

“TO RESTORE THE PHYSICAL WORLD”: THE BODY OF CHRIST, THE REDEMPTION OF THE NATURAL WORLD, AND MORMONISM’S ENVIRONMENTAL DILEMMA

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In his article “Whither Mormon Environmental Theology?,” Jason M. Brown suggests that Mormon environmental scholarship and activism focuses on what he calls the “retrieval” of “earth-affirming doctrines” with the hope that the retrieval of these teachings “will foster more environmentally minded orthopraxis among the Mormon faithful.”¹ Brown then goes on to suggest that those retrieved teachings about the earth can be divided into two traditions, the “stewardship tradition” and the “vitalistic tradition.” The stewardship tradition as Brown defines it assumes the notion of earthly stewardship as set forth in the book of Genesis: that humans are responsible for maintaining and treating respectfully the various flora and fauna that God provided for them. According to Brown, “stewardship thus maintains an anthropocentric view of creation, with the earth and its creatures ordained for prudent and respectful human use.”² On the other hand, the vitalistic tradition, Brown claims, “consists of those Mormon teachings that hold in

1. Jason M. Brown, “Whither Mormon Environmental Theology?,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 70.

2. *Ibid.*, 71.

common the implication of an intrinsic moral ontology regarding our relationship to the earth.”³ Essentially, this approach argues that the earth and its creatures possess an intrinsic value in and of themselves merely because of the fact that they exist.

Brown’s categorizing of the two main approaches of Mormon environmentalism encapsulates a good deal of current Mormon thought and practice regarding the environment and humanity’s role in preserving it (or not). Brown is also correct, I believe, to point out the general ambivalence that Mormons have when it comes to the environment. Indeed, in the past twenty years alone, while there has been what some might call progress on the Mormon environmental front, there has also been a retrenchment of sorts, or at least a resistance to participating in what might broadly be termed “environmental practices.” This resistance is borne out in several studies, one of which is Lori M. Hunter and Michael B. Toney’s survey of Mormon attitudes toward the environment. After surveying a number of Mormons living in Cache County, Utah about the environment and then comparing those results to a nationwide, more general survey (the 1993 General Social Survey, conducted for the National Data Program for the Social Sciences at the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago), Hunter and Toney discovered that while the Cache County residents demonstrated a stronger belief that an individual could impact the environment, they were less likely to either contribute to environmental causes or to be a member of an environmental group.⁴

In addition to such surveys as Hunter and Toney’s, other authors remark upon Mormonism’s resistance to significantly engage in environmental causes. Richard C. Foltz, for example, highlights the tensions between Mormon culture, especially in Utah, and environmentalism.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Lori M. Hunter and Michael B. Toney, “Religion and Attitudes Toward the Environment: A Comparison of Mormons and the General U.S. Population,” *Social Science Journal* 42, no. 1 (2005): 25–38.

Foltz remarks upon the July 24, 1999 incident in Escalante, Utah wherein the home of two environmentalists was vandalized, noting that “local Mormon bishop Wade Barney stated that the couple had ‘asked for it’ and were ‘lucky’ not to have suffered worse.”⁵ Foltz also notes the generally dismal voting record of Utah politicians concerning the environment, reporting that, for example, Utah’s two Republican senators at the time, Robert Bennett and Orrin Hatch, each scored a zero out of 100 in the 1997/98 League of Conservation Voters voting report.

Such statistics are perhaps hardly surprising given Utah’s generally conservative political bent and the almost instinctive mistrust that Mormon culture expresses toward anything that is perceived to be radical or progressive, whether concerning the environment or other issues. There are others, however, who claim that there is progress being made on the Mormon environmental front. Indeed, fifteen years ago, Rosemary Winters expressed the belief that Mormons may not be as anti-environment as they are perceived to be. Referring to Chris Peterson, the then-director of the Glen Canyon Institute, and Richard Ingebretsen, the founder of the Institute, Winters expresses an optimism about Mormons and the environment, noting that “Ingebretsen and Peterson’s daunting mission—restoring river ecosystems and a sense of responsibility for the earth, in the land of the Saints—might not be so far-fetched after all. ‘Mormons are environmentalists—they just don’t know it,’ says Ingebretsen. ‘They just need to be shown the way.’”⁶ Ingebretsen’s remark illustrates his belief that Mormons have within them an innate sense of environmental stewardship and implies that they only need to become more aware of how their beliefs are aligned with current environmental concerns in order to become more active and engaged in solving contemporary environmental problems.

5. Richard C. Foltz, “Mormon Values and the Utah Environment,” *Worldviews* 4, no. 1 (2000): 1–19.

6. Rosemary Winters, “Being Green in the Land of the Saints,” *High Country News*, Dec. 22, 2003, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/265/14450>.

Similarly to Ingebretsen, George B. Handley expresses the belief that Mormons may be uniquely situated to solve today's environmental problems, remarking that "the LDS account of the Creation teaches that we can identify spiritually valuable and ethical uses of natural resources because they are facilitated by and enhance our sense of wonder of our spiritual kinship with the whole of the earth, stimulate a desire for deeper knowledge, and respect biodiversity; only these kinds of acts (ecological restoration comes to mind) are spiritually holy and redemptive; they enact the conditions of a Fortunate Fall."⁷ Handley suggests that LDS narratives concerning the earth, specifically its creation, can remind Mormons of their "spiritual kinship" with all of God's creations. Such a kinship, Handley maintains, can lead to, among other things, "ethical uses of natural resources." Handley's assertions about Mormonism's creation narrative and its potential impact on Mormon thought resonates with Brown's ideas regarding what he calls the "vitalistic tradition"; Handley assumes that the creation both facilitates and enhances our "sense of wonder" regarding our relationship with the rest of God's creations. Such an assumption relies less upon the Edenic mandate to be a good steward to the bounties of the earth and more upon the innate sense of connection and kinship that all creations of God ought to share. In one sense, Handley's view relies upon empathy. In his paradigm, humans would take care of the earth and its flora and fauna because of the bond they feel between themselves and other living organisms.

While the debate continues about just how committed Mormons are to environmental causes generally, perhaps even more importantly, there exists another approach to the issue of Mormons and the environment. Brown's identification of the two main strains of Mormon thought regarding the environment are, I believe, generally correct. However, it is my contention that both the stewardship and the vitalistic models offer an incomplete picture of Mormonism's view of both the earth itself and

7. George B. Handley, "Faith and the Ethics of Climate Change," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 29.

the resources, both animate and inanimate, found thereon. I propose that there exists a third possibility, one that has the potential both to alter current Mormon thought regarding the environment and to enhance Mormonism's role in conserving it. There is in Mormon theology a strain of thought regarding the earth and its inhabitants that has less to do with how or for what purpose they were created and more to do with the role that Christ played in both their creation and redemption. This particular line of thought links Christ's atonement with nascent Mormon teachings that considered the earth to be a living being. In this article, I suggest that the most powerful inducement toward Mormonism's greater involvement in environmental issues is more likely to be based on empathy for the earth as a living being and on its value as demonstrated by Christ's atoning sacrifice rather than on stewardship models based on God's Edenic decrees concerning "dominion."

Early Mormon leaders often considered the earth as both a gift from God and as having been redeemed by Christ's atoning sacrifice. Further, they often used the earth as a trope in order to glorify God. John Taylor, for example, sees the earth as a mirror in which one can see God reflected: "I love to view the things around me; to gaze upon the sun, moon, and stars; to study the planetary system, and the world we inhabit; to behold their beauty, order, harmony, and the operations of existence around me. . . . [E]verything is beautifully harmonious, and perfectly adapted to the position it occupies in the world. Whether you look at birds, beasts, or the human system, you see something exquisitely beautiful and harmonious, and worthy of the contemplation there was a God, [even] if there was no such thing as religion in the world."⁸ Taylor sees nature as not only harmonious and beautiful, but also "perfectly adapted." The implication is that God, as the creator and organizer of the universe, emphasized harmonious organization on both a large scale ("the planetary system") and a small scale ("the human system").

8. John Taylor, June 12, 1853, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:151–52.

Taylor's observations in one sense are hardly unique (one thinks of the Renaissance idea of man as microcosm, for example), but they indicate an alignment in early Mormon thought between the symmetrical and harmonious mind of God and the symmetry and perfection of his creations. Taylor even goes so far as to suggest that such symmetry, beauty, and order can lead one to consider the fact that there is some overarching organizing principle even if there were "no such thing as religion in the world."

While Taylor's observations are perhaps not terribly surprising given early Mormonism's rhetoric about the earth becoming purified at Christ's Second Coming and its emphasis on millennialism,⁹ other early Mormon leaders made even bolder claims about the earth and the role it played in the lives of the humans who populate it. Brigham Young, for instance, links human conduct with the state of the earth itself: "You are here commencing anew. The soil, the air, the water are all pure and healthy. Do not suffer them to become polluted with wickedness. Strive to preserve the elements from being contaminated by the filthy, wicked conduct and sayings of those who pervert the intelligence God has bestowed upon the human family."¹⁰ Young here emphasizes the link between human conduct ("wickedness") and the state of the earth itself. According to Young, the earth itself can become "contaminated" by the "filthy, wicked" conduct of human beings, thereby destroying its purity. The implications of such a statement are legion, but one significant consequence of Young's paradigm is that the personal conduct of the earth's inhabitants causes damage to

9. See, for example, Orson Pratt: "What a happy earth this creation will be, when this purifying process shall come, and the earth be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the great deep! . . . Travel then, from one end of the earth to another, you can find no wicked man, no drunken man, no man to blaspheme the name of the great Creator, no one to lay hold on his neighbor's goods, and steal them, no one to commit whoredoms" (Orson Pratt, Aug. 1., 1880, *Journal of Discourses*, 21:325).

10. Brigham Young, June 10, 1860, *Journal of Discourses*, 8:79.

the earth itself. Further, the reference to the “intelligence” given to the human family by God being “perverted” implies that polluting the mind is equivalent to polluting the earth.

The notion of the earth’s purity is extended and expanded by other early Mormon theologians, notably Parley P. Pratt. At one point, Pratt, when discussing Christ’s atoning sacrifice, notes, “Now the object of a Savior to bleed and die as a sacrifice and atonement for sin, was not only to redeem man in a mortal sense . . . but it was also to restore the physical world from all the effects of the fall; to purify the elements; and to present the earth in spotless purity, before the throne of God.”¹¹ For Pratt, one purpose of Christ’s bodily suffering was to redeem the earth itself. Pratt appears to believe that one of Christ’s responsibilities as Redeemer was to both render the earth pure and to present it in its newly purified state to God the Father. Additionally, the Doctrine and Covenants states, “And again, verily I say unto you, the earth abideth the law of a celestial kingdom, for it filleth the measure of its creation, and transgresseth not the law—Wherefore, it shall be sanctified; yea, notwithstanding it shall die, it shall be quickened again and shall abide the power by which it is quickened, and the righteous shall inherit it.”¹² Interestingly, this passage not only affirms that the earth is in need of redemption (or at least sanctification), but also suggests that the earth itself is a living organism, noting that “it shall die” and then “it shall be quickened again,” presumably at the Second Coming of Christ. This passage helps illuminate the strain of early Mormon thought that claims that Christ redeemed the earth as well as the beings on it. In the paradigm set forth in these verses, the earth itself, because it is a living organism, requires redemption in order to be sanctified. Further, the declaration in Mormon scripture that the earth itself is a living being suggests that

11. *Ibid.*, 56.

12. Doctrine and Covenants 88:25–26.

any Mormon environmental ethic must include the recognition of that fact, thus adding a new dimension to the stewardship tradition.

The notion of the earth as a living being has a long history not only in religious texts but also in the realm of science. The so-called “Gaia hypothesis,” for instance, developed in the 1970s by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis,¹³ suggests that it is possible, and perhaps even beneficial for the purposes of environmental conservation, to think of the earth as an entity unto itself. As Lovelock and Margulis themselves put it: “the total ensemble of living organisms which constitute the biosphere can act as a single entity to regulate chemical composition, surface pH and possibly also climate.”¹⁴ The main thrust of the Gaia hypothesis is the idea that the earth itself, because it can regulate certain aspects of the biosphere, can be considered a “single entity,” i.e., a living organism comprised of the total biomass that inhabits it. While the Gaia hypothesis had and continues to have its detractors,¹⁵ this is perhaps one area where science and religion may be of one accord.

In a related vein, the earth as mother is a long-established trope, even within Mormonism. In the Pearl of Great Price, for example, we are told that during a vision, Enoch hears the earth itself speak: “And he heard a voice from the bowels thereof, saying: Wo, wo is me, the mother of men; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which is gone forth out of me? When will my Creator sanctify me, that I may rest, and righteousness for a season abide upon my face?”¹⁶ Mormon scripture in this case employs the trope of the earth as mother but goes even further.

13. James E. Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, “Atmospheric Homeostasis By and For the Biosphere: The Gaia Hypothesis,” *Tellus* 26, nos. 1–2 (1974): 2–10.

14. *Ibid.*, 3.

15. For a pithy overview of both sides of the Gaia debate, see Michael Ruse, *The Gaia Hypothesis: Science on a Pagan Planet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

16. Moses 7:48.

The passage clearly indicates not only that the earth is a living being, but that, as a living being, the earth can experience pain and fatigue. Here, the conception of the earth as a living entity capable of feeling is used to call humans to repentance, since it is their “wickedness” that causes the earth to require sanctification. However, the other implication of this particular passage is the immediacy with which we are meant to feel the earth’s desire for sanctification. The fact that Joseph Smith chose to render this passage in the first person suggests the importance of letting the earth speak for itself, indicating that both the original author and Smith wanted to emphasize that the earth is a living, feeling being and as such deserves and requires our empathy.

The relationship between empathy and the physical nature of both human bodies and the earth itself is a fundamental aspect of Mormon belief and, ideally, practice. In the context of Mormon teachings, one consequence of the earth being conceived of as a living, feeling being means that humans are therefore obligated to care for it as if it were any other sentient being. The model for this, unsurprisingly, is Christ himself, though perhaps not quite in the way we would expect. One aspect of Christ’s atonement that Mormon scripture emphasizes is the bodily nature of Christ’s suffering. This is not, however, merely to emphasize the depths of agony that he suffered for humanity. It is instead, according to Mormonism, designed to link Christ’s body with all other bodies and his suffering with all human suffering.

In one passage in the Doctrine and Covenants, Christ recounts the suffering he underwent during the Atonement: “For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto

the children of men.”¹⁷ Here, the bodily descriptions of Christ’s suffering come into even sharper relief than they do in the New Testament. That Christ describes his own suffering lends an immediacy to the passage, but even more telling are the bodily references, particularly the link between bodily sensations and emotions. The “suffering” Christ endured because of the sins of humanity caused him to “tremble because of pain” and to “bleed at every pore.” Christ therefore not only marks his body as the locus of suffering for humanity’s sins, but also emphasizes the fact that his body suffers due to the sinfulness of others. The language in this passage, I would suggest, echoes quite closely the words that the earth itself speaks in the Book of Moses. The earth groans because of her wicked children, and Christ’s body is wracked with pain due to the wickedness of humanity.

I suggest that the early Mormon call for an empathetic relationship with the earth still retains its power and its mandate, particularly given Christianity’s spotty record concerning environmental consciousness. It is worth noting that a number of recent scholars have pointed out that Christianity in particular has arguably hastened the negative impact commerce has on the environment. Sallie McFague, for example, argues that “Christianity—at least since the Protestant Reformation, and especially since the Enlightenment—has, through its individualistic view of human life, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, supported a neoclassical economic paradigm and a consumer culture that has devastated the planet.”¹⁸ McFague further claims that it is for this very reason that Christianity “should support an alternative ecological model, one in which our well-being is seen as interrelated and interdependent with the well-being of all other living things and earth processes.”¹⁹ And Bartholomew I of the

17. Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–19.

18. Sallie McFague, “New House Rules: Christianity, Economics, and Planetary Living,” *Daedalus* 130, no. 4 (2001): 126.

19. *Ibid.*

Eastern Orthodox Church wrote: "At stake is not just our ability to live in a sustainable way, but our very survival. Scientists estimate that those most hurt by global warming in years to come will be those who can least afford it. Therefore, the ecological problem of pollution is invariably connected to the social problem of poverty; and so all ecological activity is ultimately measured and properly judged by its impact upon people, and especially its effect upon the poor."²⁰ The connection Bartholomew I makes between ecological policy and activity and the economic consequences, particularly regarding the poor, links a fundamental concern of Christ's earthly ministry (caring for the poor) with environmental (and economic) ethics. It may be that things change only when we embrace the earth as a living being, when we access our compassion and empathy for it and for all of God's creations that we begin to exhibit the commitment required to save the earth and its limited resources. The redemptive, empathetic model allows, I believe, for a deeper connection to and a deeper concern for our living, breathing, and sanctified home.

20. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *On Earth as it is in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 144.

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