

WHERE ARE WE STANDING?

Margaret Olsen Hemming

This talk was delivered in the Chapel Hill First Ward in the Durham Stake in North Carolina and was given November 8, 2024.

In the most recent general conference, President Russell M. Nelson announced seventeen new temples that will be built in upcoming years. As we know, the process of building a temple takes a very long time, even after a building has been announced. A site must be decided on, the land purchased, and building plans made before a construction crew can even break ground. I'd like you to do a little thought experiment: Imagine that President Nelson announced a new temple for Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and soon after, the Church announced the plot of land that had been set aside for that temple. How would you think about that land before the temple had been built? Would you go over and dump your trash there? Or would you see it as already sacred? If you walked in that space or drove past it, what would you think about it? How would you treat it?

Okay. Hold that thought in your brain for a minute. I'm going to come back to it, but I want it to be sitting in the back of your head as I go forward.

In our scripture, we have two significant examples of people entering a promised land. The first is in the Old Testament, with Israel going into Canaan. In Genesis 17:8, God covenants with Abraham, saying, "And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." Here, the promise seems straightforward: The land is theirs as a possession, for them and their descendants forever. But a little later it is more complicated. In Deuteronomy 4:25–27 and 8:1–2, God threatens Israel with removal from the land if they are

disobedient. Joshua tells the people explicitly, “Therefore it shall come to pass, that as all good things are come upon you, which the Lord your God promised you; so shall the Lord bring upon you all evil things, until he has destroyed you from off this good land which the Lord your God hath given you. When ye have transgressed the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you” (Joshua 23:15–16). In other words, the land does not belong to Israel, even if it is the land God has given them. God led Israel to the land of Canaan and blesses them there *on condition* they act obediently.

The conditions that God lays out for Israel make up a large portion of the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Old Testament. They include everything from not worshiping idols to how the Sabbath is to be set apart to what kinds of food are forbidden to eat. Most significantly for my talk today, they also set out laws for how to care for the land: Israel must let the land rest from the work of growing crops every seven years (Exodus 23:10–11); land cannot be permanently sold (Leviticus 25:23–28); landowners must leave a portion of their fields unharvested, so that the poor and the stranger can pick that food and have something to eat (Lev. 19:9–10); and Israel is commanded to not destroy fruit trees during war, because life-giving trees have a special status (Deut. 20:19–20).

You may be feeling like I’m wandering a bit here but stay with me. The laws that God gives Israel tell us that the people *do not own the land*. God, forever and always, owns the land, because God created the world. Even though Israel is God’s covenant people, they are not entitled to the land, and they cannot treat it however they want. They are stewards of the land, and they must treat the land with care or else they will lose it.

The second significant example we have in scripture is from the Book of Mormon, when Lehi and his family enter the land promised to them. In 2 Nephi 1, Lehi speaks extensively about what God has given them: They have the land for their family and their posterity, but again, *with conditions*. Repeatedly, Lehi says that if they are not obedient to God’s commandments, then they will lose the land. They do not have

unlimited rights to do whatever they want. Verse 10 particularly sticks out to me in this section:

But behold, when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief, after they have received so great blessings from the hand of the Lord—having a knowledge of the creation of the earth, and all men, knowing the great and marvelous works of the Lord from the creation of the world . . . and having been brought by his infinite goodness into this precious land of promise—behold, I say, if the day shall come that they will reject . . . their Redeemer and their God, behold, the judgments of him that is just shall rest upon them.

What is interesting to me in that verse is what it says about creation. If the people, “having a knowledge of the creation of the earth” reject God, they will face divine judgment. Why knowledge of the creation and the earth in particular? Why is that important in a promise about the land? I believe it is meant to point readers to God’s work in creation. *The land belongs to God* and pondering the greatness of God’s creation will remind us of that and help us to be obedient and treat the land correctly. In other words, at the time of their entrance into the land, God reminds Lehi’s family that he created the world, the earth is his, and they should keep that idea firmly fixed in their minds as they settle it.

Hopefully at this point it is somewhat clear where I am going with this. For me, scripture makes it very clear that we, also, do not own the land. Regardless of what human law says, divine law is clear: Only God owns land. We only have the privilege of caring for it as stewards. What does that mean for us in real terms?

It means that the environmental crises in our world today are a problem for the faithful. In particular, the climate crisis warrants our deep concern. Scientists continue to warn us that climate change is accelerating, leading to more frequent and severe weather events such as hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and droughts. They stress that rising greenhouse gas emissions, primarily from human activities like burning fossil fuels and deforestation, are driving global temperature increases. Studies show that if global warming exceeds 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, there will be significant, possibly irreversible

impacts on ecosystems, biodiversity, and human communities. We are very close to that point and will pass it very soon—within a handful of years—unless we change our behaviors significantly. We have recently watched the impact of these worsening storms in western North Carolina. While this past summer was the hottest summer humans have recorded, the science tells us that it will be one of the coolest summers of our children's lifetimes. If we are stewards of the earth, then all of this is not just a scientific or a political concern, but also a spiritual one. What we are doing to God's land and God's people through unlimited consumption is a significant problem.

There have been times over the years, during conversations with my fellow Church members, that I have heard the idea that how we treat the land is irrelevant, because when Christ returns to the earth, "the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory" (Articles of Faith 11). This is an important point. We must always acknowledge that it is not human efforts that will heal a wounded world—only divine grace can do that. As members of God's church, we must always look with faith and hope to the Creator for the renewal of all things.

But there's another thing to consider here. As Latter-day Saints, we believe that the Celestial Kingdom will eventually be established on earth. We do not believe, as some do, that Heaven is a far-off distant place and that we will leave our bodies and all earthly things behind to go there. So here is where I want to return to the image of a piece of land that has been set aside for the eventual construction of a temple. Picturing that plot of land in your heads, I want to ask again, How would you treat that piece of consecrated land? Would you dump your trash there? Would you say, it's fine to dump waste there because someone will clean it up before the temple is built?

My beloved brothers and sisters, I say all of this not for the purpose of scolding or shaming. My message is simply this: We stand on holy ground, all the time. God created this extraordinary world for us, but it does not belong to us. The earth is a creation made by God, just like all of us. How we treat God's gifts is crucially important. President Nelson

has taught us, “As beneficiaries of the divine Creation, what shall we do? We should care for the earth, be wise stewards over it, and preserve it for future generations.”¹ In the face of the climate crisis, maybe that means turning down the heat of our homes a little bit in the winter and instead putting on a sweater. Maybe it means wearing clothes until they wear out instead of tossing ours away and buying more. Maybe that means biking and walking instead of driving. Maybe it means consuming less meat. Maybe it means advocating for green energy projects. Every person’s situation in this room is different, so I don’t know what is right for you. But as people of faith, we know that freedom without limits is not God’s way. We are called to a higher, better way of being.

I invite each of us to consider our sacred responsibility as stewards of God’s creation. If we truly believe that the earth is destined to become the Celestial Kingdom, then every step we take on this land is a step on consecrated ground. The choices we make each day—what we consume, how we care for the resources we’re blessed with, and the impact we leave behind—are, in a very real sense, expressions of our devotion to God. Let’s remember that while we hope for the ultimate renewal of the earth through divine grace, our role is not passive. We are called to act with reverence and respect now, as part of our commitment to God and to future generations. May we live in a way that reflects our love and gratitude for all that God has given us, honoring the earth as a place of sacred potential and promise. As we leave today, I pray that we can carry this sense of stewardship with us, finding significant ways to care for the earth. In doing so, we not only follow the example set for us in scripture, but we prepare ourselves and our world for the day when this earth, transformed and perfected, will indeed become our eternal home. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

1. Russell M. Nelson, “The Creation,” *Ensign*, May 2000, 86.

MARGARET OLSEN HEMMING {olsen.margaret@gmail.com} is the coauthor of *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, the former editor of *Exponent II*, and the incoming coeditor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.