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Toward a Greener Faith: A Review of Recent Mormon Environmental Scholarship

George B. Handley

WITH THE EXCEPTION OF A FEW foundational essays by Hugh Nibley, it was not until the late nineties when formal theological treatment of the environmental ethics in Mormon belief emerged. However, since that time we have seen a steady and significant proliferation of such treatment even though LDS ecotheology unfortunately remains an understudied and underappreciated contribution to Mormon studies. When we consider that Joseph Smith provided three additional accounts of the creation and that the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants provide instruction about the principles of environmental stewardship that is unprecedented in Christianity, it is surprising that these doctrines haven't been given more attention. Moreover, given the significance of the environmental crisis before us, I am convinced that Mormon doctrines of the creation are among the most important and valuable insights the tradition has to offer. This essay assesses the major contributions during this recent upsurge of scholarship and provides suggestions for future directions.

Although my focus here is on ecotheological scholarship, it is important to acknowledge the contributions of environmental historians who have explored the historical environmental practices of Mormons. While historians have at times criticized Mormons for their environmental practices (most notably Donald Worster in his important

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study of dams and irrigation, *Rivers of Empire* in 1992, and Marc Reisner in *Cadillac Desert* in 1993), their work has often been largely ignorant of, if not unsympathetic to, the beliefs and unique history of Mormons.¹ We find important correctives to this in essays by Thomas Alexander and Richard Jackson² and in the recent book *On Zion's Mount* by Jared Farmer, a book that is required reading for understanding how Mormon environmental attitudes were shaped in the context of life along the Wasatch Front.³ There is still much work to be done in this area, particularly to help us understand how religion affects environmental behavior generally, how it interacts with political ideology, and how Mormon environmental attitudes and behavior shaped in the context of the Intermountain West have been transformed in an increasingly global church.⁴ It is a challenge, for example, to understand how Mormonism can help inspire the environmental views of a Hugh Nibley or a Terry Tempest Williams as well as those of a Glenn Beck or a Cliven Bundy.

1. Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

2. Thomas Alexander, "Stewardship and Enterprise: The LDS Church and the Wasatch Oasis Environment, 1847–1930," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25 (Autumn 1994): 340–64; and Richard Jackson, "Righteousness and Environmental Change: The Mormons and the Environment," in *Essays on the American West, 1973–1974*, ed. Thomas G. Alexander (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 21–42.

3. Jared Farmer, *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

4. One sociological study done in 2006 compares Mormon attitudes about the environment, as reflected in a sample drawn from citizens of Logan, Utah, with the General Social Survey and found that their attitudes tended to reflect greater concern for the environment than that found nationally, but with one difference: "While LDS respondents appear environmentally concerned, they also appear to believe that environmentally benign economic growth is feasible" (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* 42/1 [2005]: 6). In general, they seemed less willing to adopt the measures others with similar concerns about the environment were willing to adopt, measures such as higher taxes, more sacrifices, joining an environmental organization, or signing a petition.

Nibley, of course, was prolific in his career and addressed many topics in his scholarship, but one of his favorites was the requirements for building Zion—the Mormon concept of a unified, harmonious community. In *Approaching Zion* and in his collection *On the Timely and Timeless*, he wrote trenchant criticisms of the ethos of capitalism, particularly its profound misunderstanding of nature as a divine gift and a sign of grace toward God's children.⁵ Whereas capitalism wants to emphasize the virtue of the independence of the self-made man, Nibley wants to ask, "Independent of what? Of God? Of our fellowman? Of nature? So we actually reject the gifts of God. As *gifts* we despise them."⁶ In his essay "Subduing the Earth," he offered what is arguably Mormonism's most important and clearly articulated environmental ethic when he corrected misunderstandings about the meaning of human stewardship following the fall of Adam and Eve. He explained: "Man's dominion is a call to service not a license to exterminate."⁷ A similarly trenchant essay, "Stewardship of the Air," was written in the context of the struggle for air quality during the time of the operation of Geneva Steel but has proved prescient in the context of our current struggle in Utah with inversion.⁸ A much-cited essay of his on Brigham Young's views of environmental stewardship is, in my view, less rigorous in its analysis and less useful, since we have little or no context and no analysis of the ecological implications of Young's views.⁹ One suspicion that arose as a consequence of Nibley's Brigham Young essay was that the church's

5. For a more thorough exploration of Nibley's environmental views, see Terry B. Ball, "Nibley and the Environment," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20/2 (2011): 16–29.

6. Hugh W. Nibley, "Deny Not the Gifts of God," in *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 136.

7. Hugh W. Nibley, "Subduing the Earth," in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 96.

8. Hugh W. Nibley, "Stewardship of the Air," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, ed. Don E. Norton and Shirley S. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 55–75.

9. Hugh W. Nibley, "Brigham Young on the Environment," in *To the Glory of God: Mormon Essays on Great Issues—Environment, Commitment, Love, Peace, Youth, Man*,

nineteenth-century leaders and the doctrines they preached demonstrated a more pronounced environmental ethos than that apparent in the church today, a persistent suspicion that nevertheless remains underresearched, unproven, and at the very least unexplained. But the overall legacy of Nibley's environmental essays was to stimulate a concern among scholars that the environmental ethics of Mormon belief deserved more attention, maybe even some rescue.

One of the most ambitious efforts in this regard was an underappreciated book of essays published in 1999 called *New Genesis: A Mormon Reader on Land and Community*.¹⁰ *New Genesis* covers interesting terrain, including essays by Mormon authors, activists, scientists, environmental professionals, scholars, and artists. It also includes three essays by LDS Church leaders (General Authorities): Vaughn J. Featherstone, Hugh W. Pinnock, and Steven E. Snow. It is an impressive collection (if somewhat uneven in its scholarly rigor) that provides personal and intimate portraits of various members' perceptions of the responsibilities that people bear to their environment. It stands as a powerful testimonial of the inspiration many Latter-day Saints feel about environmental stewardship based on personal experience, doctrinal understanding, and, in some cases, professional training. One of its most trenchant essays, by James B. Mayfield, is entitled "Poverty, Population, and Environmental Ruin," which to this day remains the only essay to address the pressing concerns about growing population levels from the perspective of LDS doctrines of stewardship. Mayfield's essay is an important counterpoint to the false assumption that environmental stewardship requires extreme

ed. Truman G. Madsen and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 3–29.

10. Terry Tempest Williams, William B. Smart, and Gibbs M. Smith, eds., *New Genesis: A Mormon Reader on Land and Community* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1999). One publication that almost entirely escaped the public's notice was a self-published book by Aaron Kelson, a graduate of Utah State University, entitled *The Holy Place: Why Caring for the Earth and Being Kind to Animals Matters* (Spotsylvania, VA: White Pine Publishing, 1999). Although light on analysis and without much reference to relevant scholarship, it covers major doctrines ably and with a touch of personal conviction.

population control measures and is otherwise antithetical to family and children. Mayfield places the suffering of families facing extreme poverty and environmental degradation front and center and argues that rather than imposing draconian measures to control population levels, we need to curb greed and strengthen women's position in society. He writes:

Free agency is only possible when people have choices, and choices require opportunities, awareness, resources, and abilities in conscious decision-making. Teaching children skills, values and proper attitudes is largely the responsibility of the women. Thus the best hope for solutions lies in strengthening the role and position of women in society, not through forced family planning and easily available systems of abortion, but by helping both men and women develop their levels of literacy and productivity where they do have choices that are meaningful and fulfilling. (pp. 61–62)

Because evidence suggests that as women gain more independence and educational opportunities, family sizes tend to decrease, he concludes: "I believe God wants people to make good choices, to use wisdom in determining the number of children they will have, and that in the long run, as systems of education and literacy are implemented throughout the world, the problem of overpopulation will take care of itself" (p. 62). Among many other worthwhile essays, I find "Water-masters" by Dennis Smith to be an especially beautiful and insightful tribute to the stewardship Smith learned growing up at the foot of Lone Peak, and Michael Dunn's gripping tale of an encounter with a grizzly in the Tetons provides an inspiring account of the spiritual meaning of wildness. It is a collection of admirable diversity and engaging reading, one that has yet to be replicated.

The book's force lies mainly in its many personal witnesses. Although the essays are often anchored by scriptural anecdotes, the book's aim is not to present a systematic and scholarly treatment of the relevant theology. Indeed, even the work of Nibley seemed to lack rigorous connection to the broader conversations about environmental ethics and ecotheology in other traditions and systematic analysis of

relevant doctrines. Upon my arrival at BYU in 1998, I began researching the environmental doctrines of the LDS tradition but also the literature of ecotheology. My aim was to understand Mormonism in light of how other Christian traditions were trying to inspire an improved relationship to the natural environment. I was struck by the almost uncanny similarity between these ideas advanced by Christian ecotheologians and the doctrines of the Latter-day Saints. My essay “The Environmental Ethics of Mormon Belief” was the result of this research.¹¹ I identified four major doctrinal questions with important environmental implications, namely, the doctrine of the soul, the doctrine of the spiritual and physical creations, the human role within the creation, and the law of consecration. As the first attempt at a formal ecotheological treatment of LDS doctrines of environmental stewardship, it seems to have continued to be relevant despite the advance of time and despite the fact that many other doctrinal areas have been and still need to be explored. I confess that, at the time, I somewhat naively hoped that I had provided a more or less comprehensive survey of relevant doctrines, a view belied by the prolific scholarship that has continued since that time. At least my main purpose was to provide a rebuttal to the suspicion that environmental stewardship was somehow a fringe idea or that the sometimes vehement anti-environmentalism of the Intermountain West was representative of an official church view, ideas expressed in Richard Foltz’s essay “Mormon Values and the Utah Environment,” published in *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* in 2000. Foltz had suggested that it is not clear whether an environmental ethic “is with or against the current of formal teaching” or if caring for the creation is merely a fringe idea, an example of other potentially heretical “private theologies.”¹² Thomas Alexander and I coauthored a rather strident response to Foltz that was published in the same journal, but I have since felt that despite his false equation of local politics in Utah with official church doctrine, perhaps Foltz’s overstatements were

11. Published in *BYU Studies* 40/2 (Summer 2001): 187–211.

12. Richard C. Foltz, “Mormon Values and the Utah Environment,” *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 4 (Spring 2000): 4, 14.

understandable given the dearth of any formal teachings on the subject from official church venues.¹³ While I do not equate environmental attitudes in Utah as stemming from overt or even covert church positions, I believe that lack of institutional emphasis on stewardship has allowed a culture of anti-environmentalism to continue unchallenged in many Mormon communities throughout the Intermountain West. Following on the heels of my publication, the important journal *Environmental Ethics* also published an excellent analysis of LDS doctrines, coauthored by Philip Cafaro, a professor of philosophy at Colorado State, and his LDS graduate student at the time, Matthew Gowans, now a visiting professor of religious studies at DePaul University.¹⁴

Seeking to fill in the gaps of what church leaders have said about environmental stewardship over the years, Richard Stratton, a former graduate student in forestry at Utah State University, self-published a collection of statements from General Authorities entitled *Kindness to Animals and Caring for the Earth: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Latter-day Saint Church Leaders* in 2004.¹⁵ Restricting himself mainly to members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency of the LDS Church, Stratton provides robust evidence of concern for proper treatment of all living things among every generation of church leaders. The book's weakness is that it is only a reference book of quotes and doesn't provide analysis or context, but it certainly should have put to rest any doubts about the existence or consistency of such teachings. Sadly, Deseret Book refused to publish it, so it never enjoyed wide circulation, thus allowing apathy about stewardship to continue.

13. George Handley and Thomas Alexander, "Response to Richard Foltz's Article 'Mormon Values and the Utah Environment,'" *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 5/2 (2001): 223–27.

14. Matthew Gowans and Philip Cafaro, "A Latter-day Saint Environmental Ethic," *Environmental Ethics* 25 (2003): 375–94.

15. Richard D. Stratton, ed., *Kindness to Animals and Caring for the Earth: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Latter-day Saint Church Leaders* (Portland, OR: Inkwater Press, 2004).

At this same time in the early 2000s, students at BYU became increasingly interested in environmental questions and in Mormon answers to those questions in particular. It was clear that a strictly scientific approach to the environment was not enough. In 2002 I created an environmental humanities course that covered religion, poetry, painting, philosophy, and literature. Biologist Steve Peck and I also later experimented with a team-taught course entitled Religion and the Environment, and in 2003, in collaboration with Terry Ball in Religious Education, we also planned and held a symposium on LDS perspectives on the environment. The symposium was very successful, with hundreds of attendees and participants from around the country and internationally. In 2006 BYU's Religious Studies Center published the selected proceedings in a coedited collection entitled *Stewardship and the Creation: LDS Perspectives on the Environment*. The book enjoyed a short run in print, unfortunately without broad distribution, but is now available online.¹⁶ The highlight of the conference and, in my judgment, of the published proceedings was the keynote address by Paul Cox, "Paley's Stone, Creationism, and Conservation." It broke ground by exploring the implications of the Mormon teaching of creation out of unorganized matter as opposed to the traditional Christian dogma of a creation ex nihilo. He shows the compatibility of Mormon theology and contemporary science and the consequent reasons why we are held more accountable in such a creation. The essay is at once a brilliant examination of theology and a personal witness by one of Mormonism's most accomplished environmental scientists. Speaking to fellow Latter-day Saints, he concludes: "I hope that you may experience the same whisperings of the Spirit that I have felt as you ponder this artistic masterpiece, this beautiful earth, that the Lord personally created. That great gift—a testimony of the Savior and His atoning mission—can come only through the ministrations of the Holy Ghost. As we

16. George B. Handley, Terry B. Ball, and Steven L. Peck, eds., *Stewardship and the Creation: LDS Perspectives on the Environment* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2006); online at https://rsc.byu.edu/%5Bfield_status-raw%5D/stewardship-and-creation-lds-perspectives-environment.

reverence the Savior, let us treat His masterpiece with reverence and humility.” The collection also included a valuable examination of business ethics by Don Adolphson, entitled “Environmental Stewardship and Economic Prosperity,” a topic that he taught in the MBA program at BYU for many years but that still needs more attention. Craig Galli provides a very well researched and important analysis of city planning in his essay “Stewardship, Sustainability, and Cities.” He brings forward many of the ideas of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young to test their viability in the context of contemporary environmental problems. Galli quotes Brigham Young: “The work of building up Zion is in every sense a practical work; it is not a mere theory. A theoretical religion amounts to very little real good or advantage to any person.” Galli then concludes that for this reason “the design and attributes of our neighborhoods, communities, and cities impact future generations and have spiritual, if not eternal, consequences.” Galli’s essay is especially valuable because city planning is proving to be increasingly vital to determining the kind of environmental health we will pass on to future generations. Steven Peck’s essay, “An Ecologist’s View of Latter-day Saint Culture and the Environment,” provides a careful and helpful discussion of the differences between commonly held views about the environment among Mormons and what science and theology teach, helping to dispel many misunderstandings about environmental problems that have influenced the way Mormons behave and vote. The collection also includes helpful case studies of environmental attitudes and behavior as inspired by LDS belief and as they pertain to certain regions of the Intermountain West and Mormon community life and to specific issues, including endangered species and watersheds.

One perspective that the collection neglected was that of the social sciences. Gary Bryner was a political science professor at BYU at the time and was someone who had long been engaged in thinking and teaching about these concerns. Inspired by the emerging scholarship on Mormonism and the environment and despite undergoing treatment for pancreatic cancer, he authored a brilliant essay entitled “Theology and Ecology: Religious Belief and Environmental Stewardship.” It was

published in *BYU Studies* in 2010, just after he succumbed to his illness. The essay provides an indispensable overview of the interface between religious organizations and public policy related to environmental problems and thus offers a useful framework for Latter-day Saints to consider in their contemplation of their own obligations as stewards. He provides a more comprehensive look at the history of religious environmental activism than what previous scholars have offered and also acknowledges specific obstacles to LDS involvement. He encourages fellow members by concluding that “[our doctrinal] obligations [to be stewards] require that we plunge into the world of politics and work with others who may disagree with us on many issues in order to find common ground and workable solutions to the problems we face together.”¹⁷

Also in the wake of the symposium and its related publication, I decided to write an environmental memoir. *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River*, also published in 2010, was an attempt to put to the test my own theological understanding in the context of the watershed where I live and my own family and ancestral history. I mention it in this review because, although a work of creative nonfiction and partially an environmental history of the Provo River, it teases out many of the possible implications of LDS teachings about the creation in a suburban, twenty-first-century context. Although much nature writing, especially in Utah and throughout the West in general, is often a reaction to the context of Mormon culture and history, including most famously the work of Terry Tempest Williams, my aim was to provide a perspective from within the practice of Mormonism to test the viability of LDS belief and practice for a more sustainable sense of place.

Its viability was at least acknowledged positively by two review essays published in a 2011 special issue of *Dialogue* devoted to environmental stewardship, edited by Steven Peck.¹⁸ The issue also provides six

17. Gary Bryner, “Theology and Ecology: Religious Belief and Environmental Stewardship,” *BYU Studies* 49/3 (Summer 2010): 41.

18. Rob Fergus, “Scry Me a River,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44/2 (2011): 190–95; and Adam S. Miller, “Recompense,” *Dialogue* 44/2 (2011): 134–42.

substantive and well-researched articles that rigorously apply LDS doctrines of stewardship and the creation to environmental questions. For example, in his essay “Enoch’s Vision and Gaia: An LDS Perspective on Environmental Stewardship,” Craig Galli provides a compelling exploration of Gaia theory and how it might be consonant with LDS accounts of creation.¹⁹ Bryan Wallis, in his essay “Flexibility in the Ecology of Ideas: Revelatory Religion and the Environment,” explores the basis for a kind of epistemological flexibility in Mormon creation theology that should allow Mormons the freedom to adapt understandings to new information gleaned from study and science. He finds that basis compellingly in the conception of ongoing revelation, since it posits a kind of contingent and earth-bound context in which revelations take place.²⁰ Jason Brown’s essay, “Whither Mormon Environmental Theology?,” provides an especially trenchant critique of what he sees as two strands of Mormon environmental thinking—thinking that falls into the stewardship tradition and thinking that falls into the category of what he calls the vitalist tradition.²¹ The former, he argues, stresses anthropocentric management of natural systems while the latter challenges us with a more biocentric context in which to understand ourselves. This seeming ambiguity within LDS doctrines of creation highlighted by Brown may very well account for the tensions in LDS attitudes toward the environment. It is certainly relevant to many similar tensions within the history of environmentalism more generally. Brown argues that to the degree that Mormons limit themselves to an anthropocentric stewardship, they may still be guilty of what he criticizes as stewardship’s “instrumental valuation of the earth and its creatures by giving human subjects mastery over material objects” (p. 75). Positing the intriguing possibility that there was an ecological apostasy in addition to the spiritual one, Brown suggests that Joseph Smith’s doctrines of vitalism

Miller’s essay pushes the theological implications of *Home Waters* by exploring the meaning of genealogy, the body, and grace.

19. *Dialogue* 44/2 (2011): 36–56.

20. *Dialogue* 44/2 (2011): 57–66.

21. *Dialogue* 44/2 (2011): 67–86.

can be seen as a restoration of ancient understandings of all life that can provide adequate alternatives to the instrumental attitudes of crass capitalism or even of a utilitarian environmentalism. In his essay “‘The Blood of Every Beast’: Mormonism and the Question of the Animal,” Bart Welling provides what remains the only essay to explore environmental ethics within the Book of Mormon itself, addressing the intriguing question of wilderness, wild beasts, and the implications of red meat in Book of Mormon theology.²² My own essay, “Faith and the Ethics of Climate Change,” examines for the first time LDS theology in light of the Anthropocene, the age of climate change. The essay is less an attempt to prove climate change to LDS skeptics than it is an attempt to understand how the complexity and unpredictability of climate change—often the very reasons for so much denial—are opportunities well met by LDS creation theology, particularly the account of Moses’s vision of the creation in the Pearl of Great Price.²³ Finally, Patricia Karamesines offers a fascinating exploration of Mormon doctrine as it relates to the practice of nature writing, offering reasons for Mormons to make more contributions to this popular genre.²⁴ This special issue of *Dialogue* remains a singular achievement of environmentally focused scholarship on Mormonism.

In 2012 a special issue of *Sunstone*, also edited by Steven Peck, provided a less significant cluster of three essays on Mormon environmentalism. I say this because the essays are more personal and are not as engaged in the scholarship built up by previous contributors. However, one essay, by Rachel Whipple, raises what is a pressing topic still awaiting adequate research.²⁵ That is, how might LDS faithful find ways to engage in more sustainable practices and more effectively teach an ethics that is intimately connected to the ethos and spiritual health

22. *Dialogue* 44/2 (2011): 87–117.

23. *Dialogue* 44/2 (2011): 6–35.

24. *Dialogue* 44/2 (2011): 119–33.

25. Rachel Whipple, “Practicing Stewardship in a Consumer Culture,” *Sunstone* 167 (2012); online at <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/practicing-stewardship-in-a-consumer-culture/>.

of families and homemaking, especially within the context of capitalism? Much work remains to be done to connect the Mormon ethic of self-reliance and provident living to the task of living more sustainably and with a gentler impact on the earth. Indeed, it would seem that if a strong Mormon environmental ethos is to emerge, it will come from a more holistic understanding of the relationship between the domestic space and the global environment. Unfortunately, self-reliance and stewardship have recently been understood to have merely monetary meanings and could benefit from an expanded recognition of our interdependencies with and responsibilities for the health of ecosystems, of earth's energy sources, and of communities across the globe and into the future.

Teaching and research on the environment at BYU, meanwhile, have continued to develop and grow in interdisciplinary reach. In the fall of 2012, BYU held a second symposium on stewardship, this time called "Conservation, Restoration, and Sustainability: A Call to Stewardship." It was cosponsored by the College of Humanities, the Kennedy Center for International Studies, and the College of Life Sciences and underwritten by a donation to BYU from The Nature Conservancy, money that helped to formally organize a consortium of cross-disciplinary faculty called the Environmental Ethics Initiative (EEI). Although no proceedings of the symposium were published, it was again well attended and included an array of prominent non-LDS scholars, as it sought to bridge the conversation happening within LDS culture with the broader field of environmental studies. Keynote speakers included restoration ecologist Margaret Palmer, climate change thinker Jonathan Foley, and environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott. This same support for EEI most recently led to a semester-long weekly climate change lecture series during the winter semester of 2015. It was cosponsored by the David M. Kennedy Center and featured lectures by internationally renowned experts as well as several of BYU's own faculty involved in

climate-related research, including two standout lectures by William Christensen and Summer Rupper.²⁶

What is perhaps the most significant and culminating development of this history is the result of a symposium entitled “Religion, Faith, and the Environment,” held at the University of Utah Law School in March of 2013.²⁷ Elder Marcus M. Nash acted as an official representative of the LDS Church at the symposium and, in his speech “Righteous Dominion and Compassion for the Earth,” offered what is certainly the most definitive statement regarding earth stewardship by the church that we have to date. The speech was met with great enthusiasm and was the impetus for the creation of two websites later produced by the church on the topic “Conservation and Stewardship,” first on the Mormon Newsroom website and then, more importantly, on LDS.org, where it is now part of the Gospel Topics library.²⁸ Elder Nash’s speech is featured on the websites, along with links to articles about the church’s sustainability practices, scriptures and teachings of the prophets, tips for conservation, and some of the abovementioned research, including links to the aforementioned volume *Stewardship and the Creation* and to my essay “The Environmental Ethics of Mormon Belief.”

While statements about stewardship have been made by most if not all church leaders at one time or another, until Elder Nash’s speech no one had ever devoted an entire talk exclusively to the topic. What stands out, in my judgment, about the talk is the way it directly connects the Mormon plan of salvation with environmental stewardship. As noted, some scholars have sought to identify ways in which Mormon theology

26. Keynote and other lectures from the conference are available online at <http://kennedy.byu.edu/lectures/>.

27. The entirety of the symposium is available online at <http://www.law.utah.edu/event/12233/>.

28. See <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/environmental-stewardship-conservation> and <https://www.lds.org/topics/environmental-stewardship-and-conservation>. A short and well-produced video, included on these links, summarizes briefly the ethos of Mormon environmental stewardship. These websites were unfortunately overshadowed by the production at the same time of several webpages by the church on such topics as race and the priesthood and the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

is more friendly to a biocentric view, which in many ways it is, but his talk instead emphasizes the anthropocentrism of Mormon theology and then embeds an environmental ethic directly into our broader and exceptional human responsibilities toward one another. Better stewardship does not require, in other words, a radical rethinking of ethics but rather a more holistic and expanded understanding of God's gifts. The earth was created for humankind and is intended to be used for human ends, and while this might imply that Mormonism is essentially uninterested in the inherent value and long-term well-being of the planet, Elder Nash makes it unambiguously clear that all human uses of natural resources must have in mind both long-term sustainability and the needs of the poor front and center. His talk is, in other words, a call to much greater modesty in consumption, deeper reverence for all of life, and a more conscientious and compassionate approach to distributing natural resources more equitably. He sums up his argument by saying that "as stewards over the earth and all life thereon, we are to gratefully make use of that which the Lord has provided, avoid wasting life and resources, and use the bounty of the earth to care for the poor." I believe that the talk serves as a vital reference point for all future discussions and will likely provide, along with the additional information provided on the websites, incentives for church administrators and members to develop more effective and focused efforts in homes and in wards to respond to environmental problems with moral urgency and practical efficiency. The websites also make clear as never before that the church has a long history of commitment to good stewardship practices in their design of buildings, ranches, and in other areas.

If it seems paradoxical that Mormons believe in a spiritual creation that makes living souls of all living things while also believing in a decidedly human purpose to the whole of creation, it is. This is a tension that is perhaps yet to be more fully explored and understood, since it is clear that Mormonism, despite having an unmistakable ethic of stewardship placed directly on human shoulders, has not produced a very even record of environmentally friendly attitudes, policies, and practices. Indeed, one of the most common perceptions of Mormonism

prior to the development of this scholarship was that Mormonism was at best ecologically indifferent and at worst ecologically hostile.²⁹ The emphasis on the environmental principles of Mormonism continues to be either largely ignored or met with surprise. Many of the faithful are either largely unaware of the church's websites or suspicious that they were created under political pressure. And much of the ideas contained in them have yet to see the full light of day in general conference, in the *Ensign* magazine, or in any of the church lesson manuals.

There are many areas of research awaiting the voices of new scholars. We have yet to see a thorough examination of the ecotheology of the Book of Mormon, much less an attempt to connect it to what is written in the Doctrine and Covenants and to the significant ecotheological scholarship that already exists on the Bible. Mormon thinkers of a theological bent could also explore ways to widen the definition of "provident living" to include stewardship of the earth; a more exhaustive exploration of the Word of Wisdom in light of what is known about the environmental impacts of our eating could be undertaken;³⁰ and, especially because of LDS contributions to business, more careful attention to the environmental ethics of business practices is also warranted.³¹ As the church makes progress in the greening of its architecture, further research is needed on how to help the users of buildings—whether at home, at church, or at work—maximize the efficiencies and minimize

29. In his survey of faith-based environmental initiatives, Max Oelschlaeger mistakenly concludes that the LDS Church is "the only denomination that has formally stated its opposition to ecology as part of the church's mission" (*Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994], 204).

30. Jane Birch is the only scholar to have addressed the Word of Wisdom in this way. See her book *Discovering the Word of Wisdom: Surprising Insights from a Whole Food, Plant-Based Perspective* (Provo, UT: Fresh Awakenings, 2013). Although her primary purpose is to develop a more healthy diet based on the recommendations of the Word of Wisdom, she does address some of the environmental benefits of such a diet.

31. It would be valuable not only to revisit Nibley's words of caution about greed and the drive for accumulation, but also to consider the environmental impacts of extractive economies that externalize costs to the detriment of future generations and the poor.

the environmental impacts of the built environments they inhabit. Although the question of animals is proving increasingly important in humanistic studies, more research is required to understand the fullest implications of the place of animals in the Mormon plan of salvation and the concomitant ethical obligations humans bear towards all animals. Since there was a time when humane treatment of animals was important enough for the early twentieth-century church to create a program, Humane Day, to teach Primary children ethical treatment and care of animals, one wonders how that ethic might be reenacted in the current age of industrial meat production, not to mention the mistreatment of animals involved in the production of all kinds of consumer goods. Finally, and on a related note, more work needs to be done to understand the relationship between family economics and consumption patterns to climate change and how Mormons can develop the kind of collective ethics needed to respond adequately. It will also be important to consider how climate change affects the poor disproportionately and how this might require a shift or redefinition of the kind of humanitarian work the church does.

The particular visions of stewardship held by Brigham Young, Joseph Smith, or any other leader of the LDS Church still await scholarly attention in light of contemporary ecological understandings. Furthermore, what neither Nibley nor the scholars who have followed him have ever suggested are any reasons explicitly stated or implied by church leaders as to why LDS faithful might be justified in neglecting stewardship of the earth. This is perhaps a major oversight, since many Mormons justify anti-environmental attitudes, however incorrectly or vaguely, by recourse to doctrine and teachings of the church. In other words, scholars might do well to not assume that the absence of a strong environmental ethos is merely a function of benign neglect. Environmentalism, rightly or wrongly, was often identified as a threat to LDS values, and scholarship should explore such reasoning.³²

32. For example, a little-known book entitled *Environmentalism and the Gospel* (Analytica, 1995), by Gale Lyle Pooley, seeks to make an argument against contemporary environmental wisdom and activism on the basis of the Mormon author's

More work is needed to understand the interface between political ideology and theology in Mormon culture. It didn't used to be the case that Republicans in the United States were anti-environmental (and it certainly isn't always the case), but today partisan affiliation explains, more directly than religion, one's environmental attitudes. For that reason, more research is needed to understand the political formation of Mormons, particularly in the Intermountain West, and how that might differ from formations elsewhere in the country and in the world. To which doctrines are Mormons drawn to substantiate their views, and what, if anything, might influence a Mormon to change her mind about such a matter as the environment? And although I have suggested that environmental history is beyond the purview of this study, it still remains to be answered why, given the exceptional and explicitly stated doctrines of stewardship in Mormonism, Latter-day Saints are not more known as a people for their environmental stewardship. What, in other words, accounts for the fact that the research on the doctrines of stewardship over the last several years came so late, and why do the pertinent teachings remain relatively neglected by most members of the church?

I should stress that most of this research is really a means to an end. As Orthodox ecotheologian Metropolitan John of Pergamon has written, humanity needs "not an ethic, but an ethos; not a program, but an attitude; not a legislation, but a culture."³³ Elder Nash's talk makes it clear that Latter-day Saints don't have to displace or reformulate their fundamental understandings of their purposes on this earth. Any compartmentalization of, say, human economy from the natural economy, or of human ethics apart from ethics toward all life, would be an impoverishment of LDS theology as well as of the earth itself. As many of the thinkers and writers reviewed above suggest, what is required is a kind

understanding of the gospel. The problem with the book, however, is that it provides a straw man of environmental extremism, drawn up by his own strong ideological understanding of the environmental movement as the representation of all environmentalisms, as well as an equally narrow and selective reading of LDS doctrines of stewardship.

33. John D. Zizioulas, "Preserving God's Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology," *King's College London Theological Review* 12/1 (Spring 1989), 1–5; 12/2 (Autumn 1989), 41–45; and 13/1 (Spring 1990), 1–5.

of living and imagining and acting that is deeply attuned to the sanctity of human life and of all living things—in the past, in the present, and into the future.

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