondly, Orual accuses the gods of having made Psyche’s happiness dependent on her decision about whether or not to believe Psyche’s story, claiming that the gods left her no clear sign to guide her choice (p. 283). We might say that the first of these charges touches upon the gods’ demand for Psyche as a sacrifice: The gods took Psyche away from Orual when the lots pointed her out as the Accursed and it was decided she was to be made the Great Offering. Orual’s second charge is concerned with the lack of a clear sign from the gods. In other words, it is concerned with how the gods reveal their will, and thus also includes the question of revelation.

Divine Revelation: “What is the use of a sign which is itself only another riddle?”

When Orual meets Psyche in the mountain, she is unable to see the palace her sister claims to be living in. But later at night, after the sisters have parted, Orual walks down to the river – and suddenly sees the palace standing there (pp. 149–150). Orual’s momentary glimpse of the god’s palace is both a moment of divine revelation and a central crux in the story. In
Orual’s words: “What is the use of a sign which is itself only another riddle?” (p. 151). The challenges raised by Orual’s vision may be gleaned from these words about the vision as both a sign and a riddle: As a sign, Orual’s vision points to the possibility that Psyche’s story is true, that her sister is in fact wed to a god and is living in a palace. However, the revelation is also a riddle: If the palace is real, why is Psyche able to see it all the time, when Orual is not? And why is Orual suddenly able to catch a glimpse of it, only for it to disappear a moment later on?

In Lewis’s account of Orual’s visit to her sister, he changes the Apuleian myth on the level of story, narration, and plot: The palace’s initial invisibility and Orual’s later glimpse of it are elements that change the story, “what” it is the narrative tells us about. This change in story is expressed on the level of narration through Orual, the first-person narrator. The narration therefore becomes a key element in how her vision is presented to the readers. Finally, these changes in story and narration impact the plot, for the theme of the Apuleian myth is changed through them. No longer is this a myth that tells us about envious women who begrudge their sister’s good fortune. Rather, *TWHF* becomes a story that conveys some of the central problems of faith: Why are some people able to see and believe, while others are not? If we rephrase this question, we can ask: What is the relationship between the revelation and hiddenness of the divine? To answer this question, we must turn to look more closely at Orual’s vision of the palace.

Orual sees the palace at twilight. This temporal setting is symbolic of liminality; the in-betweenness between day and night that, in some stories, is considered the time when the veil between the human and divine worlds is at its thinnest. In light of Orual’s accusation against the gods and her later denial of the clarity of what she has seen, however, the reader is surprised by Orual’s description of her experience: “I never doubted that I must now cross the river. […] I must ask forgiveness of Psyche as well as of the god” (p. 150). The vision leaves her no room for doubt, and moves Orual to a recognition of the right course of action. Then why does she not cross the river? Orual’s answer would probably be that she did not because the vision suddenly disappeared. The disappearance of the vision reinforces her belief that the gods are only mocking her (p. 151), taking the vision away so she can have no certainty. But in demanding certainty, and claiming that uncertainty is the playful work of the gods, Orual is making a demand that goes against the very nature of revelation: It can neither be held on to, nor frozen in time. A revelation cannot be “possessed”, but “poses fresh questions rather than answering old ones.”

Orual’s explanation that the palace’s disappearance is caused by gods who are mocking her stands in contrast to her first reaction when she saw the palace, when she was convinced she must have been wrong the entire time. Orual does not understand why the palace disappears. As readers, we may guess that the answer behind this is that Orual becomes unable to see the palace the moment she becomes afraid: “I was in great fear. Perhaps it was not real” (p. 150). Fear makes Orual question the reality of her experience, and as soon as she questions its reality, the vision fades away. Faith and fear thus seem to be opposed in *Till We Have Faces*.

Lewis’s distinction between “contemplation” and “enjoyment,” which he borrows from the philosopher Samuel Alexander (1859–1938), offers a point of departure for understanding what happens during Orual’s vision.21 Peter J. Schakel, summarizing Alexander’s view,
notes that “enjoyment” is a “direct experience of something from the inside.”22 We may therefore say that it is through “enjoyment” that Orual’s vision first reaches her, and it is the mode through which she beholds the palace. “Contemplation,” on the other hand, is “analysis of something from the outside.”23 As soon as fear grips her, Orual is torn out of the experience and starts to question it. She moves from the immediacy of the experience, to reflection and distance. Lewis argues that “enjoyment” and “contemplation” “can and do alternate with great rapidity; but they are distinct and incompatible.”24 It therefore seems to be the nature of a vision that it can only truly be enjoyed; in “contemplation” the experience, together with its transforming powers, are lost. As soon as the vision disappears, Orual is only able to see it as another part of the riddle of the gods: “What is the use of a sign which is itself only another riddle?” (p. 151).

The word “riddle” further points us to another element of Orual’s experience, i.e. its ambiguity. As Robert Holyer notes, “As Lewis understands our relation to the Divine, we must contend with both ambiguity and mystery. The evidence we have of the Divine is ambiguous.”25 In terms of our question, this means that revelation will always be ambiguous,26 i.e. it can be interpreted – and I would add, be experienced – in different ways. In one sense, we might say that we here stand at the heart of a great hermeneutical problem: “Because none of the evidence for the Divine is in itself decisive, it must be shifted through the other beliefs and desires of the reasoner.”27 This is the ultimate problem that every interpreter is faced with: We see through our own prejudices, which are largely shaped by our own life stories. For Orual, who has been brought up with a keen awareness of her own ugliness and a cruel father, the world is a “god-haunted, plague-breeding, decaying tyrannous world” (p. 111). This pessimism in turn leads her to expect cruelty rather than kindness from the gods, and this becomes the prejudice through which she encounters the divine.

Secondly, in addition to the ambiguity of the divine, Holyer notes that the divine is mysterious. That is, “we cannot understand either how it can be or why it is as it is.”28 In this sense, Orual is right: The sign that she sees of the palace is a riddle, but it is a riddle because it points to the mystery of the divine. This mystery, in turn, offers no answers as to the “how” or “why” of its being.29

In the act of contemplation, Orual’s reason takes over. She blames the vision on her own possible tiredness (p. 151), thus providing a logical explanation that stands in contrast to what she has just described as an authentic experience. This further reveals that the manner in which Orual responds to the gods has also been shaped by her upbringing as the Fox’s pupil. As a Stoic philosopher, the Fox’s character stands as the main voice of reason in TWHF. He is a rationalist, who considers myths “lies of poets” (p. 9), is ashamed of his own

25. Holyer, “The Epistemology of C. S. Lewis’s Till We Have Faces”, 238.
26. See also Williams, On Christian Theology, 134: “Revelation … extends rather than limits the range of ambiguity and conflict in language.”
27. Holyer, “The Epistemology of C. S. Lewis’s Till We Have Faces”, 255.
28. Holyer, “The Epistemology of C. S. Lewis’s Till We Have Faces”, 238.
29. Cf. the end of Till We Have Faces: “I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice?” (p. 351)
love for poetry (p. 9), and holds a worldview in which everything good is understood to be “in accordance with nature” (e.g., pp. 11, 20, 25). Thus, through his eyes, everything that happens has a logical explanation. For instance, when the “Brute” is reportedly seen on the mountain, it is, according to the Fox, nothing but a big black shadow mistaken for a monster. And while the Fox does believe in the divine, his is not a belief in the same individual gods that the people of Glome worship. To Orual, he says that “The divine nature is without jealousy. Those gods — the sort of gods you are always thinking about — are all folly and lies of poets” (p. 32, cf. p. 27).

Orual differs from the Fox in that she believes in the gods – and fears them (p. 32). While their characters therefore differ, the Fox’s teachings provide Orual with a logic she reaches for when she tries to make sense of her vision of the palace. This results in her contemplating the experience from “the outside” and considering it a possible trick of the eye. This logic, however, fails to take into account the full meaning of her experience because it does not take seriously the surprising insight the moment of “enjoyment” offered, i.e. that Orual has been wrong about the gods all along.

If we draw together the above observations, we may note the following: First, Lewis’s change to the Apuleian myth, in making it so that Orual does not see the palace except from in a vision, produces engagement with the question of the hiddenness versus the revelation of the divine. The key challenge presented by Orual’s vision is that it so clearly shows that the divine is both hidden and revealed at the same time. In our interpretation of the vision, we have come closer to understanding why the divine is both hidden and revealed: It is because revelation is always ambiguous. And because it can always be interpreted in different ways, in Orual’s case both as a sign producing certainty and as a riddle that proves (to her) that the gods are mocking her, the revelation both reveals and conceals its own message through its recipient.

Secondly, the moment of revelation is always “enjoyed” or experienced as something immediate; in such a moment, we may be surprised and able to “see” something that cannot be grasped through the act of contemplation. Thus, Orual’s certainty that she must cross the river and beg for Psyche’s forgiveness arises from the “enjoyment” of the revelation. However, both fear and her deliberation about what she has seen, removes her one step away from the instinctual experience. Contemplation need not only be negative, however. To contemplate, or interpret, an experience may also allow us to discern something that the immediacy of the experience itself does not disclose; allowing us to try to translate what we have born witness to as meaningful to our lives. Even though Orual interprets her experience negatively, as the riddle of the gods, this interpretation produces a meaning on which her following actions rest.

30. See, e.g., Diogenes Laertius, VII.88: “...the end may be defined as life in accordance with nature, or, in other words, in accordance with our own human nature as well as that of the universe.” Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, trans. R. D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1925). See also Schakel, Reason and Imagination, 39.

31. A clarification about how to understand revelation/hiddenness is in order here: When I speak of revelation in the present context, I consider the god as the subject of the action. When I speak of hiddenness or concealment, however, I do not do so with reference to the god as the subject of concealing, but to the human’s inability to see. This inability might be due to the recipient’s own (lack of) preconditions for seeing and the god’s concomitant lack of revelation.
Sacrifice: “It is only sense that one should die for many.”

Orual’s second accusation against the gods is that they gave her “nothing in the world to love but Psyche and then took her” (p. 283) from her. Orual’s bereavement points to the second element we shall turn our attention to in this article, i.e. Psyche’s sacrifice. Sacrifice is a prominent theme in *Till We Have Faces*. It runs as a thread through the entire book, from the first mention of the old priest’s sacrifices to Ungit (p. 12), to the goddess’s demand for the Great Offering (pp. 53–60). The actions of a number of characters, including Orual’s, can also be read in light of the same theme. Here, however, I will focus only on the sacrifice that is part of Orual’s complaint, i.e. Psyche’s sacrifice. We shall see that not only is the princess’s sacrifice described in a number of ways that draw upon both the Apuleian myth and the Christian story; as a theme, sacrifice also raises theological questions that are discussed within the book: Is the demand for sacrifice mere nonsense, or is it demanded by the gods (pp. 52–57)? And if the gods demand it, what does this request reveal about the divine? Moreover, is it sense that one should die for many? Furthermore, the theme of sacrifice also raises questions for the book’s readers: How do the different ways of describing sacrifice in *Till We Have Faces* help us understand different aspects of the meaning of sacrifice – both in this book, and as part of Christian theology?

A Wedding and A Death/Devouring

We begin by looking at how *Till We Have Faces* both retains, and changes aspects of the Apuleian myth in the way it describes Psyche’s death. If we look at the *Golden Ass*, we can see how the Milesian oracle describes Psyche’s death to her father, the king:

‘Array her for her wedding—and to die,
O king, and set her on a mountain high.
Your son- in- law is not of human make—
But nasty, savage, something like a snake.
Winging above the ether, it defeats—
Maiming with fire and sword—all that it meets
Jove fears it, Jove whom gods regard with fear;
And Styx, black river, shudders when it’s near.’ (Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.33, my emphasis)

Here, Psyche’s fate is described both as a wedding and a death, to a savage monster. These elements are retained in *Till We Have*, where we read about how the Priest of Ungit describes the Great Offering:

The victim is led up the mountain to the Holy Tree, and bound to the Tree and left. … called the Brute’s Supper. … Some say the loving and the devouring are all the same thing (p. 56, my emphasis).

32. Orual interprets the God of the Mountain’s words to her that “You also shall be Psyche” as a statement that she too shall be an offering when she challenges the Prince of Phars to single combat, thus (potentially) sacrificing herself on behalf of her people (p. 246). Her sacrifice for her people is, however, equally shown in the hours she devotes to them as their Queen, setting the affairs of the kingdom in order and eventually securing a peaceful reign (257–269, cf. Schakel, *Reason and imagination*, 60). Another character in whom the theme of sacrifice is revealed is Bardia, Orual’s trusted soldier and advisor, who also sacrifices much of his life and health to serve his queen (pp. 295–301).

33. Cf. Holyer, “The Epistemology of C. S. Lewis’s *Till We Have Faces*”, 235.
Before she is led up to the mountain to be sacrificed, Psyche also wonders out loud: “How if I am indeed to wed a god?” (p. 82).

On one level, then, Psyche’s sacrifice in *TWHF* is presented as a union with the divine (a wedding), but also as something that claims the entire person and her life (devouring). In its most basic sense, devouring evokes a brutal image of the sacrificial victim being killed and eaten by the god. But the “devouring” by the god takes on a symbolic meaning in *TWHF*, expressed through an insight which the Fox utters towards the end of the book: “The Priest knew at least that there must be sacrifices. They will have sacrifice — will have man. Yes, and the very heart, center, ground, roots of a man; dark and strong and costly as blood” (p. 336). These words express some of the same that the title *Till We Have Faces* does: The gods want our true selves, our true words and faces, or the “heart” and “roots” of a man. Understood as such, Lewis transforms the meaning of “devouring” from being eaten, to the gods’ demand for man’s true self. This results in a union – a wedding – between the human and the divine, between Psyche and Cupid. Thus, *TWHF* transforms and adds depth to some of the aspects of sacrifice presented in the Apuleian myth, where Psyche is simply to be a monster’s next meal.

**The Effects of Sacrifice**

In its narration of the gods’ demand for a sacrifice, *Till We Have Faces* evokes the Christian story. When the lots fall upon Psyche and point her out as the Great Offering, her father says: “It is only sense that one should die for many” (p. 70). The King is here cast in the same role as Caiaphas in the Gospel of John, i.e. the high priest who states: “You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” (John 11:50). This allusion to the Gospel of John indicates that this is the perspective taken by the implied author; it *is* sense that one should die for many. Even so, this is debated within the book. *Till We Have Faces* raises both the question of whether the demand for a sacrifice is the result of mere superstition or an actual demand made by the gods, and of whether sacrifice does in fact have life-giving powers. We will address the latter of these two questions.

That life is the result of sacrifice is debated by different characters in the book. After Psyche has been left on the Grey Mountain, the rain returns and the plague disappears from Glome. Both the Priest and Psyche consider these kinds of events to be correlated, and this is expressed both before she is sacrificed and after. The Priest notes that sacrifice both brings rain and grows corn (p. 58). Psyche, awaiting her sentence, says that she is comforted by a thought that is a mixture of the Fox’s philosophy about “the divine nature — but mixed up with things the Priest said too, about the blood and the earth and how sacrifice makes the crops grow.” (p. 125). Her faith gains new certainty later; when she is standing tied to the tree, Psyche asserts a conviction that “I was bringing the rain” (p. 126).

The Fox, on the other hand, considers the return of the rain and disappearance of the plague mere chance (p. 98). Like others have noted before me, in making this claim, the Fox is abandoning his rational worldview: Orual reminds him that “you have told me there’s no such thing as chance” (p. 98).34 When confronted with her rebuke, the Fox agrees — acceding that the rain would have begun to fall no matter whether Psyche was sacrificed or not. In

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34. Cf. “The Epistemology of C. S. Lewis’s *Till We Have Faces*”, 245.
light of his Stoic worldview, Psyche’s death becomes an example of virtue to the Fox, something that demonstrates her courage and patience (pp. 98–99).

This debate between the characters in the book confronts us as readers with a choice: We must choose between considering the Fox’s words as true, or Psyche’s and the Priest’s. Given the trustworthiness of Psyche’s character, her wellbeing when she meets Orual on the mountain, and Orual’s vision of the palace, the choice seems obvious. If we return to the king’s words, “it is only sense that one should die for many” (p. 70), we may therefore say that the king, like Caiaphas, ironically speaks prophetic words of theological truth: Sacrifice has life-giving powers. Here *Till We Have Faces* deviates from the Apuleian myth, where Psyche’s surrender to the god does not lead to life for others. In this sense, Lewis allows the Christian story to reshape the Greek myth.

**Psyche as Christ?**

Psyche’s character is chosen as a sacrifice because she is both the Accursed and the perfect victim (e.g. p. 57). This ambiguity points to Christ, who in being hung upon the cross was seen by the Jews as cursed by God (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13) but was held by the early church to have been without sin and through his innocence to have redeemed mankind (cf. e.g. 2 Cor. 5:21). Psyche, too, is hung upon a tree. Psyche is both the best and worst, “the best, because of Psyche’s goodness and beauty, and the worst, since Psyche not only represents the King [who has gelded a young man and thus provoked the fertility goddess] but also has provoked the jealousy of Ungit”35 herself.

Read in light of the Christian story, it is not difficult to find similarities between Christ and Psyche: Just as Psyche is perfectly good, theologians have long claimed that Christ was without sin (cf. Hebrews 4:15), and that it was precisely because he was so, that he could be offered as a perfect sacrifice on behalf of a sinful world. Lewis himself, however, limits the possibility of comparison between Psyche and Christ. He writes that Psyche “is in some ways like Christ because every good man or woman is like Christ.”36 Acceding to the author’s intention, interpreters therefore mostly note that Psyche is more like a “good Christian” than Christ.37 If we were to focus solely on Psyche as an example of faith, this might provide a sound reading.38 However, despite Lewis’s explicit intention, I would argue that it is difficult not to read Psyche’s sacrifice as symbolic of Christ’s: Both the ambiguity of being accursed and the perfect victim, of being sacrificed and bringing redemption to the entire kingdom, point towards Christ.39

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35. Schakel, *Reason and Imagination*, 25
37. So Schakel, *Reason and Imagination*, 15, who concludes: “We are not to assume, therefore, that Psyche’s loving attitude, self-giving concern for others, responsiveness to spiritual urgings, and understanding of divine matters reflect anything unique and unattainable.”
38. See the above footnote. Psyche is not unique in modelling faith, but her character does far more than model faith. I agree with Margaret Patterson Hannay, *C.S. Lewis: A Map of His Worlds* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), who notes: “Lewis downplays the parallels to Christ, but of course they are too obvious to overlook”, 124.
39. Is Psyche portrayed as a *victima*, a passive victim of the gods’ sacrifice, or a *sacrificium*, an active part-taker? I believe the answer to this question is twofold. On the one hand, the gods’ call for sacrifice does not leave any real room for Psyche to deny or comply with the demand. In this sense, she is a victim of a fate beyond her. At the same time, Lewis portrays Psyche as actively considering her own story as leading up to this fate: “All my life the god of the Mountain has been wooing me. … I am going to my lover” (p. 87). Thus Psyche is also characterized as a subject who is going to her lover. In this sense, she retains her agency in the face of fate and is an active part-taker in her own sacrifice. Lewis does not seem to relate Psyche’s active part-taking to the salvific effects of the sacrifice, but her willingness to go to the god of the Mountain allows us to read her wedding to the god as an act of free will and love rather than forceful rape.
Psyche’s sacrifice as presented by Lewis, might be said to model the Anselmian theory of vicarious satisfaction, in that her (near) death as the perfect victim provides satisfaction to the divine honour.40 In Psyche’s case, the repayment of this honour may also be due to her being hailed as a goddess by the people (p. 37). In Apuleius’s myth, this provokes Venus’s jealousy (4:30), and in Till We Have Faces, Psyche’s veneration is followed by drought, plague, and the appearance of wild animals (p. 47). When the gift of Psyche’s life to the gods ultimately results in life, Psyche becomes a clear example of the power of sacrifice: When (wo)man is given entirely to the divine, life is the result.41

On the surface, and to Orual’s limited point of view, Psyche’s sacrifice signifies bereavement and death. But the appearance of Psyche on the mountain, alive and well, signals that the “devouring” by the gods is rather the gods’ full claim upon Psyche’s life: They have taken her, body and soul, but it is an act of love that makes her happy. Thus, sacrifice in Till We Have Faces signifies death, for it is the death of an old life. However, sacrifice also signifies life: A new life for Psyche, and life for the entire people for whom she has given up her old life.

**Sacrifice as the Gods’ Demand**

What does Psyche’s sacrifice reveal about the gods? The question invites some of the same insights we touched upon when we considered revelation earlier. First of all, the demand for a sacrifice is ambiguous because it contains the possibility of different interpretations: For Orual, who considers Psyche’s sacrifice through the eyes of possessive love, the conclusion is that the gods gave her “nothing in the world to love but Psyche and then took her” (p. 283) from her. We have already seen that Orual’s approach to the gods and the world is a pessimistic one. Her accusation coheres with her worldview: The gods are cruel; they give very little, and then take it away. But Orual’s perspective is a flawed one. This is something we realize in the latter part of her book. A reminder that Orual’s other sister, Redieval, became lonely when Orual’s attention turned to Psyche reveals to the reader that there might in fact have been someone else in the world that Orual could have loved had she given it a chance. Even if we cannot fully trust Orual’s point of view, however, her interpretation of the gods’ demand for sacrifice as cruel, points to a theological question which is not resolved in the book: Is sacred bloodshed integral to divine love?42 Can what seems unjust to human beings be good in the eyes of the divine? Or does the book manage to sidestep these questions because Psyche, unlike Jesus, is neither tortured nor killed, but is instead wed to the god?

Lewis’s narrative does not offer any other explanations concerning the gods’ demand for sacrifice. We read about the effects of the sacrifice, i.e. the rain, disappearance of the plague,

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40. “Restoring the beauty and order of the world lost by our dishonoring of God, Jesus, on Anselm’s vicarious satisfaction model, offers up to death his own sinless life in honor of God, thereby rendering the satisfaction that humans owe to God but in a divine way that their dishonoring of God demands and merely human lives are incapable of providing”; see Kathryn Tanner, “Incarnation, Cross, and Sacrifice: A Feminist-Inspired Reappraisal.” Anglican Theological Review 86.1 (2004): 36. Tanner otherwise argues that it is Christ’s incarnation that is the foundation of atonement, and that Jesus’s life should therefore be considered just as much as the cross when considering his saving work: “Humanity is at one with the divine in Jesus—on the cross as everywhere else in Jesus’ life—and that is what is saving about it.” (Tanner, “Incarnation”, 43). If we contrast Lewis with this view, it is clear that Lewis himself places a much bolder emphasis on the actual sacrifice of the victim; Psyche’s life up until the point of the Great Offering has no impact on the divine salvation of her people.

41. One might argue that life is the result of the union between human and divine in the Apuleian myth too, because Psyche becomes pregnant in the myth. But this life is, of course, not the same as life “for many.”

42. What Christ’s sacrifice signifies and accordingly tells us about God is also a major debate in Christian theology. See Asle Eikrem, God as Sacrificial Love: A Systematic Exploration of a Controversial Notion, Studies in Systematic Theology (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 64–82.
and observe that Psyche is still alive, happy, and well. This contradicts Orual’s words about the gods’ cruelty. Their love is not explained, merely shown. However, if we ask for the logic behind the demands for sacrifice, and why appeasement must happen in this way, the gods of *Till We Have Faces* are silent. Thus, we, like Orual, are to some extent left without answers about why the gods do what they do.

**Concluding Observations**

In *Till We Have Faces*, C. S. Lewis sheds light on some important theological problems, inviting us as readers into engagement with theological concerns. In this article, we have particularly looked at the themes of revelation and sacrifice.

By changing the Apuleian myth so that Orual is unable to see the palace that Psyche is living in except for in a brief glimpse, we as readers are faced with the question of what Orual’s vision means. To her, it becomes a riddle. To us as readers, the riddle shows that revelation is ambiguous: It can be both interpreted and experienced in different ways. Orual’s glimpse of the palace shows us that in the immediacy of the revelation, in the “enjoyment” of the divine, we may see or understand something unexpected. However, as soon as we begin to contemplate our experience, or interpret it, our life stories and expectations of the divine become the focal lenses through which we see. Thus, one person may come to interpret one revelation very differently from another.

In terms of the question of sacrifice, Lewis articulates the theological dogma that Christ’s sacrifice is life-giving: As a kind of Christ-figure, Psyche’s sacrifice brings life to the people through rain and the disappearance of the plague. However, the gods’ demand for sacrifice remains a mystery; it tells us very little about the nature of the gods. Lewis’s true achievement in his treatment of sacrifice lies elsewhere. It lies in showing that the gods’ devouring is not murder and destruction; rather, devouring is a claiming of the heart and roots of man into a union with the divine. It is, as Psyche’s marriage to the god reveals, first and foremost an act of love.