



Promised Land



by Lindsey Weigley—

Walk about Zion, go around her,

count her towers,



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consider well her ramparts,

view her citadels,

that you may tell of them

to the next generation.

For this God is our God for ever and ever;

he will be our guide even to the end.

—Psalm 48:12-14, NIV

Zion National Park is a vast, crumbling, red rock wilderness. They say the stone is formed of lime and was once buried under a shallow ocean, and that many years of erosion raised it into the pinnacles, spires, and spidery canopies that we see today. Thousands of tourists flood the park each year to tilt their necks upward and look at the ancient rock—some perhaps to wonder about its origin story, some just to climb on it. Nonetheless, something elemental and deeply human draws people to this place.

I visited Zion around this time last year. My friends and I decided that our activity for the day would be to hike Angel's Landing. It is a pretty steep hike, beginning with a series of well-trod switchbacks, followed by a loosely marked path across a rocky plateau, and finally culminating in a dicey rock-and-chain scramble to the summit. But at the top, the hard work is well worth it: awaiting hikers is a breathtaking 360° view of the canyon from the center of the park.

While studying the route, I couldn't help but notice that most of the landmarks within Zion have been named after religious figures or symbols: The Court of the Patriarchs, named after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Kolob Arch, the second longest natural arch in the world, named after a place in Heaven according to the Mormon tradition; the Temple of Sinawava, a massive natural amphitheater whose namesake is the coyote god of the Paiute tribe. Even Zion itself has deep spiritual meaning: Zion, the city of David, the land of Israel, the kingdom to come.



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For me, the geography of this place certainly provokes something spiritual. Mountains, in general, command a sense of reverence. Maybe it is all that exposure; this land is deadly if it isn't treated with the right kind of respect. It could also be that the raised dirt and stone feel much like the halls of a cathedral. The earth—rather than appearing as a flat line receding into the distance—has vertical dimension. The feeling of smallness is visceral. Everything I am suddenly feels microscopic in comparison, standing inside a parabola of earth and rock.

I'd like to think that this is how the people who named the arches and mountains of Zion also felt. It is possible that their motives were more political: a way of claiming turf for their own culture. Religion has a terrible relationship with power, and I don't want to discount that reality. But the more generous version of history would say that the individual people who explored these canyons felt compelled to call these rocks after the spiritual features of their traditions, the sacred landmarks that gave them meaning. Angels, saints, and Biblical figures help us navigate all that is dangerous and exposed in our lives, so why not name the land after them? And standing in terrain that is as vast and beautiful as the Utah canyons, it seems only appropriate to name this place after the Promised Land.

I like to think that the word *promised* in the name Promised Land doesn't only refer to the act of God agreeing to give people something, as in, "I promise to give you a GoPro for Christmas." I have wondered if it could also mean *promised* as in "engaged to be married." As in, land that is *betrothed*.

This concept seems useful because it describes our relationship to the land, to the Earth, in a way that isn't domineering or subjugating, as in land *ownership*. That is the language of slavery and exploitation, from which the people of Israel escaped in the Biblical story. Instead, it describes our ideal relationship to the Earth as one of marriage. God gives us the Land and we are charged with its care and well-being. The Land provides soil, shelter, and sustenance. In return, we are to take care of it, to protect it from overfarming, strip mining, degradation. If the metaphor is correct, the language describing the Earth (and the New Earth) is one of communion and symbiosis.

Therefore, it is an act of obedience to tend to the Earth thoughtfully. All of the Earth's forests, oceans, mountains, and canyons command reverence, but they also embody vulnerability. We are at the planet's mercy, and the planet is also at ours. One only has to look at the overwhelming effects of [plastic pollution](#) or the [death of our coral reefs](#) to realize how much we've already lost. It is more than simply "stewardship." We are caring for our partner in living, our shelter, and our kin who live here. We are interwoven into this sacred landscape.

The summit of Angel's Landing is certainly holy ground. The stone monument retreats into atmospheric blue, covered in ancient desert trees and cut cleanly by a valley river. The boulders seem at once so immense and immovable and yet are scattered like aquarium ornaments. It is as if they were once lifted high in the air, like the



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floating Hallelujah Mountains in the movie *Avatar*, connected only by the roots of trees.

Being in nature feels close to the heart of God: wild, beautiful, and touchable. This landscape inspires the language of the spiritual because it is exactly that. It reveals God as a Sculptor, a Stonemason, bent over in an ancient workshop—carefully carving our place in Eden with wind, water, and ice.

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