The Most Mormon Magic System: How Brandon Sanderson Turned Agency into Fantasy

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As a prominently religious author, Brandon Sanderson has been frequently asked about how his beliefs influence his work. In a podcast recorded in 2010 for the online magazine *Mormon Artist*, he stated how LDS thought makes its way into his epic fantasy novels:

> I don't go into my work actively making any aspect of it LDS, [. . . but] if you look at who I am, and what my mythology is [. . .]—using that in the definitional sense of it, not looking at it as mythology is untrue—what my mythology is, what my belief in how things work is, influences what I do when I write [. . .]. And so I end up making these fantasy worlds that do have some core underlying LDS-style mythology. (Sanderson et al.)

This idea that religious beliefs can be re-embodied into a fantasy novel evokes the concept of mythopoeic literature, popularized by C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. In mythopoeic literature, the author creates a new set of myths, which "influence the spiritual, moral, and/or creative lives of the characters" and "also inspire the reader to examine the importance of mythology in his or her own spiritual, moral, and creative development" ("About the Society"). For example, Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* reinvented Christian mythology in a secondary world. He described his writing process this way: "Let us suppose that there were a land like Narnia and that the Son of God, as He became a Man in our world, became a Lion there, and then imagine what would happen" (Schakel 37).

In writing classes and interviews, Sanderson consciously rejects comparisons between his writings and Lewis's in favor of Tolkien. Sanderson says, "I'm not setting out to be like C.S. Lewis and write parables of belief. I'm trying more what Tolkien did in that I tell story and setting first, and let theme and meaning take care of itself" ("Barnes and Noble Book Club Q&A"). From Sanderson's perspective, Tolkien represents the author who lets meaning naturally develop from their work whereas Lewis picks a specific meaning he wants to convey and then constructs the story to bring that point across.

However, this comparison overly simplifies the mythopoeic nature of Lewis's work and minimizes the strong roots that Sanderson's own work has in LDS theology. While some of Lewis's fictional works are strict allegories with a clear message (for example. *Pilgrim's Regress* and *The Great Divorce*), the *Chronicles of Narnia* are not. Though three of the volumes contain biblical retellings (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* tells the story of the crucifixion and resurrection; *The Magician's Nephew*, the creation and fall; and *The Last Battle*, the second coming and final judgment), the remaining four volumes do not have a strict correspondence. Instead, these novels

set out to explore concepts important to Christian life by telling a story in which these principles are important.

For example, one possible interpretation of *The Silver Chair* is as an examination of "the complicated relationship between personal freedom and the need for obedience" (Schakel 71). In the beginning of the book, Aslan gives Jill four signs to follow, "which become what the words of the law were for Israel: a source of guidance and direction" (Schakel 72). From there, the plot is driven by the following (and misinterpreting) of the signs, analogous to mortals trying to understand God's will and mostly getting it completely backwards. It is however not a direct retelling of any story in the Old or New Testaments, nor does it have a clear didactic message on how humans might better interpret God's will. The most explicitly Christian scene in *The Silver Chair* occurs near the end of the novel when the Green Lady attempts to convince Puddleglum, Jill, and Eustace that the overworld was something they imagined, and Puddleglum presents a sort of "Pascal's wager" of reasoning for his belief regardless of reality. He says, "Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things— ... in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. . . . I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia" (Lewis, *The Silver Chair* 190). Though there are strong Christian themes, *The Silver Chair* and the remaining *Narnia* books don't simply retell an existing narrative with new window dressing, but rather explore ideas important to Lewis's personal mythology of faith in a more wholistic way.

In the following examination of the mythology and magic system of Brandon Sanderson's *Stormlight Archive*, I argue that its nature appears similar to Lewis's work in books like *The Silver Chair*, exploring concerns and perspectives unique to the Mormon faith of its author.

Roshar and Restorationism

The Stormlight Archive is an epic fantasy series set on the planet Roshar, home to giant crustaceans and violent hurricanes. Long ago, the evil Voidbringers were sealed away by ten heroic demigods known as the Heralds and their armies of magic-wielding Knights Radiant. Thousands of years later, much about the ancient conflict has been mythologized or forgotten, but there are signs that the ancient enemy will soon be returning. As Roshar enters a golden-age of magic-assisted technology, the ancient powers of the Knights Radiant are once again manifesting in unlikely people, including Kaladin Stormblessed, a young slave traumatized by his experiences as a soldier, and Shallan Davar, a bright young scholar with a dark past. Dalinar Kholin, a noble from the warlike Alethi nation, begins seeing visions that purport to be from the Almighty, claiming that the enemies of humanity will soon return. Three gods watch over the planet and the plot: Cultivation and Honor, who are aligned with the human characters, and Odium, who is aligned with the coming enemy. The series follows these and other characters in a story of not only global, but metaphysical, proportions, as they strive to uncover the truth about the past and master themselves in the present in order to fight for the future of the planet. Only four volumes out of a projected ten have been published at the time of this writing.

This Mormon mindset of recovering power through unearthing lost knowledge and receiving divine authority is reflected in most of Sanderson's works; the *Stormlight Archive* is no exception. One of the foundational principles of the Mormon restoration movement was the idea that the true sacraments, or ordinances, of the primitive Christian church had been lost over the centuries, along with the proper authority to perform them. Terryl Givens writes:

> [Joseph] Smith believed that in his day neither the proper ordinances nor the authority to perform them was to be found on earth. [...] Restoring this loss of priesthood authority, and consequently of the proper forms of "true order" and "true worship," was the great project Saints understood as the purpose of Smith's ministry. (Givens 28)

These ordinances were seen as critical to the process of human salvation and reconciliation with God. Joseph Smith taught that the problems with his contemporary Christianity could not be corrected by a reformation; the church required a new establishment of authority and power directly from a divine source.

The state of the dominant church in *Stormlight*, the Vorin church, reflects the same sort of decay and corruption that Smith saw in the religious atmosphere of his day. Shallan's studies with her mentor Jasnah reveal that the Vorin church has an authority problem: "the church of this era was suspicious of the Knights Radiant... Yet it relied upon the authority granted Vorinism by the Heralds" (Sanderson, *Words of Radiance* 65). In other words, the current Vorin religion believed that the Knights Radiant had once betrayed mankind, and so it sought to distance itself from them while maintaining the connection to the Heralds. In order to downplay the importance of the Radiants, church scholars "modified copies of ancient texts... aligning history to match Hierocratic dogma" (*Words of Radiance* 65). Parallels can be seen to the Protestant reformation as viewed through a Mormon lens: by distancing themselves from the Catholic church, reformers had lost claim to the priesthood foundation of the Catholic church, leaving the church without a divine mandate. This loss of authority and its accompanying rituals situates the plot of the Stormlight Archive in a similar authority crisis to the one felt by Joseph Smith and his followers.

Mormonism's restorationist impulse is embodied throughout the series in the character of Dalinar Kholin. In the final chapter of the first book, *The Way of Kings*, Dalinar receives a vision in which a god-like being called Honor instructs him to restore the Knights Radiant, specifically by restoring their ordinances and rituals: "Speak again the ancient oaths and return to men the Shards they once bore... The Knights Radiant must stand again" (Sanderson, *The Way of Kings* 997). Importantly, the reestablishment of the Radiants does not come through the Vorin church but directly from the divine forces that made the original oaths with men, the *spren* who are fragments of divine power. Jasanah explains to Shallan that "spren are... power... shattered power. Power given thought by the perceptions of men. Honor, Cultivation, and... and another. Fragments broken off" (*Words of Radiance* 308-09). Direct bonds with spren allow the Knights Radiant to access ancient powers without reference to the current incarnation of the Vorin church. This parallels the Mormon belief that Joseph Smith established a church through a new

direct revelation from God, rather than by reforming existing Christian sects. This restoration of the Radiants is as central to the plot of the Stormlight Archive as the restoration narrative is to Mormon doctrine.

Honor and Covenants

As the Knights Radiant are restored throughout the series, we see that the oaths made by the Knights Radiant reflect a similar structure to the "covenant path" in the LDS church. In this practice, a person progresses toward salvation by a series of covenants with God, at each point making more serious promises and receiving knowledge and blessings in return. The first of these covenants is baptism at age eight, regarded as the "age of accountability" (Doctrine and Covenants 68.27), followed by the temple initiatory and endowment ceremonies in early adulthood, and finally the sealing ordinance when married. Each covenant brings greater promises of spiritual guidance for the individual and greater condemnation if the associated obligations are broken.

This linked progression of greater promises and greater power is mirrored by the five oaths of each order of the Knights Radiant. Each oath consists of a promise of right action or intention and is followed by an increase in the character's magical abilities. The first oath of each order is the same, a baptism-like covenant entering into the path of a Radiant: "Life before death, strength before weakness, journey before destination" (Sanderson, *The Way of Kings* 831). These words express a willingness to focus on the process of living rightly rather than a specific result. Each radiant oath beyond the first takes the form of a principle or belief that will guide their actions: "I will protect those who cannot protect themselves" (926); "I will remember those who have been forgotten" (*Words of Radiance* 704); "I swear to seek justice, to let it guide me" (*Oathbringer* 882). The LDS temple endowment similarly focuses on covenanting to live by principles—in particular obedience, sacrifice, the law of the gospel, chastity, and consecration (General Handbook, sec 27.2). The order of the Lightweavers is the exception, with a different oath structure that will be addressed below.

Making the magic system dependent on character's devotion to principles results in a plot that turns largely on when those morals are challenged, just as you would expect from a mythopoeic novel. Once a Radiant has sworn an oath, they are accompanied by a spren, who is the embodiment of their principles and the source of their power. Kaladin, a member of the order of the Windrunners (devoted to the concept of protection), is bonded to an honorspren named Syl. In *Words of Radiance*, Kaladin attempts to justify his continued participation in an assassination plot against the king by twisting his oath of protection, claiming that removing the king would be protecting the kingdom: "some people—like a festering finger or a leg shattered beyond repair—just needed to be removed" (751). Syl recognizes that his real motivations lie in class resentment and a desire for revenge against the king for sending a cruel nobleman to oversee his village. As a result of Kaladin's lack of integrity, she begins to lose her sapience. Eventually her bond with him is broken, and Kaladin loses the ability to draw on Stormlight to fuel his magic. When he finally admits his error—"'If I protect... only the people I like, it means that I don't care about doing

what is right.' If he did that, he only cared about what was convenient for himself. That wasn't protecting. That was selfishness" (1014)—and acts to protect King Elhokar from the assassins, only then is Syl able to return and Kaladin able to swear the next oath.

This plotline also reflects Mormon beliefs about priesthood power. The Doctrine and Covenants, a book of early church revelations and part of the Mormon scriptural canon, proclaims that "the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness. . . . When we undertake to cover our sins... behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man" (Doctrine and Covenants 121.36-37). According to this scripture, no outside authority needs to condemn a person who abuses their spiritual power: as soon as that person acts unrighteously, their authority and power disappear. This injunction becomes quite literal in the Stormlight Archive, as Syl withdraws from Kaladin when he fails to act according to his oaths.

Cultivation and Agency

This magic-morality link leads to a widely recognized problem in Christianity, one strongly portrayed in *Oathbringer*, the third novel: the problem of sin. Though human beings might have a sincere desire when making covenants, no person is able to consistently do all the things they know are right. Spren figure much more prominently in the plot of *Oathbringer*, and their common refrain when they meet human characters is that they are oath-breakers. "There is not a man alive who has not broken an oath, Dalinar Kholin," remarks the Stormfather, the largest of the spren of Honor (Sanderson, *Oathbringer* 408). Another spren says, "You are not to be blamed. Betraying oaths is simply your nature, as a human" (944). And yet people continue to optimistically make oaths. When the Stormfather accuses Dalinar's betrothed, Navani, "You have broken oaths before," she replies, "All people have...We're frail and foolish. This one I will not break. I vow it" (62). All the humans break oaths, and yet the characters continue to swear these oaths with the absolute confidence that they will obey them.

Sanderson's solution to this problem showcases a Mormon version of the personal efficacy of Christ's atonement, portrayed through Dalinar's plotline in *Oathbringer*. In this book, readers discover that the upright general, earnest to a fault, who they have grown to love for the first two novels, was once a bloodthirsty warlord. Flashbacks show his crimes escalating until Dalinar burns an entire city to the ground with all its residents, accidentally murdering his peace-loving wife, Evi, in the process. Broken by the realization of his own sins, Dalinar descends into drink before finally seeking out the Nightwatcher, a spren rumored to grant wishes. When he finds her, he wishes for "forgiveness," which stumps the barely sentient spren, and so Cultivation, the second god of Roshar, arrives. She offers him not absolution, but a temporary erasure of his guilt and memories of his wife: "I will not give you the aptitude, or the strength, nor will I take from you your compulsions. But I will give you... a pruning. A careful excision to let you grow" (*Oathbringer* 1078). His knowledge of his guilt will later return, but Cultivation's gift lifts Dalinar's burden and

puts him in a position where he can make choices to grow out of the person who made those sins and into someone who can more clearly comply with Honor's oaths.

In this way, Cultivation is a force for agency and self-determination, an important principle in the Mormon understanding of the purpose of mortality, which is making choices to "prune" undesirable traits and encourage positive ones in order to become as God would have us be. As Terryl Givens puts it, "in LDS thought, only conformity to law can sanctify us, because only conformity to law creates the causal conditions under which our character is transformed in accordance with our choices" (Givens 239). The importance of humanity's agency is also a major theme in The Book of Mormon, particularly in a sermon from the prophet Lehi where he teaches, "because that they [humanity] are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day" (The Book of Mormon 2 Nephi 2.26). Lehi is saying that because Christ's atonement has taken away the immediate condemnation for sin, humanity is now free to make choices for good or evil, facing judgment only at the end of their story rather than throughout it. This is very similar to the way that Sanderson asks his readers to judge Dalinar by his final character, rather than the mistakes he has made along the way.

This emphasis on personal responsibility and agency continues to be a major theme in the fourth book in the series, *Rhythm of War*. Several of the characters in this book are limited by their circumstances: Kaladin suffers with crushing depression and PTSD, Venli struggles with her prejudice against the humans who enslaved her people, and Shallan uses her multiple personalities to hide the truth from herself about her past sins. In spite of these limitations, each must accept responsibility for their actions to move the plot forward. Shallan, in particular, is an interesting case. The oaths of her order of Knights, the Lightweavers, are made not by committing to follow a principle but by admitting an uncomfortable truth about themselves. Over the course of the previous three books, Shallan's inability to accept her traumatic past has fragmented her personality into three personas, Shallan, Veil, and Radiant. To progress and reintegrate herself, Shallan must admit that she has broken her previous oaths, killing her first spren. When she is finally able to recover this suppressed memory and admit to her guilt ("I killed my spren. My wonderful, beautiful, kindly spren. I broke my oaths, and I killed her" [*Rhythm of War* 1017]), Veil becomes a part of Shallan once again, reminding her "that escape wasn't strength," but her mistakes and difficult circumstances would help her to grow stronger (*Rhythm of War* 1017). In this way, her journey mirrors Dalinar's: she must accept responsibility for her sins and change because of them.

Odium and Satan

This growth through responsibility is opposed by an enemy, both on Roshar and in LDS thought, who seeks to deny human agency by removing accountability. Odium, the third god on Roshar, is the god of divine hatred and strong emotions. In the dramatic ending of Oathbringer, Odium tries to turn Dalinar against humanity, inviting him to give into his war-filled past and

become his champion of destruction and retribution. When tempted, Dalinar draws strength by reclaiming all of the guilt Cultivation took from him, as well as the growth that sprang from it. "You cannot have my pain," he cries to Odium (1132). Odium attempts to absolve Dalinar of his sins by blaming his circumstances—"I was there, influencing you"—but Dalinar insists on claiming accountability for his actions: "I did kill the people of Rathalas... You might have been there, but I made the choice. I decided!" (1134). Odium serves as a tempter to Dalinar not by tempting him to evil, but by tempting him to absolve himself of responsibility for that evil. This type of temptation echoes the Mormon doctrine that Satan's fall from grace was that he "sought to destroy the agency of man" (*Pearl of Great Price* Moses 4.3). The LDS version of Satan invites people not just to do evil, but to refuse responsibility for their actions, just as Odium does throughout the *Stormlight Archive*.

Superficially, Odium's solution for Dalinar seems similar to Cultivation's—both desire to remove the burden of guilt for his sins—but with one critical difference, which reflects a Mormon perspective on Christ's grace. Cultivation's plan requires that Dalinar grow into someone who can keep his oaths, who can behave ethically despite past mistakes, whereas Odium wants to excuse Dalinar's actions without any requirement of change. The LDS view of Christ's saving power emphasizes the importance of personal change as a result of divine forgiveness. Givens states that "salvation itself in Mormon doctrine is not a gift that God can bestow or a reward that humans can earn or merit. . . . Salvation is a natural consequence of compliance with law . . . which eventual compliance is made possible by the gift of Christ's atonement" (238). From a Mormon perspective, Christ's grace exists not to simply wash away all mistakes, but to lighten humanity's burden of guilt while individuals continue to progress towards perfect righteousness. In other words, it is an atonement that, like Cultivation's gift to Dalinar, exists to enable personal agency rather than to release humanity from accountability.

Clearly, Sanderson's *Stormlight Archive* does not just incidentally parallel many aspects of the Mormon theory of salvation; rather, the series is largely about these concerns. The corruption of the Vorin church and the need for restoration rather than reformation portray a uniquely Mormon conception of the world, expressed through the person of Dalinar Kholin. The gods of the planet, Honor and Cultivation, reflect the pillars of the LDS conception of salvation, covenants and agency, and the plot advances as the characters deal with these concerns. Odium, the divine antagonist of the series, acts similarly to the Mormon version of Satan, taking away responsibility and agency, while characters are redeemed when they instead take responsibility for their faults and move past them.

The *Stormlight Archive* is intrinsically about Mormonism in the same way that *The Silver Chair* is about Christianity: not by parable but by creating a new mythology with the same underlying worldview. Sanderson has taken elements that are familiar to Mormons and turned them into a magic system that conveys this perspective perhaps more effectively than any missionary text. In this way, his stories fulfill CS Lewis's perspective about the function of myths: "The value of the

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'" (Lewis, *On Stories* 196–97).

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