

# READING THE WORD: SPIRIT MATERIALITY IN THE MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPES OF NAN SHEPHERD

Rachel Gilman

As a graduate student at the time of the 2016 presidential election, I felt the heightened tension of Utah's vote and the ensuing schism as political and religious beliefs played out on a national stage that foregrounded environmental issues, such as the overturning of land designations for national monuments like Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante. In an effort to defend the designations, I travelled to Washington, D.C. where I lobbied on Capitol Hill in the offices of Utah's representatives and senators such as Jason Chaffetz and Mike Lee. During this experience, I felt the cold reception of disagreement and dismissal to what I thought were both logically and emotionally appealing arguments. I naively believed that because I was a BYU student, that surely Congressman Chaffetz would see reason in my argument that a responsible land ethic was inherent in our shared belief system. If you're laughing, then you know how foolhardy that thought was. It obviously did not work.

I returned from that experience more aware of the different ways in which we practice our interpretation of religious doctrine and how two members of the same faith can both look at the same plot of land and see two very different values and uses for it. But I also returned keenly interested in how doctrinal truth about our environmental stewardship, and our ecological kinship, is communicated and perceived. This interest led me to ask: what is the Mormon sense of ecological kinship taught in

the scriptures? Can that sense of ecological kinship lead to a biocentric understanding of how we should relate to and reconcile ourselves to the natural world around us? My engagement with the Scottish author Nan Shepherd has informed an ecological and phenomenological language and rhetoric that influences how I reverence the natural world, and turned my faith, or my understanding of the scriptures, toward a biocentric view of my interrelation with an ongoing creation of the physical world and of myself. This view, I hope, can be seen as a general ethic inherent in our scripture and doctrine—one that is capable of being learned, but that is also meant to be sought after.

### I. Shepherd

Nan Shepherd's work *The Living Mountain*<sup>1</sup> labors at the intersection between organic and inorganic matter to apprehend the ways in which a mountain exists as a living entity. One of her contributions from this labor with the mountain is an upending of the Cartesian cogito—"I think therefore I am"—with her own participatory mode of perception and a cogito suited to the experience of the living mountain: "I walk therefore I am," as suggested of Shepherd's work by British nature writer Robert Macfarlane.<sup>2</sup> *The Living Mountain* is in part her resolution to a subjective problem, one rooted in a neo-romantic mode of thought that provides no relation to person or place. This mode of thought has also led to a rhetoric of disconnect with place, and can result in a rhetoric of dominion, property land ownership, and subduing the earth for man's use and pleasure without thought of an inherent value or right to life for animals, plants, and elements. Problems faced today in environmental thought remain steeped in this subject-object mode of experience, one

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1. Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain: A Celebration of the Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Canongate Canons, 2011).

2. Robert Macfarlane, "I Walk Therefore I Am," *The Guardian*, Aug. 29, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/aug/30/scienceandnature.travel>.

in which the subject strives toward a connection to place through a conscious engagement with the natural world, but where tension still exists between the survival of self versus the survival of the natural world.

The scriptures teach an ecological kinship of belonging with and to an elemental world by presenting us with a biocentric way of thinking about our own spirit materiality. This approach allows us to reconcile and reverence God more completely. Shepherd offers a working model of an ecological sense of place by engaging with a mountain and representing its context of deep geologic time and its ongoing creation as a way to understand inorganic matter as the living qualities of a mountain and landscape. She perceives that this model requires a new language in order to recount the experience of being part of the mountain and articulates this need through her descriptions concerning how her senses connect her to Being. Ultimately, the model she develops leads her to engage a type of new phenomenology of materiality in the elemental world.

## II. Dust

An ecological kinship forms an integral part of LDS scripture as is most clearly seen in our creation process and purpose. If we are to achieve a biocentric view of all creation, perhaps the first step is recognizing that our composition is the same. God told Adam “For dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return” (Gen. 3:19) to remind him not just of his fallen state, but of his physical materiality being of the same stuff as the very ground he was meant to sustain himself with. In Moses, God explained (after detailing the generations of creation) how both heaven and earth—every plant, every herb, every creeping thing, the water, the air, *all* things—were spiritually created before they were naturally upon the face of the earth (Moses 3:5). His next comment foregrounds a material intermingling between the created flesh of man and the dusty debris of the earth itself: “And I, the Lord God, formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and

man became a living soul” (Moses 3:7). If we are to develop a biocentric empathy, it should derive from recognizing the order of this careful creation—an intermingling of the fragmented matter of all things in order to arrive at “the first flesh upon the earth,” which arguably appears here at the end of the creation in order to connect us back to the sustaining ecosystem of life on the earth.

Acknowledging that we are formed from the same material “stuff” as the rest of the created world in which we live, the creation narrative, rather than separating us from our environment, instead serves to situate our bodies within a familial spectrum of divinely-formed materials: both are of God. In this reading, the organic material and the inorganic material work together in kinship, the one with the other enabling us to fulfill the measure of our creation. That process motions for us to find our kinship in the material of the earth. As King Benjamin teaches, “Ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth; yet ye were created of the dust of the earth” (Mos. 2:25). In Doctrine & Covenants, “For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fullness of joy. . . . The elements are the tabernacle of God; yea, man is the tabernacle of God” (D&C 93:33, 35). Eternal elements are a tabernacle of God and so are we. That interrelation encourages us to liken ourselves to the elements, examining how our kinship informs the way that we can relate to them and to the natural world around us.

Shepherd observes that an elemental mystery like water in its simplicity, “does nothing, absolutely nothing, but be itself,” flowing and providing life, unheeding to economic or aesthetic concerns. She further acknowledges the selfhood of elemental consistency by saying that “elementals are not governable,”<sup>3</sup> a principle we see actively opposed in scripture when God or those acting in accordance with God’s will command the elements and they obey. But to what or whom do they

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3. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 3.

obey and not obey? Here perhaps lies not only our inequality of purpose but also our kinship of reconciliation: “O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth. For behold, the dust of the earth moveth hither and thither, to the dividing asunder, at the command of our great and everlasting God” (Hel. 12:7–8). The dust obeys; the elements move at the power of His voice. And yet do we obey? Not all the time. And even we are admonished to be like the dust: “humble yourselves even to the dust, and worship God, in whatsoever place ye may be in, in spirit and truth” (Alma 34:38). Reading scripture attuned to dust foregrounds a certain ecological perspective centered on our material kinship with the world. When we adopt the perspective of the least of God’s creations—a turn to a biocentric empathy with the material around us—then we are able to be more worthy servants.

How can we cultivate a biocentric empathy with the elemental earth? Shepherd’s experience on the mountain, a place familiar to her, describes in words an interrelation between body, consciousness, and elements apprehended through the senses. As she concludes *The Living Mountain* she writes that among the pure elementals on the mountain there “then may be lived a life of the senses so pure, so untouched by any mode of apprehension but their own, that the body may be said to think. Each sense heightened to its most exquisite awareness, is in itself total experience.”<sup>4</sup> “Humbling ourselves to the dust” may require us to be in the dust, or as Shepherd is describing, living amongst elements, interacting with the features of a landscape that heighten our bodily awareness to an exquisite recognition of our own self intermingled with that matter around us. She captures this in saying each time I go to the mountain—the eye sees what it didn’t see before, or sees in a new way what it had already seen. So the ear, the other senses. It is an experience that grows; undistinguished days add their part, and now and then,

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4. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 82.

unpredictable and unforgettable, come the hours when heaven and earth fall away and one sees a new creation. The many details—a stroke here, a stroke there—come for a moment into perfect focus, and one can read at last the word that has been from the beginning.<sup>5</sup> Our essential matter enables us to worship and reverence our Creator because we can see with our eyes, with our bodies, that the creation is ongoing. Our consciousness is a product of our physical senses apprehending the natural world around us, attuning the body to a heightened awareness of our being.

### III. Sight

Our ecological kinship connects us with the elemental world, but our sensory experience and what it communicates to our consciousness provides the means of apprehending the truth of that experience. Shepherd's rhetoric of the senses describes how the eye grounds vision in bodily experience. She writes, "The eye brings infinity to my vision,"<sup>6</sup> and further questions, "How can I number the worlds to which the eye gives me entry?—the world of light, of colour, of shape, of shadow."<sup>7</sup> For Shepherd, the body is paramount, because it is through the senses that knowledge of existence is apprehended. Of that power in sight, she states:

It is, as with all creation, matter impregnated with mind: but the resultant issue is a living spirit, a glow in the consciousness, that perishes when the glow is dead. It is something snatched from non-being, that shadow which creeps in on us continuously and can be held off by continuous creative act. So, simply to look on anything, such as a mountain, with the love that penetrates to its essence, is to widen the domain of being in the vastness of non-being. Man has no other reason for his existence.<sup>8</sup>

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5. Ibid.

6. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 76.

7. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 79.

8. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 79–80.

Shepherd's sensory engagement of looking on the mountain in this case, is the "continuous creative act" that she claims holds off *non-being*, the very reason for existence. Perhaps another way of reading this passage is found in looking to Matthew: "The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light" (6:22). That "living spirit" or "glow in the consciousness" is an intermingling consciousness with the essential elements to comprehend joint creation. This intermingling is our ecological kinship, meant to both ground us and remind us of our materiality. Scripture echoes this understanding in Doctrine and Covenants, "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes. We cannot see it, but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter" (131:7–8).

Enoch and Moses were given "purer eyes" when they witnessed all of God's creations. For us to see matter in the way that they saw it truly would lead to a biocentric empathy with the natural world and lead to an ecological kinship with creation that recognizes how we are integrally the same. As Moses describes, "But now mine own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural eyes, but my spiritual eyes" (1:11). What caused the change? "And behold the glory of the Lord was upon Moses" (1:31). The "Glory" of God being intelligence or His Work—the immortality and eternal life of man—permits this vision to value all things the same, otherwise Moses might not have concluded, "I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed" (Moses 1:10). Valuing all of creation on an equal field is key to having empathy, because it is knowing that the matter itself has also chosen. The scriptures speak of matter both organic and inorganic as agentic. After the creation, "The Gods watched those things which they had ordered until they obeyed" (Abr. 4:18). Here our material equality is echoed in that the collective we, both human and non-human agents, are all created by God from the same matter, and commanded by Him with the power and will to choose for ourselves.

#### IV. Sound

The suggestion that we, as material of the earth, are all capable of being commanded further denotes our ecological kinship, and indicates a specific understanding regarding how our finer matter *moves* and interacts in our shared space on this earth.

Because in this reading elementals actively hearken to God's voice, having chosen in the beginning to obey, I posit that there is an exchange between sound and creation. Consider the opening words to the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (1:1, 3). In the beginning, Christ was there to command, and he effected this command by *speaking*. The scriptures depict God as a being that issues forth sound: "And I, God, said: Let there be light, and there was light. . . . And I, God, called the light Day; and the darkness, I called Night; and this I did by the word of my power, and it was done as I spake" (Moses 2:3, 5). With the word "let," God's voice invites the elementals to organize and form a world, which is done "by the word of my power" (Moses 1:32). Word and voice are thus identified as catalysts for creation; they remain empowered to draw obedience from the material world:

Yea, behold at his voice do the hills and the mountain tremble and quake. And by the power of his voice they are broken up, and become smooth, yea, even like unto a valley. Yea, by the power of his voice doth the whole earth shake; . . . Yea, and if he say unto the earth—Move—it is moved. (Hel. 12:9–11, 13)

While we can listen and understand and reason God's voice, we still choose whether or not to hear it and understand it. But this choice also provides an invitation to be more participatory in the ongoing creation by interacting with language in a way that other creations do not because their selfhood is consistent with the measure of their creation. They have no need to create the tension we do when we resist commands,



but when there is obedience, our matter is reconciled with the dust to become a more worthy servant.<sup>9</sup>

Shepherd's physical contact with the elementals on the mountain lead her to conclude that the mountain and its landscape are *living*, and afford her 'grace' to "know Being" which is "part of the technique by which the god is sought."<sup>10</sup> She sees and experiences the same matter of life in the mountain which her senses key her to recognize more fully in and through her body. In this mysterious, intermingling realm of organic and inorganic matter, with her senses tuned to creation at work, she learns to quiet herself to listen to that ongoing work of the elementals. Shepherd notes that silence is seldom on the mountain, because "always something moves."<sup>11</sup> Sound can be understood as evidence of that movement and of ongoing creation. A physical presence, or immanence achieved by walking amongst an elemental landscape reveals a creator and creation that continues as we see it, immerse ourselves in it, and hearken to it. This leads to seeing our ecological kinship as an ongoing reconciliation of creation meant to lead to exaltation.

## V. Conclusion

In Alma, the prophet teaches that "all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator" (30:44). Order and motion of creation are evidence of a Creator. God himself states explicitly that "all

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9. This same point is made in *Lectures on Faith*: "We understand that when a man works by faith he works by mental exertion instead of physical force: it is by words instead of exerting his physical powers, with which every being works when he works by faith" (Doctrine and Covenants, 1835, [63], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/71>).

10. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 84.

11. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 75.

things [are] created and made to bear record of me . . . things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath” (Moses 6:63). The earth can be understood in terms of a material record that both moves and responds to its Creator. The scriptures are clear in stating the life of matter both organic and inorganic is interconnected, and our experience with it as bodies are a “manifestation of its total life” as Shepherd writes it.<sup>12</sup> “Being” serves as a byword for creation, and if our purpose in the physical body is to know God, we must know his creations—both mountain and self. This ecological kinship can, as a general ethic, be learned by seeking those “best books” along with the doctrine of the scriptures to broaden the language of belief that can enhance faith. It is, as Adam Miller suggests, translating anew the scriptures into “[our] native tongue, inflected by [our] native concerns, written in [our] native flesh.”<sup>13</sup> The urgency of that task with our ecological crises seems pressing, and as a millennial, an inheritor of these crises with a desire to solve, mitigate, and improve, this seems an essential work of enacting my faith.

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12. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 83.

13. Adam S. Miller, *Letters to a Young Mormon*, second ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 27.

RACHEL GILMAN {rachelgilman@gmail.com} holds master’s degrees in Landscape, Literature, and Environment from Bath Spa University and in American Literature from Brigham Young University. She is a dedicated educator, passionate environmental activist, and freelance writer and editor.