

Article

“All the Precious Trees of the Earth”: Trees in Restoration Scripture

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Abstract: In Hebrew scripture and the New Testament, trees play a prominent role, most obviously in the first chapters of Genesis and the last chapter of Revelations. Trees also serve as messianic heralds, as life-giving resources, as aesthetic standards of beauty, as exemplars of strength and fame, and as markers and instruments of salvation. Like the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Mormon and other Latter-day Saint scriptures feature prominent references to forests, trees, branches, roots, and seeds. What is unique about the spiritual and cultural landscape invoked by Latter-day Saint scripture? More specifically, what is said about trees and their accoutrements in restoration scripture? While numerous studies have focused on the major thematic tree scenes in the Book of Mormon, the tree of life in the visions of Lehi and Nephi, Zenos’ allegory of the olive tree, and Alma’s discourse on the seed of faith and the tree of righteousness, this paper aims at a broader look at trees in Latter-day Saint scripture. Taking cues from Robert Pogue Harrison’s *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, this paper takes a wide-ranging look at how trees in restoration scripture can help us rhetorically address the ecological dilemmas of our time. When the Gods built us a home, they did so with trees, and when God called on Their people to build a house, God told them to “bring the box tree, and the fir tree, and the pine tree, together with all the precious trees of the earth” to build it (see Abraham 4:11–12 and D&C 124:26–27). Another revelation declares bluntly: “Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees” (D&C 77:9). As eaters of sunshine and exhalers of oxygen, trees have much to teach us about how to live, and trees in restoration scripture specifically contribute to a broader vision of ecological living.

Keywords: Latter-day Saint scripture; ecological rhetoric; trees; gifts



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1. Introduction: Trees in Nature/Culture and Taking Care

Bruno Latour begins his Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion by describing the problem of nature and culture as “domains that are at once distinct and impossible to separate completely” (Latour 2017, p. 15). Modern people have imagined and acted as if we could distinguish between nature and culture, but it has always been humanity’s fate to be artificial, cultural by nature. We are thus caught in an impasse of our own making, or rather an aporia of our own nature. The nature and culture impasse has significant consequences for humanity writ large and shapes what we can say and do about the climate crisis as well as how we might understand faith, religion, and atonement in the face of the mass extinction of human life on Earth as we know it.¹ We are part of nature and nature is in us, yet we have always operated on nature as an exception. Halfway between animals and angels, we occupy a space of great potential but also of great danger. Wanting to separate ourselves from the other fellow travelers on this planet, we have thought ourselves unique, and yet, perhaps, the animals, birds, and plants are here to show us a better version of ourselves through our learning to take care of creation with them, through our learning to be mindful of how our existence is part of one great whole (Harrison 1992, p. 6). Perhaps the rocks, trees, animals, flowers, grasses, birds, and all other beings with which we cohabit this planet are given to us to remind us of our potential and our danger.

Part of what obscures a purer appreciation of trees may be attributed to the profanity of forests in scripture and culture. Robert Pogue Harrison, developing insight from the rhetorician and philosopher Giambattista Vico, observes that:

The forests became profane for a simple reason: they obstructed communication of Jove's intentions. In other words, their canopies concealed an open view of the sky. We find here in Vico's text a fabulous insight for the abomination of forests in Western history derives above all from the fact that, since Greek and Roman times at least, we have been a civilization of sky-worshippers, children of a celestial father. *Where divinity has been identified with the sky, or with the eternal geometry of the stars, or with cosmic infinity, or with "heaven," the forests became monstrous, for they hide the prospect of God.*²

Whenever cities are built, humans cut down all the trees, to make room to behold the heavens, to see what God is up to. At the same time, the forests and the trees act as cover for human misdeeds, acting as a border and shadow of civilization. The movement toward seeing the forests as profane is itself a mark of separation from God, for He is their Creator as well as ours. Our removal of the trees is to get a better view of the heavens from our point of view, wishing to link ourselves "with the eternal geometry of the stars", which obscures our earthbound, dustbound kinship with the trees. Our act of killing living, breathing trees diminishes creation in some measure, although we cannot, at the same time, imagine human worlds without wood. We cut down the trees to see God, but God was in the trees; we profane the forests in order to distance ourselves from what they reveal and conceal. Yet, all along, life was in the trees and forests. They were acting in their sphere and, in the process, making our world.

How can we, then, show reverence for the trees, piety toward the forests, without slipping into idolatry? One way to do that is to use our minds, to imagine the trees and our relationships with them in ways informed and inspired by scripture. This could allow a view beyond the confines of modern and modernizing projects in order to consider trees as agents, beings with the power to act in their sphere. Their presence is a gift for which we must learn to take responsibility, collectively and individually. Heirs to the gift of trees and forests gain essential insight into what Latour calls "the condition of belonging to the world." This condition is, for human beings and increasingly for all other earthbound beings, the problem of the operations of culture on nature and nature on culture, what Latour calls nature/culture (Latour 2017, p. 13). By breeding, grafting, and cultivating trees we have invented olives and olive oil, paper and pencils, chewing gum and rubber tires. None of these things are natural, yet none of them could be invented without nature, whether we think of it as the wild, untamed, or inherent ground, or, less critically as a "resource" for our use. All nature and all culture sprang from the dust, as it were; from nature/culture we are, of nature/culture we are. Yet, while human assemblages are not exactly natural, and this includes the many trees bred for our purposes, humanity cannot separate itself from the trees. In fact, the crisis of modernity is born out of imagining that such a separation is possible as well as desirable.³ Yet by "taking care", Latour says, by belonging to the world better, we can cure ourselves from believing that we do not belong to nature, while at the same time we can convince ourselves that what happens to the world does concern us (Latour 2017, p. 13). One way into such care and belonging can be brought about by learning to see trees as created, animated beings with the power to create worlds.⁴

In what follows, I briefly look at the role trees play in Hebrew scripture and the Christian New Testament. Here, we find trees treated extensively as markers of beauty, salvation, and eternal life. In the Section 2, I discuss some of the references to trees made in Latter-day Saint restoration scripture, including the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. These scriptures add theological weight and perspective to the role trees play in creation and earthly existence. In the conclusion, I develop some insights from contemporary research on trees to highlight the ways trees evoke a sense of interconnection and atonement.

2. Trees in the Bible

From the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation, trees feature prominently in the Bible as literal and symbolic landmarks in nearly every prominent story. From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to the burning bush, from the waters of Marah to Jacob's ladder, to the calling of Zacchaeus and the crucifixion, trees, as well as the multitude of their associations, are always popping up. Trees do not serve merely as backdrop or accompaniment in the Bible, but rather as agents providing fruit, knowledge, life, shade, and sweetness. Trees serve as instruments for the fall of mankind, as life-giving resources, as aesthetic standards of beauty, as exemplars of strength and fame, as messianic heralds, as the very markers and instruments of salvation. From the beginning, their fruit signifies both what is forbidden and what is most desirable. The forests in the time of the kings and judges of Israel became a shield for idolatry and places of immorality (see Judges 3:7; 6:25; 1 Kings 14:15, 23; 2 Chr 14:3) even as their products were used to build the temple. As such, we find in biblical accounts of trees that they are not idealized but are rather evoked as objects operating in both positive and negative registers. Some trees are praised for their fruit and others are cursed for their failure to bring forth fruit.

Yet the presence of trees is felt throughout the narrative. As Matthew Sleeth observes, "Other than God and people, the Bible mentions trees more than any other living thing" (Sleeth 2019, p. 17). Sleeth adds, "trees grow older, taller, and bigger than anything else on the earth. They have been with us since the beginning of time. We humans owe our very lives to the sap, bark, wood, flowers, and fruit of trees. We are their masters, yet they are our stake in the future" (Sleeth 2019, p. 4). Given the long spans of time that trees can live, they are a link between generations, offering us a glimpse into the past and the future.⁵ Many of the trees now living on the earth may well be around in the time of our second and third great grandchildren's lives. Trees are also our stake in the future in two other senses: by reflecting on their way of being in the world, we may learn better ways to be ourselves, and trees have a crucial role to play in mitigating the worst effects of the climate crisis.

While it would be impossible to refer to every moment when trees have played a significant role in the Bible, it is worth remarking on how trees serve as a metaphor for Israel as well as for the Messiah. Israel is often spoken of in terms of a vineyard, a grapevine, an olive tree, a branch, or branches growing over a wall, while the very best among her are referred to as plants of renown and trees of righteousness (see Genesis 49:22, Isa. 4:2, 5:1–7, 61:3, 65:22–23, Ezekiel 34:29, Romans 11:16–27). Likewise, the Messiah is called "a shoot from the stump of Jesse" (Isa 11:10), "a tender shoot", and "a root out of dry ground" (Isa. 53:2), as well as a branch (Jer. 23:5, Isa. 4:2, Zech. 3:8, 6:12) and a noble cedar (Ezekiel 17).

This last prophecy is worth looking at in depth, for it tells of the care and deliberate effort taken by God to bring the Messiah into the world and the power of thinking of the Messiah as a tree. Ezekiel first tells a riddle to Israel about an eagle breaking off a shoot from a cedar tree to plant in another land. The answer to the riddle is found in Ezekiel 17:12–21, where we learn that "the eagle is Nebuchadnezzar (King of Babylon), he came to Jerusalem (symbolized by Lebanon—because of all the imported cedar?), cedar signifies David's royal lineage and the topmost shoot, King Jehoiakin and his court and ministers, carried into exile (planted) in the city of traders (Babylon)" (Evans 2015, p. 108). The image of Israel as a tree is passive in this parable. The tree is broken and transplanted. Its fate is not in its own power.

In a nearly identical allegory at the end of Ezekiel 17, the author of this text exhibits a tree that is subject to the agency of God, rather than an eagle, but also shows the tree with a messianic agency of its own. Julian Evans calls this parable truly "awe-inspiring" because God takes the initiative, but I find inspiration in the tree's own production (Evans 2015, p. 108).

Thus says the Lord God:
 I myself will take a sprig
 From the lofty top of a cedar;
 I will set it out.
 I will break off a tender one
 from the topmost of its
 young twigs;
 I myself will plant it
 on a high and lofty mountain.
 On the mountain height of Israel
 I will plant it,
 in order that it may produce boughs
 and bear fruit,
 and become a noble cedar.
 Under it every kind of bird will live;
 in the shade of its branches
 will nest
 winged creatures of every kind.
 All the trees of the field shall know
 that I am the Lord.
 I will bring low the high tree,
 I will make high the low tree;
 I dry up the green tree
 and make the dry tree flourish.
 I the Lord have spoken;
 I will accomplish it. (Ezekiel 17:22–24)

In this parable, God is the gardener, taking a high tree—metaphorically the House of David, or the shoot from the stem of Jesse—and removing a sprig from that tree, literally lowering it, but using this shoot or sprig as the source of a new tree that will grow to a great height.⁶

This newly transplanted tree grows on a high and lofty mountain to become itself a great, powerful, fruitful, and noble cedar. It is no surprise that the image of the mighty cedar would be used to offer a glimpse into messianic possibilities. Like the cedar in the parable, the Messiah produces boughs and fruit and offers a safe shelter to those who dwell in Him. To liken the Messiah to a tree is to see in messianic promise an ecosystem, as it were, of self-generating grace, a living being overflowing itself with shade, fruit, shelter; in a word, beneficence to the world.⁷ Yes, God does a work in the parable, but the tree also does its work, and it is the tree's work in the parable that ends up expressing a model of messianic flourishing. In doing what a cedar does, the cedar is a being that acts in the world, flowering and flourishing in such a way that other beings, too, are made to prosper. The cedar is an agent of life and its sufficiency flows from its agency. Trees are regenerative, and the metaphor of this parable has the same power. As long as there are cedars on earth, the parable will ring forth with a clear meaning and set of associations that resonate through the ages. The metaphoric power of trees expresses a peculiar genius in the author of Ezekiel for a timeless connection to readers. What a tree is is also what a tree does. From the parable, we understand that God is also interested in what a tree knows. Not content to merely do God's work, the parable ends by declaring that God wants the world, specifically "the trees of the field", to know what God has done. What the trees

know is somehow as important to God as what a tree is and what a tree does—all of which are expressed as crucial in this parable. Being, doing, and knowing are clearly expressed as functions of the cedar that simultaneously express the Holy Messiah. Here we receive the image of a tree that is an animate object, a living, breathing being at work in the world for the good of other living agents, including those who eat its fruit and nest in its branches.

Ezekiel pushes a connection between spiritual health and the physical health of trees and forests even further when he writes about dry forests and fire. Again, portraying Israel as a powerful kingdom whose power was nothing next to Babylon, Ezekiel likens Israel to a lioness with cubs and then a vine in a vineyard (Ezekiel 19:1–14). The vine was “transplanted by the water, fruitful and full of branches from abundant water”, and “towered aloft” and “stood out in its height with its mass of branches” (Ezekiel 19:10–11 NSRV). Yet it was struck down by an eastern wind and “the fire consumed it” before it was transplanted into the wilderness (Ezekiel 19:12–13). The prophecy is a further lament about the sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, but it also expresses a crucial link between the spiritual health of a people and the physical health of ecosystems.

In two poetic parables, Ezekiel compares Israel at first to a strong and healthy vine:

Your mother was like a vine in
a vineyard
 transplanted by the water,
fruitful and full of branches
 from abundant water.
Its strongest stem became
 a ruler’s scepter;
it towered aloft
among the thick boughs;
it stood out in its height
 with its mass of branches. (Ezekiel 19:10–11, NSRV)

This mother vine had strong rods, an exalted stature, and thick branches, and flourished near abundant water.

But it was plucked up in a fury,
 cast down to the ground;
the east wind dried it up;
 its fruit was stripped off,
its strong stem was withered;
 the fire consumed it.
Now it is transplanted into
the wilderness,
 into a dry and thirsty land.
And fire has gone out from its
stem,
 has consumed its branches
and fruit,
so that there remains in it no strong
stem,
 no scepter for ruling. (Ezekiel 19:12–14 NSRV)

While Israel was once planted in a goodly land, she was quickly transplanted out of good conditions into a dry and thirsty wilderness (captive in Babylon), but also eventually devoured and destroyed by fire. Both her strength and authority to rule were lost.

Ezekiel makes it clear through these parables that it was idol worship and adultery that led to Israel being sacked and carried off to Babylon; indeed, part of the crime seems to be that they offered up their own children as a burnt offering to their idols, thus figuratively proving themselves to be fit for fire in spiritual terms (Ezekiel 23:37). Another parable of Ezekiel bears the marks of the first and declares that the fires that burn the forests are like those kindled against the wicked. The prophecy comes against “the forest of the south field”:

And say to the forest of the Negeb, Hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, I will kindle a fire in you and it shall devour every green tree in you and every dry tree; the blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from south to north shall be scorched by it. All flesh shall see that I the Lord have kindled it; it shall not be quenched. (Ezek. 20:47–48 NRSV)

The godly, tolerant, just, and merciful are in Psalms 1 “like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper” (Psalm 1:3 NRSV). Meanwhile, the unjust, unmerciful, and scornful are like a thirsty forest a long time after it last rained. No longer green and tender, the trees have become brittle, they are slowly losing their green, and it is possible to sense the danger of the fuel load present in the forest. Indeed, the coming conflagration is so great in Ezekiel’s telling that not even the green trees can be saved. As Evans notes:

Forest fires are hard to cope with: they move rapidly, are frequently life-threatening, and nearly impossible to put out Quenching forest fires is hard. The Israelites would know this, God knew too and Ezekiel paints a vivid picture of the completeness of their imminent destruction—it could not be stopped. (Evans 2015, p. 110)

The passage hints at what we often call a tipping point, that moment where momentum gets the better of an object, where potential energy becomes kinetic energy that can no longer be held in check. In this case, it was the desire to be like other people, to “worship wood and stone” (Ezekiel 20:32) that made Israel like a dried-up forest, according to the author of Ezekiel. While the Psalms show that the spiritual health of a people can be illustrated by the lushness and vitality of a healthy tree by a river, Ezekiel’s author compares her to a dry forest, with a lot of dead wood and vegetation about to go up in flames. Dry tinder is the sign of spiritual death and pliable green shoots are the sign of life (see also Luke 23:27–33 and D&C 135:6). To extend this text to our own time, it may be wise to ponder the terrifying fires that are now happening all around the world and their connection to the health and vitality of our global societies. Are these forest fires God sanctifying the earth through the baptism of fire, or the result of bad management and the climate crisis? How much room is there, really, between these two possibilities?

In the end, Ezekiel prophesies a great restoration and offers an extended vision of what Israel will look like when she is returned to her land and the Temple is rebuilt. The vision brings Ezekiel back to the temple out of which flows water, pure water, that was first ankle-deep, then knee-deep, then waist-deep. Its flow becomes a river deep enough to swim in that cannot be crossed (Ezekiel 47:1–6). Along the banks of the river on both sides, Ezekiel sees a great many trees. As the water flows into the sea, everywhere it reaches it turns stagnant waters fresh and produces life (47:7–9). Ezekiel observes:

On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing. (Ezekiel 47:12)

The contrast between the image in Psalm 1 and this latter prophecy of Ezekiel with the parable of the forest fire earlier in Ezekiel gives us a glimpse into the wide range of imagery available to us as we think about trees theologically.

The New Testament builds on the tree imagery found in the Hebrew scriptures, endeavoring to connect this imagery to the life of Jesus Christ. Similarly seasoned with

trees of all kinds, whether it be the cursing of the fig tree, the calling of Zacchaeus from out of a tree, the olive trees of Gethsemane, the crown of thorns, or the revelation that God's throne sits by a tree—trees are everywhere in the New Testament, too. The image found there—of the land fully flourishing, of trees green and lush springing from waters flowing from out of the temple—is an image of what God most wants for his children. The Bible began with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as well as the tree of life; it ends in Revelation 22 with another vision of the tree of life, or, as Joseph Smith might have riffed, trees of lives. Like the vision of Ezekiel 47, John's vision of the heavens includes many waters flowing from the throne of God, watering a collective of many trees on both sides of the river:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1–2)

The leaves of the trees of life, like the leaves in Ezekiel's vision, are for healing, but in Revelation, they are specifically for the healing of nations. Always already the trees are there, whether in the Garden of Eden, the Garden of Gethsemane, or the Garden gracing the throne of God. Always already trees are prepared as instruments of our individual and collective salvation and exaltation.

3. Trees in Restoration Scripture

Latter-day Saint scripture is of many different kinds. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has canonized the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Each of these texts has its own origin and history, but they all affirm the Latter-day Saints' belief in continuous revelation. The Book of Mormon is complementary to the Bible, sharing a common narrative history, but also disruptive to the way the Bible is often received, especially by Protestant Christianity.⁸ It draws on many of the prophecies and writings contained in the Bible, especially Isaiah and the Gospels, but places them inside a new history that infuses Jesus Christ and Christian belief into the messianic prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures while at the same time wresting open all Protestant attempts to establish biblical sufficiency. The Book of Mormon essentially opens space for reimagining the ancient covenant between God and Israel. As a book of scripture from the Americas, the Book of Mormon takes literally the idea of transplanting, grafting, and preserving the House of Israel to show that the enduring covenants of the Lord apply even to those who are scattered, confounded, and dislocated.⁹ The Doctrine and Covenants is a collection of sacred writings, mostly dictated by Joseph Smith, that include revelations in direct response to questions as well as letters and declarations offered to establish and regulate the church. The Pearl of Great Price includes an extract of Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible as well as translations of Egyptian papyri together with Joseph Smith's personal testimony.¹⁰ All of these works are what this paper takes as restoration scripture.

These scriptures, like the Bible, have numerous references to trees. Of course, not all the trees mentioned in the Bible appear in restoration scripture. For example, there is no mention of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" anywhere in the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants by name, although the Book of Mormon does refer to its "forbidden fruit" (2 Ne. 2:15, 18–19; Mosiah 3:26; Alma 12:22; Helaman 6:26). One reason for this may be due to the unique view of the fall of humanity articulated in the Book of Mormon, a view that essentially elides the idea of original sin. The Pearl of Great Price refers to "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" six times, twice as many references as found in the Bible (Moses 3:9, 16–17; Abr. 5:9, 12–13; see also Genesis 2:9, 16–17), which is largely due to the fact that the Pearl of Great Price retells the story of Genesis in two different ways. On the other hand, the Book of Mormon refers to the tree of life sixteen times and to olive trees fifteen times, while the Pearl of Great Price

mentions the tree of life four times and the Doctrine and Covenants mentions olive trees four times (1 Ne. 11:25, 15:22, 28, 36; 2 Ne. 2:15, Alma 5:34, 62; 12:21, 23, 26; 32:40, 42:2, 3, 5–6; Moses 3:9, Abr 5:9, Moses 4:28, 31; D&C 101:44–46, 51). The Doctrine and Covenants, like Isaiah and Ezekiel, speaks of prophets as famous trees from whom weary travelers, while finding rest, may also “receive the counsel from those whom I have set to be as plants of renown, and as watchmen upon her walls” (D&C 124:60–61; see also Ezekiel 34:29; Isaiah 61:3). In restoration scripture, like in the Hebrew Bible, trees remain a preoccupation, accompanying and seasoning the texts with powerful metaphors and descriptors. At the same time, restoration scripture includes crucial invitations for how we should orient ourselves to trees.

Restoration scripture emphasizes that when the Gods made a home for human beings, they did so using trees. The Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price gives an account similar to that found in Genesis, but with key differences. This account is revealed to Abraham rather than to Moses, and it offers a vision of the Gods doing the work of creation:

And the Gods said: Let us prepare the earth to bring forth grass; the herb yielding seed; the fruit tree yielding fruit, after his kind, whose seed in itself yieldeth its own likeness upon the earth; and it was so, even as they ordered. And the Gods organized the earth to bring forth grass from its own seed, and the herb to bring forth herb from its own seed, yielding seed after his kind; and the earth to bring forth the tree from its own seed, yielding fruit, whose seed could only bring forth the same in itself, after his kind; and the Gods saw that they were obeyed. (Abraham 4:11–12)

“The Gods organized the earth” is a key phrase in Latter-day Saint theology on creation. The earth was made through a process of organizing. The process results in the creation of something new using materials that have always already existed. Rather than creation *ex nihilo*—from nothing, as understood by other theologies—restoration scripture presents the Gods as organizing life, bringing preexisting matter together to invent something new. This preexisting matter is one, but with two kinds of expression: spiritual and physical, or natural.

The Book of Abraham has the Gods counseling together about creation before they acted to bring forth. Before they created the earth and the heavens, they measured out the height and depth of this work and knew its scope, so that by “the seventh time”, they would rest from all they had “counseled” (Abr. 5:2). With something like a spiritual blueprint, the Gods first designed the scope of their work and knew what they would create:

According to all that which they had said concerning every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew; for the Gods had not caused it to rain upon the earth when they counseled to do them, and had not formed a man to till the ground. (Abr. 5:5)

The key term in this passage is *before*. Before it had rained, before there was man to till the ground, there was a formation of every plant and every herb. Like the account in Genesis 2:4–6, the Book of Moses adds an explicit spiritual dimension to creation:

And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew. For I, the Lord God created all things, of which I have spoken, spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth. For I, the Lord God, had not caused it to rain upon the face of the earth. And I, the Lord God, had created all of the children of men; and not yet a man to till the ground; for in heaven created I them; and there was not yet flesh upon the earth, neither in the water, neither in the air; But I, the Lord God, spake, and there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground. (Moses 3:5–6)

Creation happened first in heaven, for plants, animals, and humans alike. A spiritual creation preceded natural creation.¹¹ The planning and preparation of the Gods aimed to

“bring forth” something new, according to patterns and processes, to laws of nature and of matter. It is still possible to see these patterns and processes of bringing forth at work today, as trees and animals regenerate of their own kind from the seed they produce.

While trees do not appear in the first and last chapters of the Book of Mormon, the book does contain a glorious vision of the tree of life in its opening pages. The vision of the tree of life is described as a dream beheld by two prophets, Lehi and his son Nephi. Lehi first has the vision, which he shares with his children, and then Nephi, desiring to see the things his father saw, is also given the same vision for himself. The dreamscape of their separate but similar visions places the tree of life together with other objects: a field like a world, a great and spacious building, a fountain of filthy water, a fountain of pure water, and a rod of iron beside a path leading to the tree. These objects each have particular symbolic and cosmic importance in the dream, as described throughout 1 Nephi 8–15. The chief difference between this tree of life and those found in the opening chapters of Genesis and in Revelation 22 is that the tree of life in the Book of Mormon is a virtual tree, a tree of life existing only in a dream-vision. Certainly, the impression from both Genesis and Revelation is that those texts are referring to trees that exist in real places, at least mythical places. Whereas the Book of Mormon’s tree of life is explicitly a tree vision, a dream tree. This is a degree of abstraction that allows us to consider the tree of life as a pure representation.

The tree of life in Lehi’s dream (a vision also beheld separately by his son Nephi) is accompanied by an explicit interpretation of its representation. When Nephi is interrogated by an angel about the condescension of God, he sees a vision of a virgin “bearing a child in her arms” (1 Ne. 11:20). The tree of life in the dream is the child, Jesus. The angel makes all of this explicit:

Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father! Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw? And I answered him, saying: Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things. And he spake unto me, saying: Yea, and the most joyous to the soul. (1 Nephi 11:21–23)

As a representation, the tree of life is the Lamb of God. The condescension of God is the willingness to send His own son into the world, and the willingness of the son to come to earth to reveal love to the world. Like a tree that sheds fruit, seeds, and leaves onto the ground, God’s love “sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts” of humanity through Jesus Christ. Such love, represented by a tree, evokes desire as well as joy in those who come under its sway.

The virtual quality of the tree in Lehi’s dream is crucial to understanding the rhetoric of this passage in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon is unique because of the way it engages narrative time, retelling the story of God’s covenant with his chosen people. The retelling is at once a remix of the whole history of the Bible, so that Adam and Eve, Moses and Abraham, Lehi and Nephi, and all the prophets “knew of Christ, and had a hope of his glory many hundred years before his coming” (Jacob 4:4). By complexifying the history of the Bible, a Christ that always already exists is brought to the foreground. The Book of Mormon makes Jesus Christ the explicit Jehovah of the Old Testament and the fulfillment of messianic hope. According to Latter-day Saint tradition, the Book of Mormon is the stick of Joseph and the Bible is the stick of Judah, spoken of in Ezekiel 37, that would be brought together in the last days to complete the history of Jacob’s blessing to Joseph and his sons.¹² The name Joseph means adding to or increasing, and he is depicted as “a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall” (Genesis 49:22). The fruit of the Book of Mormon’s account of covenant Israel is Christological. The narrative is designed to refocus all attention on Jesus Christ as the instrument of salvation.

What could do this better than a virtual or dream tree? The tree of life in the vision of Lehi and Nephi is virtual, so that this account may render a virtually new account of the role of Christ in human history. A virtual tree best expresses a virtual Jesus. By virtual, I do not mean false or unreal. Yet, in the context of this passage, real can only be implied

in a preliminary sense. Dreams belong to this natural world, but they are often seen as portals to our unconscious mind or to revelations about ourselves in this world. Visions, on the other hand, belong perhaps to other worlds. What Lehi and Nephi experience is described as both a dream and a vision. What we do know is that dreams gesture at truths beyond our fully conscious grasp of the world.¹³ The virtual quality of dreams is best understood as offering us a greater perspective, as if from another dimension of life. Lehi and Nephi are Israelites of the tribe of Manasseh and their two lives would have spanned from approximately ca.650 BCE–ca.525 BCE. In other words, they are prophets prophesying explicitly of Jesus Christ more than 500 years before he was born. They are declaring a vision, here, of Jesus being born to a virgin, of the condescension of God to the earth before the condescension occurred.¹⁴ By analogy, the dream tree of Lehi's vision presents us with a potentially unifying look at the Lamb of God. To paraphrase Jacob, what if Adam knew of Christ and had a hope of his glory many hundred years before his coming? What if Lehi's dream of the tree of life offers us a view of the Lamb of God existing spiritually before he was naturally upon the earth? The question and its potential answers may well be theologically and ecologically revolutionary. The repercussions of a Christian view of a natural world animated by the spirits of living beings would invite a reconsideration of our so-called pagan past. It may well instantiate a view of the natural world that accommodates the sacred and makes room for a more holistic sense of human existence as always already in a relationship with all forms of more than human existence. Here is unveiled a virtual tree depicting a preexistent Christ. This depiction is one layer deeper than the one to which we are accustomed to seeing: the natural world beheld with our natural eyes.¹⁵ The rhetorical purpose of its virtuality, as described above in 1 Nephi 11:21–23, is to point to a spiritual, timeless, eternal reality. This eternal reality is tethered to the natural world in which we now find ourselves, a world of actual trees, lambs, and children. No doubt, virtual worlds are a new way for us to grasp worlds beyond our own, as well as to better understand our place in the universe. Dreams may well be a close analogy to this state of existence. Dream trees point through our awareness of natural trees to eternal worlds of possibilities yet to come. That was certainly the effect of this dream vision on Lehi and Nephi in the account recorded in the Book of Mormon.

Other trees in restoration scripture offer us a deep glimpse into the profound spiritual truths that we can learn from trees. In "Three Trees in the Book of Mormon", John Welch observes that "the tree is the primary symbol in three significant sections in the Book of Mormon" (Welch 1999, chart 95). The olive tree, the tree of life, and a seed nourished in the heart offer three different perspectives on salvation. The tree of life, just mentioned, as discussed in 1 Nephi 8–15, is an invitation to individual men and women to understand and partake of the blessedness of God, offered to them through the atonement of Christ.¹⁶ Jacob 5, Zenos' allegory of the olive tree, tells the story of the whole house of Israel to signify the possibility of collective salvation.¹⁷ Furthermore, the allegorical tree described in Alma 32–33 is about how the word of God can take root in our hearts and "be a tree springing up unto everlasting life" (Alma 32:41).¹⁸ Each of these images are familiar to regular readers of the Book of Mormon, and they are arguably among the most talked-about passages contained therein. These trees again illustrate the wide range of imagery evoked by trees and illuminate the power of trees, along with all their attending collective assemblies—seeds, roots, branches, fruits, leaves, etc.—to represent spiritual and life-giving, life-enhancing, life-enchanting ideas and ideals.

Passages treating trees in the Doctrine and Covenants continue this practice. When God commanded people to build a house to God's name, they were told to use trees:

And send ye swift messengers, yea, chosen messengers, and say unto them: Come ye, with all your gold, and your silver, and your precious stones, and with all your antiquities; and with all who have knowledge of antiquities, that will come, may come, and bring the box-tree, and the fir-tree, and the pine-tree, together with all the precious trees of the earth; And with iron, with copper, and

with brass, and with zinc, and with all your precious things of the earth; and build a house to my name, for the Most High to dwell therein. (D&C 124: 26–27)

The box tree is largely a tree for ornamenting gardens and yards and can be shaped and pruned to provide hedges and borders. The fact that it makes this list, and is listed first, underscores a scriptural emphasis on the aesthetic power of trees. The fir tree and the pine tree are excellent trees for building strong buildings and for specialty carpentry, including the making of furniture, walls, window and door frames, paneling, flooring, and roofing. In every instance, these trees are primarily harvested today for these purposes. Consistent with Genesis 2:9, an emphasis is placed on aesthetics and utility.

Yet, in this passage, God tells his people that “all the precious trees of the earth” should be included in the building of God’s home. We may wonder how and why all the trees of the earth are precious in God’s eyes. We know that trees should be granted special treatment, even love, because of their beauty and usefulness—and we may well extend this beauty and usefulness to their power to eat sunlight and produce oxygen. In this, they do indeed provide for us a priceless model for how life may be sustained on this earth for a billion or more years into the future. “The sunlight hitting Earth’s surface each day carries 5,000 times more energy than modern civilization requires. It gives in two hours what we use in a year. This abundance of solar energy created most of our other energy sources (coal, oil, natural gas, wind, hydro, biomass) and far outstrips them.” (Ord 2021, pp. 227–28). If we use trees as our model for producing our energy, there would be little need for us to want for energy. We could put humanity in a position where it could go on developing technologies without being in the unenviable position of destroying the future potential of life at the same time. Such usefulness would only be worth something if accompanied by a true sense of responsibility to the creatures with which we share the earth. Over the door of every Latter-day Saint temple are engraved the words *Holiness to the Lord—The House of the Lord*. In the context of the *oikos* of ecology, if the Gods made a home for humans with trees, and humans made a house for the Lord by bringing “all the precious trees of the earth”, perhaps herein lies an important clue. If the wish is to secure our home and prepare a place for God to dwell on the earth, it is necessary to appreciate how central trees are to life processes. By preserving trees and valuing their precious contribution to ecology, we may secure our foothold on this planet and create a space for divine visitation by the same gesture.

An ethic of care is part of what the scriptures underscore. The Book of Mormon records that there are “many plain and precious things” missing from the Bible (1 Ne. 13:28; 14:23; Mormon 8:33). As a consequence of this, shortly after the book was published Joseph Smith began a new translation of the Bible. Unlike scholarly translations, Smith drew on the King James Version of the Bible as a starting point and made changes as he was directed by the Spirit. While translating the book of Revelation, Smith received what would become section 77, one of the more unique revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants. It is presented in a Question and Answer format, containing explanations of the Book of Revelation. The questions revolve around the meaning of different symbols in the book and how they ought to be interpreted, but one passage illuminates Revelation 7:2–3, which reads:

And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads.

The directive to preserve the earth, seas, and trees in a temporary reprieve is repeated in the expansion:

Q. What are we to understand by the angel ascending from the east, Revelation 7th chapter and 2nd verse?

A. We are to understand that the angel ascending from the east is he to whom is given the seal of the living God over the twelve tribes of Israel; wherefore, he

crieth unto the four angels having the everlasting gospel, saying: Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. And, if you will receive it, this is Elias which was to come to gather together the tribes of Israel and restore all things. (D&C 77: 9)

The injunction to delay hurting the earth, seas, and trees is undertaken to provide time for the work to be completed before the end times. The work to be completed is a sealing work, an anointing that shows that God's purpose in creation must be fulfilled before the Earth, sea, and trees are hurt.

For us, this passage may be read to indicate a delay in the final reckoning. While some think we are already out of time to curtail our CO₂ emissions, perhaps the repetition of this phrase, "Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees" can be read rather more literally as a call to cultivate a sensibility to ecology. While evolution is a powerful explanatory theory for the wonders of creation,

faith excels in responding to such wonders in praise, humility, and gratitude, out of which emerges the holy passion and sacred duty to 'serve and preserve' creation and to address anything that would threaten its integrity. Through deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, and overexploitation, we are systematically destroying the basic feature of creation, namely, its habitational integrity for diversity. (Brown 2010, p. 236)

We may well ask ourselves what it means to hurt the trees or the seas. We could not be far wrong if the answer points to once-great trees being turned into acres of suburban housing, or the great Pacific garbage patch. If our way of inhabiting the earth is making the earth uninhabitable for other creatures, including the trees, how long do we have before it is uninhabitable for us? Like the angels of Revelation, a warning repeated again in the Doctrine and Covenants, we, too, have the power to hurt the earth, seas, and trees, or to forego such harm.

Adopting an ethic of care for the earth means accepting the role humans have been given, which includes the development of intellect and technological power. Can humankind be justified in this power, if this power is used only for short-term gain while neglecting the potential futures of humanity that also lie within this power? Latter-day Saint restoration scripture suggests that one way to access these potential futures is to take note of how God built this world with trees. Readers are invited to not only appreciate the beauty and usefulness of trees but also to take seriously their spiritual existence and animated agency. A reconciliation with trees as bearers of life and salvation begins in acknowledging the interrelationships between all living, animated beings. This is precisely what it means to be at one with another in the salvific sense expounded by restoration scripture. To neglect trees is to imperil the earth as well as life itself. Oneness with trees offers hope and a path forward.

4. Conclusions

The thoughtless hardly think of trees, or when they do, they think of trees as inanimate objects in the background of the real business of life. The scriptures examined herein paint a picture that brings trees into the foreground of human experience. The Hebrew Bible and New Testament offer a view of trees that empowers readers to appreciate the power of trees as agents. Restoration scripture builds on this view by displaying trees as beings created first spiritually by God and then materially. This tiered view of the creation process invokes a need to respect the animation and agency of trees—their power to exist, act, and do within their "sphere" (see Doctrine and Covenants 93:30, 77:3). The scriptures reviewed here suggest that to reanimate nature in our imagination, we simply need to attend to scripture to learn how more-than-human beings, such as trees, are envisioned and empowered.

By offering a glimpse at a virtual tree and a virtual Christ, the Book of Mormon invites a reconciliation between all living beings. Restoration scripture underscores that humans and trees share a common origin as well as a common fate. The atonement of Christ in these

texts is not only about overcoming sin and death for Latter-day Saints, but it is also—and perhaps primarily—about the potential of God’s creations. If creatures view themselves at odds with each other—if humankind sees itself at odds with its earthly home—then we live outside the potential of reconciliation and atonement. The spiritual creation of all things, as explained in restoration scripture, parallels facts we are only beginning to understand about how trees are animated and related in the natural world. As urgent as the climate crisis is, the realization that we are all interconnected is crucial if we are to have any hope of rising to its urgency; we can only move through it together. New research reveals that modern assumptions about the survival of the fittest, through competition, are not exactly true of forests. In forests, trees nurture their direct descendants, and trees of different species share carbon, nitrogen, and other resources through a vast network of fungi beneath the ground, thus promoting the health of the whole forest.¹⁹ We will only manage the forests if we understand the way individual trees relate to each other. So, too, will we only manage ourselves when we understand our relation to all living, earthly beings. Restoration scripture’s call for atonement on behalf of all creation is precisely an invitation to set right the nature/culture relationship.²⁰ The power of trees to save humanity is not absolute, but trees absolutely have a role to play in every possible human future.

One way of setting right the nature/culture divide is to move beyond our inheritance of false ideas about forests and trees. By coming to see the forests as the “shadow of civilization”, in Harrison’s apt phrase, and by viewing trees as objects to use or obstacles to human progress, contemporary culture considers trees in a sacrilegious manner. Correcting impious thoughts about forests and trees is not synonymous with idolizing them. Valuing forests and trees is fundamentally found in the theological virtue of love, for it is possible to love forests and trees. Love can find expression through appreciation for the agency—spiritual and natural—of forests and trees. This includes acknowledging and respecting their sacred right to exist and to flourish. If being is dwelling, our task is to be with and dwell with “all the precious trees of the earth”, which were given to us to make our home. We cannot imagine a world without trees. Indeed, this review of scripture shows that we cannot even imagine other worlds without trees. Restoration scripture emphasizes that we may imagine trees spiritually and virtually, and in so doing catch a glimpse of possibilities, including messianic possibilities, not readily visible in the everydayness of being. Human beings are apt generally to miss the extraordinary nature of the beings with which we cohabit the earth (Abram 1997). This is true of trees, perhaps because wood is one of the foremost “inanimate” objects with which we build our worlds. Alas, around every corner lurks our nature/culture disability. Yet, this disability makes apparent the ever-present need to perceive the more-than-human world in its own sphere, something it seems we are only beginning to do. Seeing the world from primarily the human point of view always puts humanity in the foreground. Yet foregrounding the beingness of trees as well as their ever-present capacity to constitute our dwelling place, as restoration scripture seeks to do, may well be the best way of securing a dwelling place.

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Notes

- ¹ See Ord (2021). The philosopher Toby Ord faces the existential threat climate change presents to humanity. This is not the concern that 90% of human beings could die, but the possibility that every single human being, and thus all of humanity, could be wiped from the earth. Nuclear weapons, artificial intelligence, and the climate crisis are the most likely things to bring this about, and we have a very small window with all three of them to marshal ourselves in our own defense. Even if we do not witness the extinction of human life, it is quite apparent that we are witness to the transformation of Earth-life as we know it.

- 2 A lot of literature on the Anthropocene deals with the concept of taking care as an essential responsibility that falls on human beings. See, for example, [Kimmerer \(2013\)](#) and [Haraway \(2016\)](#).
- 3 See [Serres \(1995\)](#) for a melancholic view of the modern world view.
- 4 There has been a flowering of works of late on the agency of trees, including [Preston \(2008\)](#), [Wohlleben \(2015\)](#), [Jahren \(2016\)](#), [Trouet \(2020\)](#), [Simard \(2021\)](#), and [Lowman \(2021\)](#). For more on the agency of living things, see [Latour \(2017\)](#), especially lecture 2. It is also important to note here that trees play a crucial role in many world mythologies, spiritual practices, and religions. From the Bodhi tree under which Siddhartha sat as he gained enlightenment to Yggdrasil, the Tree of the World, or the Cosmic Tree holding up the nine realms in Norse mythology, trees have always been at the roots of cosmogonies and cosmologies of all kinds. For more on some of these cosmic trees, see [Eliade \(1982\)](#), pp. 157–58, 401–2) and [Eliade \(1985\)](#), pp. 7–8, 15–16). The Qur'an also refers to the tree of immortality or the tree of eternity at 20: 120. Native American spiritual practices also establish strong relationships between humans and trees. For example, see [Kimmerer \(2013\)](#) and [Simpson \(2020\)](#) for more on the strong relationships with maple trees kindled by the indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes regions.
- 5 For more on just how much trees have to tell us about our past, see Valerie [Trouet \(2020\)](#).
- 6 In a now classic Latter-day Saint sermon, Hugh B. Brown, a member of the faith's First Presidency at the time, compares the interventions of God in his own life to that of a gardener pruning a bush. See [Brown \(1968\)](#).
- 7 [Emerson \(1841\)](#) concludes his essay, "Compensation", with the image of a tree not unlike the one found in Ezekiel. Calamity occurs in our lives, Emerson writes, but there arises from calamity some compensation that makes of us "the banian of the forest, yielding shade and fruit to wide neighborhoods of men."
- 8 The literature on the Book of Mormon is voluminous. In the twenty-first century, conversations begin with [Givens \(2002\)](#). See also [Hardy \(2010\)](#) and [Gutjahr \(2012\)](#). For insight on how the Book of Mormon disrupted American Protestantism, see [Fenton \(2013\)](#), [Hickman \(2019\)](#), and [Coviello \(2019\)](#).
- 9 The most striking text making use of the imagery of husbandry in a vineyard as a metaphor for Israel is the extended parable of the olive tree in Jacob 5, the longest chapter in the Book of Mormon.
- 10 For more on the peculiar meaning of translation in Joseph Smith's project, see [Brown \(2020\)](#) and [McKay et al. \(2020\)](#).
- 11 See also Doctrine and Covenants 29:31–33; 77:2; Moses 6:51.
- 12 For more on this unique interpretation of Ezekiel, see [Givens \(2002\)](#), pp. 95, 194).
- 13 See, for example, the powerful essay on dreams by [Jung \(1964\)](#), pp. 1–94).
- 14 Again, virtual does not mean false, or bad. While we all know the difference between a Zoom meeting and a face-to-face meeting, it will in fact be a long time before we have plumbed the depths of the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the differences. We have "attended" many meetings in the last eighteen months which it would not have been possible to "attend" before, while we have undoubtedly missed out on many events to which we might have walked or driven. That much of our connection with one another was virtual during a pandemic is both to be lamented and celebrated, but it is not to be seen as false or unreal. Certainly, we lost out on a lot, but look at all we could do thanks to the strength of virtual technologies such as Zoom.
- 15 See Doctrine and Covenants 58:2–4.
- 16 For a key reading of how Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision relate to covenant theology in Isaiah, see [Spencer \(2020\)](#), pp. 26–43).
- 17 For more on the allegory of the olive tree, see [Ricks and Welch \(1994\)](#). See also [Green \(2020\)](#).
- 18 For more on how this passage uses the planting of a seed to explain faith, see [Wrathall \(2020\)](#), pp. 46–68) and [Sorenson \(1992\)](#).
- 19 See [Simard \(2021\)](#). See also [Horowitz \(2021\)](#) for more on how societies organized around mutual benefit are better than those in which most of us are currently living.
- 20 For example, while it is a popular belief that trees can save us from the carbon we release into the atmosphere, in reality our situation is more complex. We cannot weather the worst effects of the climate crisis if we do not cut carbon emissions, yet trees hold some power to mitigate the danger of CO2 in the atmosphere. Two short films from the Economist show what trees can and cannot do for humanity. See [Collinson \(2019b\)](#) and [Collinson \(2019a\)](#).

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