

Article

“A World in a Grain of Sand”: The Book of Nature and Restoration Theology

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Abstract: Augustine (354–430) is considered to be the first Christian scholar to refer to the Creation’s witness of God as the Book of Nature. For centuries, in conjunction with scripture, the Book of Nature was considered in Christianity to be a second witness of God. These two witnesses were also stressed in Judaism, beginning with the Torah’s account of the Creation. The Book of Nature was prominent in Islam as the faith emerged in the 7th century. However, by the 16th century reliance on the Book of Nature began to wane for all these traditions as allegorical interpretation of the natural world gave way to scriptural literalism, partially in response to emerging scientific advances. The appearance of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a self-identified restoration theology in the early nineteenth century should arguably reopen and clarify the Book of Nature in the faith. However, contemporary Latter-day Saint hermeneutics have limited the Creation’s status in the faith’s ontology. The Latter-day Saint theological ideal, supported by the scriptural canon of the faith, counters contemporary neglect, inviting greater attention to and respect for the Book of Nature among the Latter-day Saint community.

Keywords: Book of Nature; restoration theology; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Book of Mormon; Christian Ecotheology; hermeneutics



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1. Introduction

Beginning from the faith’s founding in 1830, Latter-day Saints have viewed their faith as a restoration of correct doctrine and practices distorted over centuries of deliberate as well as good-intentioned but unknowing error. The restoration is viewed as being ongoing within the faith.¹ Given this foundation, Latter-day Saint restoration doctrine pertaining to the natural world should be prominent in the faith’s ontology, as the emphasis the natural world has received throughout the history of all Abrahamic faith traditions has been significant. Yet, questions remain about how the natural world now fits and how it may eventually fit into the teleology of both mankind and more-than-human life in the faith. Among the not fully answered questions is how the natural world should be read or interpreted by those experiencing mortal life to enhance faith in the Divine. Interpreting the natural world through the lens of faith has long been referred to as reading the Book of Nature.

The primary purpose of this paper is to propose how the Book of Nature could reasonably be interpreted through the lens of the sacred texts accepted by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.² A review of the Latter-day Saint canon reveals extensive focus on the Book of Nature. Yet, in what manner the Book of Nature should be read by adherents has received comparatively limited emphasis in contemporary Latter-day Saint messages and literature (Brown 2011). Opportunities for better alignment between formal theology and application of the Book of Nature are apparent. As they are clarified and perhaps expanded they could be considered to be one manifestation of an ongoing restoration as understood in the Latter-day Saint lexicon.

A brief review of the Book of Nature in early Christianity and Judaism as well as in Islam will be presented first, followed by an approach for interpreting the Book of Nature

through the lens of the Latter-day Saint canon. Finally, the use of the Book of Nature in contemporary Latter-day Saint culture is reviewed.

2. Book of Nature According to Early Christianity and Judaism

Genesis 1:26 reads, “And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.” This summation of the Biblical account of the Creation and other related scriptural statements encouraged early and medieval Christian theologians to conclude that “God had bequeathed not one but two books to mankind; the book of scriptures and the book of nature, both of which had to be read in order to come to a true knowledge of him” (Mills 1982, p. 239). According to these theologians, reading the Book of Nature required the ability to correctly interpret symbols found in the common elements of life. Nature was thought to be a “great picture-book of the truths of salvation in whose pages God, the devil, and between them, man, figured” (Biese 1905, p. 156). British poet William Blake (1757–1827) elegantly highlighted this divinely illuminating artistry when he began his poem “Auguries of Innocence” with the words “To see a world in a grain of sand” (Blake 1988).

Reading the Book of Nature assumed that faith could be ignited and enhanced by inferring divine truth through contemplative interaction with the natural world (Calloway 2019). Ideally, this interaction would be guided by written scripture so that orthodox comparisons could be made between what was inferred and what God had already revealed in the written word (Harrison 2006).

During much of history, when literacy rates were low and printed materials were mostly unavailable, the Book of Nature was especially important for common people to connect with God. John Chrysostom (1842, p. 163) remarked of this era, “. . . the illiterate man would have gone away without receiving any benefit . . . unless someone else had assisted his course . . . This however cannot be said with respect to the heavens.” It was understood that instruction and edification were available in the heavens and in the earth if one knew how to interpret the divine ubiquitous symbols found therein. However, reliance on the Book of Nature began to wane by the sixteenth century in favor of scriptural literalism, in part because “the Reformers were quite clearly attempting to rescue the text of the Scriptures from what, in their eyes at least, were the corrupting obfuscations of their medieval predecessors.” Luther is reported to have said, “Allegory is for weak minds and idle men” (Harrison 2006, p. 123). Therefore, “. . . in the transition to modernity the book was silenced” (Ingold 2013, p. 734). Allegorical reading of the Book of Nature was discouraged as *solo Scriptura* was championed by Protestant Reformers aligned with the Lutheran and Calvinistic schools of thought.

Concern for unwitting departures from the doctrine taught in written scripture was not the only factor responsible for reducing reliance on the Book of Nature. Scientific advances began to challenge traditional interpretations of the Book of Nature at the time of the Reformation, particularly advances centered on the age and genesis of the earth and some of its prominent features (Greyerz 2016). Other common allegorical interpretations lost favor as well, especially those that assumed interpretative certainty. Specific natural events, objects, or species have sometimes been thought to reveal specific dogmatic religious truth. For instance, the pelican became “an enduring symbol of Christ’s atonement” (Harrison 2006, p. 121). Consequently, pelicans were prominently displayed in medieval iconography and literature. Concern about how allegorical certainty would mesh with advances in biological and other sciences enticed the Reformers to discourage Book of Nature allegories.

Religious leaders were reexamining what had been a commonly accepted fourfold purpose of scripture, namely identifying divine truth using literal, allegorical, moral, and analogical hermeneutics. Strictly interpreted allegories involving natural world events and features, such as the parting of the Red Sea, or individual species, such as pelicans, came to be less favored than had been the case before major scientific advances began in the sixteenth century. Some have argued the quest for religious certainty was impoverished during the Reformation as two witnesses were reduced to one. Reliance on the Book of

Nature, long viewed “as a pathway to the knowledge of God and as a partner in salvation,” was greatly diminished for a time in favor of reliance on the literal word alone (McCarthy and Tuchman 2018, p. 945). However, the Book of Nature reemerged from the turbulent interplay between advancing science and religious reformation to stand for many as more of an overarching witness of God’s majesty and omnipotence, rather than a precise text designed to elucidate specific religious dogma.

Growing scientific understanding of the complexity found in the natural world led to a “new shape of physico-theology” that argued understanding the language of science was, in fact, learning to read the language of God (Greyerz 2016, p. 704). Science and religion found common ground. While Reformation leaders believed that specific tenets such as the atonement of Christ or the triune Godhead could not confidently be inferred from the Book of Nature, they did accept that the complexity of the natural world could be viewed as a testament of intelligent design undertaken by an omnipotent Creator. This common ground between faith and science was developed most famously by William Paley (1743–1805), as outlined by his well-known watchmaker theory (Paley 1803).

3. Book of Nature in Islam

Islamic emphasis on the Book of Nature was influenced by the same concerns and developments but in a somewhat different manner. Islamic Book of Nature hermeneutics arguably emphasizes certain aspects of the Book of Nature more directly than in Jewish and Christian traditions, such as the use of extended metaphors or well-defined allegories consistent with early Jewish and Christian readings of the Book of Nature. Nevertheless, in Islam learning from the Book of Nature is still considered to be secondary to learning from revealed law. The Book of Nature is viewed as more of a window to “God’s existence, unity, perfect power and wisdom,” instead of a well-delineated road map for understanding how one should live harmoniously with the will of Allah (Morrison 2013, p. 8). This is the case even though well-defined allegories persist in Islam more so than in Jewish and Christian traditions. Some examples from Islamic Book of Nature hermeneutics will be presented here, as they may be helpful in framing how the Book of Nature could be read according to the Latter-day Saint faith.

Similar to Judaism and Christianity until medieval times, Islam relied heavily on the Book of Nature for ontological understanding as the faith emerged.³ Whereas early Christianity and Judaism relied on various extra-scriptural interpretations of how one ought to read the Book of Nature in conjunction with sacred texts, Islam’s emphasis on how to read the Book of Nature is more explicit in the Qur’an.

In Islam the two sacred texts are sometimes referred to as the written Qur’an and the cosmic Qur’an. The link between the two is not casual. “[Scholars] remained fully aware of the fact that the Qur’an refers to the phenomena of nature and events within the soul of man as *ayat* (literally signs and symbols), a term that is also used for the verses of the Qur’an” (Nasr 1998, p. 120).⁴ The direct link between verses in the Qur’an and the phenomena of nature is so intimate that they have the same name.

Islamic hermeneutics stresses how an allegorical interpretation of the Book of Nature can provide in-depth instruction about God as one is prepared to learn more about Him. The Qur’an identifies 99 names for Allah. Each name reveals something of His attributes to mankind, and each name is made manifest by *ayat* both in the Qur’an and in the Book of Nature or the cosmic Qur’an to those who are prepared to correctly interpret them.

Ottoman Islamic theologian Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876–1960) described how extended metaphors in Islamic *ayats* help the reader understand seemingly unfathomable truths about God’s nature (Turner 2019). As an example, a nearly unfathomable truth of God’s nature made more accessible through the extended metaphor is the breath of the All-Merciful or *nafas al-rahmān*. This extended metaphor was advanced by medieval Sufi writer Ibn al-Arabī (d. 638/1240). He argued that by divine design, our ceaseless act of breathing aids mankind in learning something about how Allah brings into being and sustains all things in the physical world.

Breath is not merely a convenient object lesson in Islam. Rather, the All-Merciful deliberately provided mankind with this extended metaphor so that we might comprehend, imperfectly and only by degrees as we are prepared to learn by revelation, how He creates and sustains all (Chittick 1998). Muslims posit that no more obvious lesson about the nature of the All-Merciful could be given to remind of us our dependence on Him and of His ceaseless engagement in Creation than our own breath.

A complete review of how the Book of Nature is understood in Islamic ontology is beyond the scope of this work. Indeed, according to Nursi, whose exegesis of the Qur'an, *Risāle-i nūr*, totaled over 6000 pages, no work is capable of doing justice to the Book of Nature. He stated, "The face of the earth is but a single page in the book of the cosmos... Every fruit is a letter, and every seed is a dot. In that dot is contained the index of the whole tree in its vastness. A book such as this can have been inscribed only by the mighty pen of a Possessor of Glory Who enjoys the attributes of splendor and beauty, and Who is the holder of infinite wisdom and power. Faith, then, follows inevitably on the observation of the world" (Nursi 2014, p. 93). When interpreting the Qur'an, the obvious ought to be understood as only the beginning of divine instruction that is contained in layers upon layers of meaning accessible through a combination of study and revelation (Ibrahim 1980).

Consequently, despite how ubiquitous the Book of Nature is assumed to be for mankind according to Islamic theology, the religion stresses that its full significance remains mostly hidden except to those who study it with faith. To Muslims, study of the Book of Nature is more of a revelatory process than it is an academic process because the Book of Nature is sacred and, as such, can only be fully read in theological fashion by those who are prepared to receive divine insights (Yucel and Sivri 2009).⁵

The emphasis Islam places on preparation-dependent, revelatory reading of the Book of Nature is consistent with the views of some Jewish and Christian scholars. For instance, Menning extends the written scripture pedagogical practice of *lectio divina*, a sacramental or ritualistic approach to learning, to reading the Book of Nature. Menning stresses that *lectio divina* leads us toward "becoming more attentive, more thoughtful, more committed, more reverent, and more humble as we encounter the natural world" (Menning 2016, p. 171). The development of godlike characteristics like these are argued to be essential if we hope to learn from the Book of Nature through revelatory means.

4. The Book of Nature in Restoration Theology

Our attention now is focused on how the Book of Nature can arguably be read according to the canon of restoration theology. The canon contains nearly 900 pages of scripture in addition to the Bible, with hundreds of extra-Biblical references to the Book of Nature. Is this foundation consistent with or does it depart from or extend beyond the Book of Nature hermeneutics traditionally accepted in other Abrahamic traditions?

A review of restoration theology does not provide any indication that specific natural world objects, events, or processes are allegorically aligned with precise doctrinal tenets, such as the pelican allegory described earlier. However, the review does indicate that the omniscience of God, including His intentional design, is evident in the entirety of the natural world. One cannot view the natural world with spiritually aware eyes and not see the hand of God, according to restoration theology. The review must then focus on how the hand of God is seen according to restoration theology and how seeing the hand of God makes a difference for the individual who perceives it.

According to restoration theology, seeing the hand of God in the Book of Nature must be aligned with the *raison d'être* for humanity's mortal existence. The teleology of the faith states that mankind is engaged in a divinely orchestrated plan that enables humanity to progress from an immature spiritual state to one that is fully in harmony with the character of God. To be consistent with this teleology, reading the Book of Nature must contribute to the development of an increasingly refined spiritual state or the Book of Nature would be incidental or even dispensable in the plan for mankind's progress.

The degree to which progress can occur according to Latter-day Saint teleology differs from most other faith traditions by arguing that character development has no limit, as may be consistent with the eschatology of most other Christian and Abrahamic traditions. Restoration theology envisions ongoing progression for those who accept the requirements for becoming more as God is until they have developed the attributes of godliness in perfection. Founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Joseph Smith (1805–1844) wrote, “These teachings of the Savior most clearly show unto us the nature of salvation, and what He proposed unto the human family . . . He proposed to make them like unto Himself” (Smith 1985, p. 79). The path of progress is known by many titles in Latter-day Saint theology, including one that is particularly apropos for this paper, “The merciful plan of the Great Creator” (2 Nephi 9:6, BM).

Further, restoration theology is unique in affirming that every person lived as a spirit child of God prior to our mortal sojourn. Thus, the path of progress began in a pre-mortal state where mankind had the opportunity to choose to experience mortality in a council attended by all. According to restoration theology, God the Father declared the following during the council, “We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon they may dwell; And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God will command them” (Abraham 3:24–25, PGP). Clearly, with this belief, mortal life is an indispensable component of the merciful plan of the Great Creator, and the earth’s role in mankind’s progress can hardly be overstated. The Book of Nature ought to be of great interest to all who accept restoration theology as framed by its canon.

As noted, support for the integral status of the Creation in mankind’s progress is extensive in restoration theology and cannot be fully reviewed in one paper. To facilitate a concise review, a model that integrates major themes is presented below. As with any model, the model cannot include every element of the ontology it represents.⁶ However, the model of the Creation’s role in the merciful plan of the Great Creator is based on well-supported doctrinal concepts and is consistent with statements made by Joseph Smith concerning mankind’s journey of progression. In 1835, he stated:

Let us here observe, that three things are necessary in order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God unto life and salvation. First, the idea that He actually exists. Secondly, a correct idea of His character, perfection, and attributes. Thirdly, an actual knowledge that the course of life which he is pursuing is according to His will. For without an acquaintance with these three important facts, the faith of every rational being must be imperfect and unproductive; but with this understanding it can become perfect and fruitful, abounding in righteousness, unto the praise of and glory of God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

(Smith 1985, p. 38)

This statement points to an expansive path to progress, as well as suggesting that mankind can journey along that path only by an undeviating commitment to its direction. Supported by statements such as this, the proposed model for Latter-day Saint Book of Nature hermeneutics is presented here.

Though the model is cyclical and expansionary, at a rudimentary level, there is pedagogical benefit to considering a sequence of steps. However, as will be explained, after initial lessons from the Book of Nature have been internalized, the boundaries between the sections in the model become blurred as movement from one section to another involves overlap and synchronistic development. Following a brief overview, each section will be supported by references from the restoration theology canon.

The upper left section of Figure 1 is labeled “Testament.” A starting point for reading the Book of Nature can be beginning to see natural phenomena as witnesses of God’s existence. Moving to the upper right section, a testament of God’s existence can lead to “Adoration,” defined in the model as becoming aware that we are individually dependent from moment to moment on the Creator for our existence. Adoration suggests a movement

from awareness of God's existence in general to an awareness that God is personally invested in each individual's welfare.

The Book of Nature in Restoration Theology

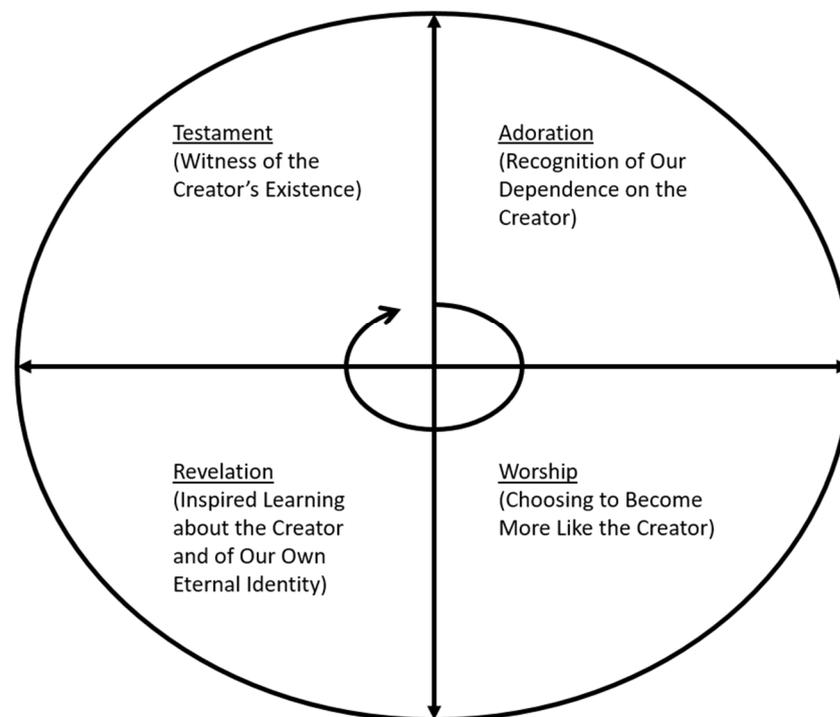


Figure 1. Kelson: Latter-Day Saint Book of Nature Hermeneutics Model.

The section in the lower right is labeled "Worship." Worship is distinguished from adoration by being defined as the desire to become like the Being who is personally adored. Emulation is often described in restoration theology as the purest form of worship.⁷ Finally, the section in the lower left is labeled "Revelation." This section highlights how reading the Book of Nature accurately can lead to insights that reach beyond the limits of our own understanding. In restoration theology none can confidently reach the section in the lower left section unless they have moved through every other section in the model, as revelation is dependent on our preparation to receive it. "That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day" (DC 50:24). More detail in support of this idea is contained in sections that follow.

As a learner engages with the Book of Nature, repeating as many cycles as can be traversed, the circle expands until perfect understanding is achieved, which Latter-day Saints envision will occur well beyond mortality. However, if sections are ignored, then the circle does not expand and may even diminish. Attention will now be given to each section of the model with supporting references from sacred texts relied upon in restoration theology.

5. The Book of Nature as a Testament of God's Existence

The Book of Nature as a witness of God's existence has an immediate reference point for all mankind: our physical bodies are made of the same elements present in all life and all of Creation. As has been popularly stated, our bodies are stardust. "Everything we are and everything in the universe and on earth originated from stardust, and it continually floats through us even today. It directly connects us to the universe, rebuilding our bodies over and again over our lifetimes" (Worrall 2015). Faced with such an intimate connection

to all that exists in the physical world, it is natural to ponder the spiritual dimensions of our ongoing connection to the entirety of the cosmos.

Restoration theology affirms the eternal nature of our link to all of God's Creation: "For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fullness of joy; And when separated, man cannot receive a fullness of joy. The elements are the tabernacle of God; yea, man is the tabernacle of God, even temples" (DC 93:33–35). The elements found in the totality of the physical world are eternal, and all of these elements, including those in our own bodies, are tabernacles of God. A tabernacle is understood to be a house of God where His spirit can dwell. Brigham Young (1801–1877) stated, "There is not one particle of element, which is not filled with life . . . There is life in all matter, throughout the vast extent of all the eternities; it is in the rock, the sand, the dust, in water, and gasses, and in short, in every description and organization of matter whether it be solid, liquid or gaseous, particle operating within particle" (Young 1856).

The Book of Mormon supports the perpetual link between the Creation and the Creator. In a passage pointing to how the Creation responded to the death of Christ, we read, "And the rocks of the earth must rend; and because of the groanings of the earth, many of kings of the isles of the sea shall be wrought upon by the Spirit of God to exclaim: The God of nature suffers" (1 Nephi 19:12, BM). One may consider how the eternal elements in the bodies of mankind would have responded to the same event.

Despite the potential transforming power of mankind's link with eternal elements, "Religious thinkers have often ignored this aspect of human nature in preference to abstract, disembodied thinking that separates mind, soul and spirit from the physical aspects of the body" (King 2013, p. 7). King argues further that relegating the physical world to non-spiritual status has lessened our ability to connect with God. King argues pointedly that spiritual awakening in children has been impeded as they struggle to perceive a loving God who they are taught is distant and abstract. The distant, abstract notion of God is refuted directly in restoration theology's support for God's existence in every element at all times.

The perpetual link between the Creator and all of the Creation is further validated in restoration theology. "The scriptures are laid before thee, yea, and *all* things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which do move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator" (Alma 30:44, BM, emphasis added). Further supporting the all-inclusiveness of the Creation's witness of the Creator, ". . . *all* things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath: *all* things bear record of me" (Moses 6:63, PGP, emphasis added). Every particle of the Creation, every fruit and seed, every human and more-than-human body, and every grain of sand, is a self-manifesting witness of God's existence according to a plain reading of restoration theology.

Though this tenet is indisputable in restoration theology, how does a person come to accept the Creation's witness of God? Spiritual awakening has been described as a mysterious process, not defined by traditional logic, and its genesis is beyond the scope of this paper (King 2013). Nevertheless, it can be noted that perceiving complexity, beauty, immense energy, or personal blessings associated with the Creation may catalyze a spiritual awakening. This viewpoint is consistent with the physico-theology approach to the Book of Nature described earlier.

A precise understanding of the identity of the Creator is not assumed to be necessary for the Book of Nature to spark a nascent understanding of the link between the Creator and the Creation. For instance, The Book of Mormon contains accounts of rulers who had something of a physico-theological perspective without knowing the precise nature of God. One account reads, "Believes thou that there is a great Spirit? And he said, Yea. And Ammon said: This is God. And Ammon said unto him again: Believeest thou that this

Great Spirit, who is God, created all things which are in heaven and in the earth? And he said: Yea, I believe that he created all things which are in the earth; but I do not know the heavens" (Alma 18:26–29, BM).

Latter-day Saints believe that an incomplete understanding of God sparked by the Book of Nature is not uncommon. Consider one supportive statement made by Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008), who served as the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 1995–2008, "Can any man who has walked beneath the stars at night, can anyone who has seen the touch of spring upon the land doubt the hand of divinity in creation?" (Hinckley 1978). Consequently, astronomer Sir William Herschel's (1738–1822) famous pronouncement is not surprising, "The undevout astronomer must be mad." Non-specific awareness voiced by keen observers of the natural world from any perspective resonate with the Latter-day Saint view. Ecologist and botanist Frank Egler (1911–1996) coined the weighty phrase, "Ecosystems are not only more complex than we think; they're more complex than we can think." Faced with the inescapable truth of incomprehensible complexity in ecosystem relationships, some scientists have likened the complexity evident in the natural world to the mind of God (Porter 1999). This non-specific awareness, meaning an embryonic spiritual awakening sparked by astute, science-motivated observations of the natural world, is harmonious with restoration theology. It also hearkens back to the integration of science and religion that occurred during the time of the Reformation.

6. The Book of Nature as an Invitation for Adoration

If one is convinced of the Creation's witness of the Creator, restoration theology purports that adoration may but does not necessarily follow. Adoration in the model is defined as the realization that we are personally constantly dependent upon the Creator of all. Emphasis is given here to personal dependence. If this consciousness occurs, it alters our connection to the Creator from an abstract to an individual and ongoing association. Many channels from the Book of Nature can facilitate the sense of individual dependence on the Creator according to restoration theology.

The deep allegorical connection between breathing and a personal dependence on God, as was described in the Islamic tradition, is also considered to be an opportunity to enhance adoration in restoration theology: "I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants" (Mosiah 2:21, BM). If mankind accepts that the Creator lends each person every single breath, an impersonal Creator gives way to a personally and constantly aware Creator. While vital but more abstract concepts, such as sensing forgiveness of sins and feeling peace during trials, can lead to adoration, restoration theology supports the idea that physical constructs can also lead to sustained and profound feelings of adoration.

Continuing, personal reverence can expand when beauty is recognized in a world that would not have to be beautiful if physical sustenance were the only reason for its existence. Restoration theology emphasizes that beauty is not incidental to the Creation: "Yea, all things which come of the earth, in the season thereof, are made for the benefit and the use of man, both to please the eye and to gladden the heart" (DC 59:18). Enlivening our souls through the beauty of the Creation can occur in infinite and intimate ways. Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918), who served as the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 1901–1918, stated:

Every day we stumble over the beauties of nature that we have not the power of admiration to appropriate into our own lives. We have eyes, and see not, for that which we cannot appreciate or admire we are largely blind to, no matter how beautiful or inspiring it may be. As children of God, it is our duty to appreciate and worship Him in His creations . . . Then we should train ourselves to see, we should be constantly in search of that which is beautiful and divinely impressive.

Thus, little by little, we learn to associate the glories of the creation with an all-wise Creator.”

(Smith 1904, p. 628)

This statement suggests an individual tutoring process, made possible as we read the Book of Nature according to the light of our own desires and efforts.

7. The Book of Nature’s Invitation to Worship

As humanity’s sense of dependence on the Creator deepens by personal engagement with the Book of Nature, restoration theology supports the idea that people may sense a growing desire to model their lives after a loving and involved Creator whose interaction with them and with all of the Creation is increasingly perceived to be “full of grace and truth” (2 Nephi 2:6, BM). In other words, people sense that they are blessed and rewarded far beyond anything they deserve, which may lead to a humble desire to improve.

As 1 John 4:19 explains further, “We love Him because He first loved us.” Recognizing that the Creator sustains every life and tutors every willing pupil in an individual manner can awaken a desire to grow to love as He does. Restoration theology emphasizes, “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:44–45). In the context of worship, improvement necessitates an expanding ability to love.

Restoration theology understands that developing the ability to love is a journey rather than a single decision. Among the supporting accounts for this truth in the written canon is an illuminating record described in The Book of Mormon as “The Vision of the Tree of Life.” In the vision, experienced by the prophets Lehi and Nephi, people are seen as travelers seeking one of two destinations. The first destination is a luminous, white tree which has “beauty exceeding all beauty” and which is set in a “large and spacious field” (1 Nephi 8:8–9, BM). The tree is identified as the tree of life and, consistent with Biblical descriptions, is the source of a fountain of pure water (Revelation 22:1–2). The water of life and the fruit of the tree of life are for “the healing of the nations.” The Book of Mormon identifies the tree, its fruit, and the pure water that flows from its base as all representative of the “love of God” embodied in Jesus Christ (1 Nephi 11:25, BM).

Conversely, the alternative destination in the vision is a “large and spacious building” (1 Nephi 11:35, BM) rising imposingly but tenuously on the other side of a deep chasm carved out by a torrential river of filthy water. The juxtaposed dichotomy between the field and the building using the same adjectives, “large and spacious,” is unmistakable. They are diametrical opposites. The manmade edifice, an imposing building represents “the pride of the world” (1 Nephi 11:36, BM), while the unsullied Creation represents the “love of God.” Seeking the pride of the world involves a dangerous journey through filthiness, while seeking the love of God requires willingness to undertake an arduous and courageous journey of faith.

When the prophet Lehi reaches the tree of life and partakes of the love of God, he beckons his family to join him, but not all choose to do so. His two oldest sons, Laman and Lemuel, refuse to complete the journey and turn away to other paths. In multiple accounts, The Book of Mormon describes Laman and Lemuel as reluctant participants in true worship. They knew well their dependence on the Creator, as He had miraculously saved them from starvation and had led them safely across the ocean. However, they chose not to worship the Creator by humbly seeking to become more like Him. They failed to internalize the love of God, and subsequently, for centuries many of their descendants became antagonists to those who did choose to internalize the love of God.

Another Book of Mormon prophet/leader, King Benjamin, further emphasizes the promise for those who choose to reach the tree of life instead of rejecting it as did Laman and Lemuel. King Benjamin’s record states that if people seek the tree of life they will “be filled with the love of God, and always retain a remission of your sins; and ye shall grow

in the knowledge of the glory of him that created you, or in the knowledge of that which is just and true. And ye will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due" (Mosiah 4:12–13, BM). He identifies, as do other Book of Mormon prophets, the identity of the Creator. "And he shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning; and his mother shall be called Mary" (Mosiah 3:8, BM). In restoration theology, reading the Book of Nature means growing in knowledge and in love of Jesus Christ and, relatedly, of all that He has created.

As mankind internalizes the love of the Creator, it is natural to ponder the immediate and the eternal welfare of His Creation just as He does. Faith-directed stewardship of the natural world is considered in restoration theology to be evidence that love for both the Creator and the Creation is developing. Others have written extensively about how faith-directed stewardship of the Creation can be directed by restoration theology. Accordingly, the theme will not be developed in depth here.⁸

Love-motivated worship extends to the hope that mankind's relationship with the Creation will continue beyond their mortal lives. Through love-motivated worship, the earth is increasingly understood to be far more than a temporary laboratory or an academic classroom. Restoration theology gives substance to this enduring connection, including the directive Tenth Article of Faith, which states that "the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory." Early Latter-day Saint leader Parley P. Pratt (1807–1857) added more context to our persistent connection with the Creation:

"From a general traditional belief in an immaterial hereafter, many have concluded that the earth and all material things would be annihilated as mere temporary structures; that the material body and the planet it occupies make no part of eternal life and being . . . [And] that the whole vast works and beautiful designs of the visible creation are a kind of necessary evil or clog on the spiritual life, and are of no possible use except to serve for the time being . . . What a doleful picture! . . . All this wisdom of design, all this labor of execution, after serving a momentary purpose, to be thrown away as an encumbrance to real existence and happiness; all these 'spiritual,' 'immaterial' vagaries have no foundation in truth."

(Pratt 1978, p. 33)

In restoration theology Book of Nature hermeneutics, any who have reached the worship phase of the Book of Nature model would enthusiastically agree that a blessed life cannot persist without an ongoing interaction with the Creation.

8. The Book of Nature as a Revelatory Channel

The final section of the model in Figure 1, as emphasized previously, is not confidently attainable without engagement in the first three sections. Restoration theology emphasizes that there are limits to what mankind can understand about the Creation unless they are taught directly by the Creator, and they have personal responsibility for making that possible. Joseph Smith counseled:

"The things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! If thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity . . . Let honesty, and sobriety, and candor, and solemnity, and virtue, and pureness, and meekness, and simplicity crown our heads in every place; and in fine, become as little children, without malice, guile or hypocrisy . . . If ye do these things, and exercise fervent prayer and faith in the sight of God always, He shall give unto you knowledge by His Holy Spirit".

((History 1838–1856, p. 904(b)))⁹

Unitarian Pastor James Martineau (1805–1900) concurred, as he instructed that we cannot know the things of God except through “the hermeneutics of a godlike spirit” (Martineau 1938, p. 455). These viewpoints are consistent with Islamic reliance on a revelatory reading of the Book of Nature, as well as the *lectio divina* pedagogy emphasized by Menning (2016).

As mankind progresses toward their eternal potential, restoration theology teaches that they come to understand through revelation how the Creation is over-flowing with extended metaphors designed to enlighten their understanding of eternal truth and thus draw them closer to the Creator of all. These extended metaphors can be interpreted as divinely orchestrated gateways to greater light and knowledge, but revelatory keys are necessary to fully and accurately unlock them. “And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh” (DC 84:21). Subsequently, revelatory understanding of the Book of Nature is an individualized process and may not be shared well with others whose experiences differ.

The same natural world event or process can have different meanings for different people or even for the same person at different stages in his or her development. While early Christian readings of the Book of Nature sometimes sought to identify the specific lesson taught by a natural world object or process, the extended metaphor revelatory-reading approach counters inflexible Book of Nature hermeneutics (Harrison 2006). To emphasize, “The Book of Nature is found in particular places and times, when we discover that a sense of meaning beckons to be created and recreated through our presence there” (Clingerman 2009, p. 81). A presence means not only a physical presence but also a spiritual acuity, which are both necessary for revelatory lessons from the Book of Nature to be imparted to those who are fully prepared for instruction. The idea of spiritual acuity according to restoration theology is developed further in paragraphs that follow.

A person who has begun the cycle of reading the Book of Nature may, for instance, view trees as a welcome gift from the Creator because of the lumber they can provide. Later, additional significance may come as the inspired reader cycles to understanding enhanced by revelatory instruction. The metaphysical beauty of trees may be increasingly recognized. Then, the same trees may eventually come to be recognized as living beings, companions, and even teachers with whom we can communicate and in whose company we long to remain (Clingerman 2009). Additional understanding doesn’t negate the validity of earlier understanding. Instead, it builds upon the truths already known.

Additionally, revelation is not always understood to be an increased mystical understanding of the Creation. In some, perhaps most, instances it is understood in restoration theology to be a “tender mercy” personally crafted to remind the pupil that he or she is known and loved by God. Thus, people can be reassured that while current circumstances may be difficult and confusing, the end will be clear and rewarding. A contemporary Latter-day Saint leader clarified, “He who fashioned this world can calm the seas with His word . . . Likewise, events and associations unfold in each of our lives that further God’s work on earth . . . The Lord’s hand is guiding you. By ‘divine design,’ He is in the small details of your life as well as in the major milestones” (Rasband 2017). Accordingly, a happening in the Book of Nature that may have little or no meaning to some may have profound meaning to another because of the association it provokes. Timing accompanied by previous association is a central facet of revelatory reading of the Book of Nature in restoration theology hermeneutics.

In the canon of restoration theology, no more striking example of a revelatory understanding of the Book of Nature can be found than the account of Moses speaking with the Creator face-to-face. According to the record, God declares to Moses, “I am the Lord God Almighty, and Endless is my name; . . . And behold, thou art my son; wherefore look, and I will show thee the workmanship of mine hands; but not all, for my works are without end” (Moses 1:3–4, PGP). It is instructive to consider the sequence of the encounter, as it may be a pattern for all mankind’s reading of the Book of Nature. Indeed, restoration theology directly teaches that people ought to “liken all scriptures unto ourselves” (1 Nephi 19:23,

BM). The intriguing pattern is as follows: 1. God introduces Himself. 2. He informs Moses that he is one of His children. 3. He reveals His Creation to Moses.

After an unsettling encounter with the imposter-creator, Satan, following the true Creator's brief departure, He returns and blesses Moses to see even more of the Creation. "Moses cast his eyes and beheld the earth, yea, even all of it; and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold, discerning it by the spirit of God" (Moses 1:27, PGP). He had become open to spiritual depth in the natural world, through which his finite existence had been placed into "a new and deeper relationship with the world" (Clingerman 2009, p. 87). A person with such a relationship could, according to restoration theology, "move mountains, entertain angels, and walk in celestial streets" (McConkie 1971). This doctrine is emphasized further by The Book of Mormon prophet, Jacob: "Wherefore, we search the prophets, and we have many revelations and the spirit of prophecy; and having all these witnesses we obtain a hope, and our faith becometh unshaken, insomuch that we truly can command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey us, or the mountains, or the waves of the sea" (Jacob 4:6, BM).

A vision like that experienced by Moses or a mature understanding like that possessed by Jacob are not necessary for mankind to begin learning about the Book of Nature from its Author, according to restoration theology. Instead, enlightenment is within reach of all: "The earth rolls upon her wings, and the sun giveth his light by day, and the moon giveth her light by night, and the stars also give their light, as they roll upon their wings in their glory, in the midst of the power of God . . . Behold all these are kingdoms, and any man who hath seen any or the least of these hath seen God moving in His majesty and power" (DC 88:45, 47). Apparently, "any man" who witnesses these common aspects of the natural world has "seen God moving in His majesty and power", whether he or she acknowledges the divinity in the connection or not. The window to enhanced learning is not closed to any person.

Continuing to stress how the development of spiritual acuity is understood in restoration theology, revelatory learning comes gradually, "line upon line and precept upon precept" (DC 98:12). The canon supports the idea that willing and obedient pupils learn to hear the voice of the Creator through the Book of Nature, and by other means, one insight at a time and in the process come to understand their own eternal identity and potential. The Book of Mormon stresses the progressive nature of revelatory learning from, in almost all cases, humble beginnings. "For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts . . . for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say we have enough, from them shall be taken away that which they have" (2 Nephi 28:30, BM). Thus, the model shown in Figure 1 allows for expansion and implies the possibility of contraction of understanding gained via the Book of Nature.

Growing into awareness through gradual revelatory learning opens the minds of mankind not only to individual identity and potential but also to enhanced understanding of the intelligence found throughout all actors in the Book of Nature. By ongoing divine instruction, divisions between human and non-human and even between living and non-living categories are realigned. Joseph Smith exulted, "Let the mountains shout for joy, and all ye valleys cry aloud; and all ye seas and dry lands tell the wonders of your Eternal King! And ye rivers, and brooks, and rills, flow down with gladness. Let the woods and all the trees of the field praise the Lord; and ye solid rocks weep for joy!" (DC 128:23). While some may interpret this statement as being purely metaphorical, a more comprehensive and informed review of the Book of Nature in restoration theology suggests that it can be accepted literally.

9. The Future of the Book of Nature in Restoration Hermeneutics

Despite the expansive Book of Nature doctrine contained in the restoration theology canon and supporting statements by prominent Latter-day Saint leaders, it is important to

note that reading the Book of Nature as a means of growing closer to God has not been emphasized in contemporary Latter-day Saint hermeneutics. We may consider, for instance, that from 1997 to 2017, adult Sunday classes were guided by a series titled “Teachings of the Prophets.” Words from Latter-day Saint leaders from Joseph Smith to Gordon B. Hinckley were included. Of the 433 lessons presented, none were focused solely on the Book of Nature, and even isolated references were extremely rare, even though numerous pertinent statements were made by each of the fifteen presidents during his tenure. Further, we may consider addresses given in modern Latter-day Saint general conferences, which are considered to be reliable references for Latter-day Saint doctrine. A review of addresses from 1971 to 2021 found that of the 3711 addresses given, only 57, or about 1.5 percent, included the Book of Nature as a primary or secondary theme.¹⁰ This neglect of the second witness of God is consistent with broader trends of Book of Nature alienation across all Abrahamic faith traditions, as was described in the opening of this paper.

Noting the lack of emphasis is not a criticism of the topics there were included in curriculum or in general conferences. Indeed, all topics presented were authoritative. Instead, the lack of emphasis may represent lost opportunities to more deeply connect Latter-day Saints with their own inspiring revealed doctrine and, poignantly, with their opportunities to see God’s intimate involvement in their own welfare and progress from moment to moment in the common elements of life.

Reassuringly, restoration theology concludes that this lack of emphasis will not be sustained. “Yea verily I say unto you, in that day when the Lord shall come, he shall reveal all things—Things which have passed, and hidden things which no man knew, things of the earth, by which it was made, the purpose and the end thereof—Things most precious, things that are above, and things that are in the earth, and upon the earth, and in heaven” (DC 101:32–34). Arguably, then, reading of the Book of Nature by the lens of restoration theology hermeneutics is a learning process that has only begun with an expansionary potential likely beyond most of mankind’s current ability to understand.

Intriguingly, Latter-day Saints believe that The Book of Mormon currently used in the faith amounts to only about one-third of the record given to Joseph Smith in 1827. What the remaining two-thirds may contain is a matter of interest and speculation. A brief description of what the yet-undisclosed portion may contain is found in the current volume, “. . . then will I manifest unto them . . . the unfolding of all my revelations, saith Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of the heavens and of the earth, and all things that in them are” (Ether 4:7, BM). Perhaps as this occurs, the miracle in a grain of sand will become evident to many and not just to a few.

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Notes

- ¹ The ninth Article of Faith accepted by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reads, “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.”
- ² The canon of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints includes four books of scripture: The Bible, The Book of Mormon (BM), Doctrine and Covenants (DC), and the Pearl of Great Price (PGP). For the purposes of this paper, the phrase “restoration theology” will refer solely to the Latter-day Saint perspective as supported by the faith’s canon. It is understood that any Biblical reference to the Book of Nature is applicable to restoration theology; however, to highlight Latter-day Saint hermeneutics of the Book of Nature, the three non-Biblical books of scripture will be emphasized throughout this paper.
- ³ In the Islamic tradition, the term “Book of Nature” is less commonly used than other terms such as “the Creation,” “the Book of Creation,” and “the Book of Universe.” For consistency in this work, the term “Book of Nature” will be used in most cases.
- ⁴ According to [Yucel and Sivri \(2009, p. 81\)](#), the Qur’an contains over 750 *ayat* or verses that refer to natural phenomena highlighting the Islamic doctrine that “everything from the atom to the galaxies has a purpose in creation.”

- ⁵ At least 20 chapters (*sūrah*s) in the Qur'an have titles that are clearly associated with the Book of Nature, such as The Cow, The Bee, The Mountain, The Moon, The Sun, and others. Islamic hermeneutics stresses that understanding the full import of these, and other, *sūrah*s as well as the *ayat* they contain requires revelatory learning in addition to academic learning. The Qur'an stress this complementary approach with phrases such as "There are signs for those who consider." "Surely in these there are signs for rational men." "Surely in these there are signs for true believers."
- ⁶ Important Latter-day Saint tenets not specifically highlighted in the model include doctrine focused on eternal families, priesthood, ordinances, temples, the role of covenants in personal development, and more. Informed readers may be able to interpret how the breadth of Latter-day Saint theology could be internalized in or associated with the model.
- ⁷ Numerous references in support of this statement could be provided. One modern statement made by Latter-day Saint Apostle, Bruce R. McConkie (1915-1985) is archetypical of the emulation-worship theme in restoration theology. McConkie stated, "In other words, true and perfect worship consists in following in the steps of the Son of God . . . It is far more than prayer and sermon and song. It is living and doing and obeying. It is emulating the life of the great Exemplar" (McConkie 1971).
- ⁸ One of the earliest anthologies focused on restoration theology Creation stewardship was published by the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University (Handley et al. 2006). Notes available in this text point the reader to numerous other well-researched articles focused on faith-motivated stewardship. Other recommended sources for an overview of this vital topic include (Walker 2014), (Welling 2011), (Bryner 2010), and (Ettari 2019).
- ⁹ This statement stresses the importance of pursuing all avenues of attaining truth and not just those which can be gained by what may be considered to be purely spiritual means such as those limited to prayer and meditation. The pursuit of scientific understanding is recognized as being complementary to and even essential for mature spiritual understanding. James E. Talmage (1862–1933), a prominent Latter-day Saint scientist wrote, "As man proceeds to the closer examination of things he finds that by study and scientific investigation these proofs are multiplied many fold. He may learn of the laws by which the earth and its associated worlds are governed in their orbit; by which satellites are held subordinate to planets, and planets to suns; he may behold the marvels of vegetable and animal anatomy, and the surpassing mechanism of his own body; and with such appeals to his reason increasing at every step, his wonder as to who ordained all this gives place to adoration for the Creator whose presence and power are thus so forcefully proclaimed; and the observer becomes a worshiper" (Talmage 1961, pp. 32–33).
- ¹⁰ This review is my own work, and judgments of emphasis are mine alone. To be included as substantive, isolated references to Jesus Christ as the Creator or a brief mention of a natural phenomenon with spiritual significance such as light were not included. A theme had to be more extensively developed to indicate a natural world object, feature, or process is understood to be more of an intentional sign of God's existence and character rather than serving only as a convenient object lesson. My review found that most references to the Book of Nature in Latter-day Saint general conferences are limited to object lessons which could have relied on any number of objects to achieve the same pedagogical purpose. Only a few extend to the more transformational sections of the model presented in this paper.

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