

INTRODUCTION

Why Nature Matters: A Special Issue of *Dialogue* on Mormonism and the Environment

Steven L. Peck

I became active in the Church while I was serving in the U.S. Army, stationed in Germany in the late 1970s. I was just starting to feel my way around the gospel and had come to the German Alps to attend a single adult conference. The conference was a powerful reorientation into the Church; but one day, I decided to dodge a few sessions because I wanted to hike a trail someone had recommended. It was supposed to be lovely—winding through high alpine meadows and meandering through dense forests still fairytale dark and old. And it was. The woods were quiet and serene, capturing a mood of stillness. A reverence. I passed few people, but I did not feel alone. A presence was with me, sheltering me, being in attendance with me, sharing something that seemed to fill the air with promise. I felt contented and happy.

Through the forest I climbed; and finally as I rounded a corner, a landscape opened before me that can only be described, lamely, as breathtaking. But it was. My sense of awe and wonder stole the air from my lungs. Meadows, patches of forest, craggy peaks covered in glaciers and moraine—all disclosed themselves suddenly and forcefully, overwhelming me. Shrinking me and at the same time enlarging me. The presence I had felt in the forest seemed to swell and fill and expand. I felt the presence of God in ways I had never felt before. And there was no doubt in my mind that it was He. Gratitude bubbled up. I felt the need to pray for-

mally, not recognizing that I was already praying in real and significant ways at that moment. I scrambled off the trail, knelt behind some small shrubs and forbs, and communed with that Deity who had just made Himself known to me in powerful, new ways. Mostly, however, I struggled to express thanks.

On the way down I ran into some people, who recommended I take a different trail back. It would lead me into another village from which I could catch a bus back to the city where I was staying. I was still feeling buoyant from my experience on the mountain. As I strode down the trail, I happened to see a wrapper of some sort on the ground. I picked it up. It did not belong there. As I went farther, I picked up a few more. It seemed strange to me that I was finding so many items. What a bunch of litter-bugs had been slouching up this trail! My handful had become an armful, and I was growing concerned. There was just too much trash. In the last hundred yards or so, I had picked up a lot! Then I rounded a corner, not unlike the corner I had rounded a few hours ago, except with the opposite effect. I was dumped into a local trash heap. Garbage was everywhere—maybe a foot deep and fifty yards square. Again I was overwhelmed and breathless, but in a different way. All the trash I had picked up fell from my arms. I fled into the village, my joy and gratitude shattered into irate, fetid rancor. How could they ruin my experience so completely? I wondered.

I think it was the contrast between these two experiences that indelibly wrote on my mind the connection between nature and God with a double underscore that our awareness of Him can be conditioned on how we treat and honor the earth we have been given. We need nature. Our physical bodies emerged from deep natural processes, derived through long and profound ecological interactions. Our spirits joined with physicality for a purpose. This physicality. This ecologically embedded physicality. I refuse to believe that it was just the particular shape that was important to these bodies, as if the spirit merely needed a three-dimensional matter contour. Our physical body goes all the way down and includes a rich evolutionary history that has stamped it with this earth's way of being in the universe. Likewise, I think this particular physicality is necessary to our eternal way of being. I also believe that the natural world matters in ways beyond just providing a source of the raw material we need to grind through our physi-

cal existence. The creatures and processes are not just a means to an end but are part of who God is and what He wants us to become.

John H. Walton, an Evangelical scholar who teaches Bible studies at Wheaton College, has written that the ancient Israelites did not understand the Genesis account of creation as a story about material creation but rather as a functional description of God's setting up a temple. In essence, the creation story was an account of God's taking possession of a temple. Walton argues that the prophet writing Genesis 1 would have understood the seventh-day activities, in which God "rests," not as a well-deserved break, but as the final act of the temple dedication ceremony when God proclaims His temple acceptable and takes possession of it as His own.¹ Something about that view rings true in my LDS soul. However, if the earth is a temple, what obligations of respect and care does that understanding impose on us?

As I write these reflections in the early twenty-first century, we are facing daunting ecological uncertainties. Scientists are documenting global changes in the earth's climate and projecting models that consistently show that things will get worse. As an ecologist, I feel that most frightening are the changes we are seeing on the ground in almost every ecosystem—from alpine regions to oceanic systems. It is hard not to feel bent by pessimism. Currently, at least in the United States, I sense little awareness or concern about this ecological crisis, in part, I suppose, because we are isolated from ecologies. Even though they undergird all of our support systems, from the great scales of regional weather patterns that affect our ability to grow crops, to the small scales of coral reef organisms, ecologies are changing. What this means for future generations no one can say. I wonder what someone reading this a hundred years from now will think of us.

But I am not without hope. Religions have always created a sense that our future matters. They have given us the impetus to look beyond our selfish and short-term obsessions and desires toward broader and more eternal horizons. Mormonism is rich in its doctrines, scriptures, and perspectives that reveal the importance of nature and our place in it. In this issue, multiple authors explore the Mormon/environmental landscape. I'm excited that this conversation is taking place.

George Handley's noteworthy and timely paper, "Faith and the Ethics of Climate Change," explores both the science and some of the implications of climate change. Handley is one of Mormonism's most gifted environmental thinkers. In his article for this issue, he explores how ideology has confused and confounded the conversation about climate change: "It behooves us then to identify the kinds of stories, beliefs, and theologies within religious culture that can attend to the contingencies and chaos that lie at the heart of our current environmental crisis," Handley argues. And he does just that in a convincing and well-thought out proposal for LDS engagement. Central to his paper is reading the Book of Moses from the Pearl of Great Price with an eye to how deeply our LDS scriptures ask us to dig down in considering our obligations to nature and all of creation. Rod Fergus reviews Handley's new book, *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River*, in this issue, while Adam S. Miller writes a personal meditation responding to the same book.

Craig Galli, in "Enoch's Vision and Gaia," compares the Enoch tradition with modern environmental discourse about looking at the earth as a whole. While not demanding that Latter-day Saints embrace the Gaia hypothesis, he sensitively appraises its claim—that the earth is a complex living organism—in the context of LDS theological understandings and commitments. What if the earth is an animated living thing, as LDS scriptures and prophetic discourse seems to suggest? What obligations of stewardship does that suggest?

Bryan V. Wallis, in "Flexibility in the Ecology of Ideas," examines the work of anthropologist Gregory Bateson and argues that LDS theology has always been grounded in an epistemology that is "flexible and constantly evolving." Wallis draws on Bateson's work to point out that, among the hallmarks of a thriving and living theology, are continual modifications and updates in how people engage with the world. In contrast, systems that privilege inflexibility and rigidity create brittleness and are easily broken.

Jason M. Brown in "Whither Mormon Environmental Theology?" steers a course between two modalities that have tended to shape LDS discourse: that the earth is either a supermarket—there just to fulfill human needs—or that it is a scenic backdrop for the real theatrical event. In this paper, he critically examines both the

“stewardship” tradition and the “vitalistic tradition,” each with its proponents among past and current LDS General Authorities and scholars. He argues that the vitalistic tradition has much to offer in framing LDS theological commitments and providing a morality of the environment.

Bart H. Welling explores the critical ethical demands imposed by Mormon theology and history about “the question of the animal,” particularly the conflict between seeing nature as a “peaceable kingdom” and a “howling wilderness.” Welling’s contextualization of the Mormon example in the larger cultural context defines a particularly fruitful field for exploration and new understandings.

Poet and writer Patricia Gunter Karamesines’s “Why Joseph Went to the Woods” issues a call for deeper engagement in nature. She asks: Where is the Mormon nature writing?—all the while providing a stunning example of it in this piece. She reminds us how often nature has played a role in prophetic discourse and in LDS experience. Often the Spirit is revealed and disclosed in the midst of natural settings and engagement, and these revelatory insights are perhaps most at home in poetry and other creative forms.

So take this issue outside. Sit down under a tree. And read. There are lots of important things to consider and act on. The future of your grandchildren may depend on it.

Note

1. John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 72–78.