'Not Every God': Theosis and *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*

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> "Ye shall not surely die; For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."
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> —King James Version, Genesis 3:4-5

Within Mormonism, the serpent's promise that "ye shall be as gods" is taken as the truth within the broader lie of the serpent's words. Once partaken of the fruit, humankind will die; but, once partaken of the fruit, humankind will be set on a path of exaltation to become as God—a grand narrative arc of theosis. While theosis is a tenet of Mormon belief, only the bare bones of that belief are sketched out in Mormon teachings, and nowhere in Mormon scripture is there a narrative of the process or experience of theosis. One such narrative is found well outside the faith in N. K. Jemisin's debut novel *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*. While Jemisin is not a Mormon, nor does her novel feature Mormon characters, nor do I intend for my claims here to be suggestive of reflecting her views of Mormonism, whatever they may be, I argue that it illuminates a shared imagination of what it might mean for Mormonism to make gods, while simultaneously complicating ideas about what theosis requires by embodying the process in the character of Yeine. Theosis in both Mormonism and Jemisin's work explores ideas of the self, time, and kin, and these three areas will guide my analysis.

My use of Mormonism as an interpretive framework draws on Peter Coviello's *Make Yourselves Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism*. Coviello's project is in part "a story about the dynamism and violence, but also the wild beauty and extravagant imaginative power, of nineteenth-century Mormonism" (4). Coviello uses Mormonism to access something else, to shed light on other conversations, and does so in enlightening ways. What I hope to do is slightly different. I hope to use some of the "wild beauty and extravagant imaginative power" that Coviello sees in Mormonism to illuminate elements of Jemisin's work, and to use Jemisin's text to flesh out the realities and possibilities of that imaginative power. In other words, I use the theological mechanics of Mormonism's anthropology, cosmology, and soteriology[1] to converse with Jemisin's worldbuilding, especially through the protagonist Yeine, and to better understand the imaginative conceptualization of theosis in both Jemisin's literary work and Mormonism's collective imagination.

The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms demonstrates the complexity of time and chronology as they are tied to theosis, exploring through narrative time what it might mean for an individual to become a god. Jemisin's debut novel tells the story of Yeine Darr, summoned to the city of Sky by her grandfather Dekarta, who rules the world as the head of the Arameri family. Yeine is

immediately embroiled in intrigue surrounding the death of her mother and the plots of some of the gods and other Arameri. Yeine is surprisingly named as heir to the throne and must survive the machinations of relatives and the gods, while learning some shocking revelations about herself. Jemisin's work seems to largely ground Yeine in time, unlike the traditional Christian God, who exists outside of time, but akin to the God of Mormonism, who resides in time similar to humanity. The text opens with Yeine, the novel's narrator and protagonist, engaging in some self-reflection: "I am not as I once was. They have done this to me, broken me open and torn out my heart. I do not know who I am anymore. I must try to remember" (1). This opening demonstrates that while the reader moves through the novel, Yeine, our narrator, is reflecting back on what has happened. Until well into the novel, it is unclear what Yeine is describing here. Eventually Yeine discovers that she carries with her the soul of Enefa, one of the three original gods, alongside Itempas and Nahadoth, and that this is the result of a plot by some of the captive gods to overthrow the power of Itempas and regain their freedom. This opening reflects the transformation that Yeine undergoes toward the end of the novel, when she is transformed from a mortal into a god, undergoing theosis—a transformation made possible only because of her mortality.

For Yeine, theosis evokes doing and action, contrasted with a common Mormon aphorism about theosis, which focuses on becoming. Yeine's opening line echoes a Mormon couplet about theosis, from Lorenzo Snow, one of the early prophets of Mormonism: "As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be." Where Snow draws a connection between humanity[2] and God, Yeine is drawing a distinction between her mortal self and her present divinity. Yet, when Yeine actually undergoes the process of becoming a god, she seems to see much more of her past in the present than this initial articulation suggests. Yeine does "not know" who she is and she "must try to remember;" theosis then leads to a sense of confusion and loss of a sense of self, which must be recovered through memory. The couplet from Snow, on the other hand, focuses on becoming, presenting a linear, straightforward line of development from humanity to God, similar to statements that could be made about moving from childhood to adulthood. This shared sense of godhood being reached severely complicates traditional Christian ideas of God's atemporality but complements nicely Mormon teachings about God's transtemporality--essentially that God exists in time, even if that relationship to time is somewhat different than humanity's (Faulconer 60-1). Unbeknownst to the reader of Jemisin's text, Yeine is already a god by the time the novel begins, narrating events that led to her apotheosis. The reader is aware of the distance between Yeine's position and the novel's events but does not fully know what has transpired until they finish reading. This resonates with Mormon teachings about God, who exists within time rather than outside of it, and became God at some earlier point in the history of the universe, but was not always God. Sam Brown in *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* notes that Joseph Smith "was resisting one type of temporal homogeneity—the linear flattening of modern time—with a radically distinct homogeneity—the entire accessibility of all time... He wanted to be able to fully inhabit the past and allow the past to inhabit the present" (65). This

collapse of time is a part of the project of Mormon theosis, seeking to bring all time together, and is echoed in the collapse of time in the novel, where past, present, and future are present all at once.

Yeine's godhood depends on her unique, physical, once-mortal being. This connection echoes Mormon teachings, while complicating Mormonism's assertions about the ontological sameness of God and humanity. In a dramatic ceremony towards the end of the novel, Yeine is killed. This is the beginning of her becoming a god. She talks with Enefa, returns to her body, and responds to a shocked Dekarta (her grandfather, who has just played a part in orchestrating the ceremony that led to her death): "'Not every god,' I said because I was still me after all, I leaned down to smile in his face. 'Just me'" (377). Here, Yeine draws attention, twice, to the fact that she is still herself. Both in her inner dialogue, noting that "I was still me after all" and then in the final jab to Dekarta "'Just me.'" This complicates Yeine's opening assertion that she is "not as I once was" (1). Yeine struggles over the ending of the novel to reconcile herself to her new godhood and to figure out whether she is someone new or the same person that she has been throughout the text. She wrestles with the violence and trauma that bring about her divinity, calling into question who she is and what role her body plays in this new divine self. Yeine asserts that she "was still me after all," while previously saying that "I am not as I once was." Yeine then retains some coherent sense of self as she changes. Yeine is no longer a mortal, but is now god, yet still Yeine.

The question of the self is central to the possibility of theosis within Mormonism, wherein the individual can become god, importantly retaining or reclaiming their physical body to do so. Joseph Smith, Mormonism's founding prophet, taught that:

> God Himself who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a Man like unto one of yourselves—that is the great secret! If the veil were rent today and the great God that holds this world in its sphere and the planets in their orbit and who upholds all things by His power—if you were to see Him today, you would see Him in all the person, image, fashion, and very form of a man, like yourselves. (235)

The Mormon God is embodied and experiences pleasure and pain, just as people do. Coviello dramatizes the relationship this way: "They are themselves *embryonic gods*, defined in the grain of their flesh by the possibility of an expansion, via the channels of an engaged carnality, into eternality and godliness itself" (5). Coviello links this to polygyny (which we'll return to later), but a key point here is that within Mormon thought, the potential for godhood and theosis is tied to the flesh (only those who receive a body on Earth are able to be exalted, should they live accordingly).

Embodiment is central to Yeine's journey to godhood as well. As Yeine begins to exercise some of her newfound power, she is hit with a revelation: "Suddenly I understood. It was my flesh, and my power, too. I was what mortal life had made me, what Enefa had made me, but all that was in the past. From henceforth I could be whomever I wanted." (382). Importantly, Yeine, as a god, is embodied: she realizes, "It was my flesh" (382), and the fleshiness of the god Yeine is central to

the reality and power that she possesses. Briefly in the novel Yeine is dead and disembodied, but she must return to the flesh, to her body, to claim the divinity that awaits her. Mormon scripture states that "the spirit and the body are the soul of man" (D&C 88:15). Within Mormonism there is a particular idea that spirit and body are fused together to make the soul. This fusion is central to theosis, where the material, physical body is indeed seen as part of the very purpose of mortality (*Translation* 111). Yeine's statement that her new divine self "was what mortal life had made [her]," draws attention to the ways that her self is shaped by her experiences. Life has shaped Yeine into a god; she is not the actor becoming a god. Choice is removed from Yeine and put on others—mortal life and Enefa. Jemisin's narrative of theosis suggests that the self is constantly in flux, that Yeine may still be Yeine, but that she is also shaped by her mortal life, transformed. The shaping then allows Yeine to "be whomever I wanted." It is only once she is made a god that she feels truly free to "be." This sharply contrasts with the ontological sameness of God and humanity within Mormonism and the becoming of Snow's couplet. Brown, in describing God and humankind, argues that "True enough, they were all born into the species *Ahman*, but their developmental stages differed radically" (*Translation* 107). Here, Brown charts out an ontological category of being—which he calls *Ahman*, drawing on some of Joseph Smith's teachings—that contains both humanity and God. This infuses humanity with the possibility of godhood from the beginning.

The embodiment of Jemisin's gods is inextricably tied to pleasure, particularly carnal pleasures, much as Coviello draws our attention to in the case of Mormonism. As Yeine is dealing out justice to Itempas for the suffering he has caused, she kisses him "and filled that kiss with all the promise I could muster. But some of the surprise that passed between us was mine, for his mouth was soft despite its hard lines. Underneath that I could taste hot spices and warm ocean breezes; he made my mouth water and my whole body ache" (388). This is a very physical, pleasurable, embodied description of the experience. As Yeine becomes a god her pleasure and senses seem to be heightened (this is also illustrated in her earlier sexual encounters with Nahadoth), emphasizing the fleshiness and embodied nature of Jemisin's gods. The physical pleasure here is a part of being divine, of being embodied, very much in line with Coviello's reading of Mormon theosis. As Coviello says of Joseph Smith, "His is a point, that is, about the divinity of the flesh" (59). The fleshiness of God for Mormonism is the point—it illustrates the divinity of carnal, fleshy pleasures. Coviello continues arguing that "The flesh, the material body, vouchsafes to us the divinity of humankind. It is the vehicle not of corruption but exaltation" (68). As expressed here, that pleasure of the flesh is central to theosis, not a hindrance. Coviello's account likely strikes some Mormon readers as counter-intuitive, but Jemisin's narrative of theosis leans into the connection between embodiment and pleasure. Yeine is a god with passion, transformed by physical experience, fleshy and embodied.

Theosis, in both Mormonism and Jemisin, requires connection and communion—ritualized in Mormonism initially in polygamy and manifested in Yeine's polyamorous relationship with Nahadoth and Itempas, her romantic and sexual connection to both of them is intertwined with their own romantic and sexual relationship. Jemisin's work de-ritualizes and firmly queers[3] the

communion at the root of theosis, offering an alternative to Mormonism's patriarchal polygamy. Coviello argues that "Mormonism is, at its core, *a radical theory of embodied life*... I will argue, plural marriage is at the defining center of Smith's vision of exaltation" (55). Sam Brown argues for something similar, though articulated slightly differently, saying, "A persistently embodied God, the imitation Christi, and human preexistence pointed toward a state the Latter-day Saints called 'exaltation.' . . . The Saints would rise, through the relationships they created and sealed, to a status beyond their wildest imaginings, a state scholars often call apotheosis or deification" (265). In both of these arguments, exaltation or theosis is tied to relationships and sociality, though a sociality structured largely by patriarchal relationships. Both Brown and Coviello point out the inherent plurality and sociality that is tied to becoming a god within Mormonism, which finds queer expression in the sociality between Yeine, Nahadoth, and Itempas. The three are all lovers, intertwined with one another, in a complicated polyamorous relationship--Yeine loves Nahadoth and Itempas, Itempas and Nahadoth are lovers, both of whom share some romantic and/or sexual feelings for Yeine.

Yeine's communion is found in the polyamorous connection with Nahadoth and Itempas, queering the communion necessary for Mormon theosis. Over and over again, once Yeine achieves godhood, we are reminded of the connections between her, Nahadoth, and Itempas. This spills over from the kiss that Yeine and Itempas share and manifests in a variety of ways. Yeine, in talking about what to do with Itempas, says that "Yet killing him was also impossible. Out of Three had the universe been made. Without all Three, it would all end" (386). Yeine, Itempas, and Nahadoth are all three necessary for the universe to exist. They are bound together in the creation of the Universe and in its continued existence. Itempas, Nahadoth, and Enefa were all lovers and that same pattern is teased with Yeine's replacement of Enefa as the third member, though that collective communion and sociality is found for Yeine only after she becomes a god (though she has had romantic and sexual encounters with Nahadoth throughout the novel).

Yeine's divinity is also marked by her lingering connection to Enefa, which made her apotheosis possible in the first place. In a somewhat ambiguous moment, Yeine says that "it surprises me to admit it, but I shall miss you, Enefa. My soul is not used to solitude. Then again, I will never be *truly* alone, thanks to you" (394). Enefa's soul has left and Yeine is no longer living with two souls inside her, so this assertion that she will not "be *truly* alone" suggests that she will be bound to both Nahadoth and Itempas, the three of them all together in some way, even when they are not in the same physical location. Or perhaps, Yeine here refers to how she shared a soul with Enefa and will have those memories to reflect on for the future. To further the necessity of connection and relationships to godhood, Yeine notices that both Itempas and Nahadoth have "a great and terrible loneliness within" them, that the separation that all three of them have experienced has created "something unwholesome" at their core (380), rendering them lacking. Their collective love and bond is here figured as necessary to their health as gods, in much the same way that relationships are central to theosis within Mormonism. Jemisin's account of theosis expands the possibilities of sociality that Mormonism, especially contemporary Mormonism,

forecloses. Jemisin's theosis depends on a queer, de-ritualized sociality, opening up possibilities for more radical and liberatory readings of Mormon theosis.

Through Jemisin's narrative exploring the relationship of chronology, the unity of self, the pleasures of embodiment, and the necessity of sociality, she explodes the possibilities of Mormon theosis, giving flesh to the bare bones of the theology that Joseph Smith sketched out. Mormon theosis as an interpretive framework, in turn, allows us to think through what is happening with Yeine as she becomes a god, giving some language and a framework to analyze the narrative elements that may otherwise escape notice. With Yeine, Jemisin offers a possible model of what exaltation could look like. The embodied possibilities offered by Yeine transgress some of the norms surrounding theosis within Mormonism, productively opening up the image of God, while remaining surprisingly faithful to many of the key pieces of what it means for someone to become a (Mormon) God.

Notes

1. Soteriology is the study of religious doctrines of salvation.
2. While Snow's couplet refers to 'man', it is likely more reflective of current Mormon theology to use humanity, though the theological conversation is complicated depending on how you read a few key texts, such as Doctrine & Covenants 76, Doctrine and Covenants 132, and the endowment ceremony in LDS temples. My reading of these and other sources suggests that present-day Mormons would likely say 'humanity' over 'man', so that's the usage I'll follow.
3. I am drawing on Blaire Ostler's framework of "Queer Polygamy" for my use of queer throughout this section. Ostler notes that "Polygamy is inherently queer according to contemporary monogamous marital expectations. It is, by western standards, a deviation from the norm...The use of the word queer in Queer Polygamy is to signify a more thoughtful and thorough interpretation of polygamy which would be inclusive of such diversity and that many of its manifestations would be rightly considered queer" (82). Ostler is not asserting that historical Mormon polygyny is 'queer', but rather offering a way of recontextualizing Mormon theology of polygyny, and implicitly theosis, that is queer in its expansive reach and encompassing of relationships that deviate from a western norm of monogamy. I see Jemisin's novel as exploring some of these possibilities in the polyamorous relationship(s) between Yeine, Nahadoth, and Itempas, where all are lovers of each other in a variety of forms.

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