Toward a New Zion: The Paradox of Environmental Stewardship and Degradation Reflected by Mormon Culture in the California Gold Rush

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Abstract

In 1844, the murder of Joseph Smith, Jr., the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (LDS), served as the impetus for a Mormon exodus to the Western United States. Through this movement, the Church sought refuge in the secluded landscapes of Utah and California from the persecution that had plagued their religion. As it happened, the Mormons’ arrival in California coincided with the beginning of the Gold Rush, allowing the LDS Church to wield great influence in the development of the state. However, contradictions inherent in Mormon doctrine and the Church’s political directives—specifically in regards to environmental stewardship—led to difficulties establishing spiritual strongholds and to massive, mining-induced environmental degradation. The ultimate willingness of Mormons to destroy the proverbial “Eden” of California during the Gold Rush demonstrated both an inability to maintain Mormon beliefs, and also the mercurial and malleable nature of Mormonism itself. This mirrored the more general malleability of the Gold Rush culture in California, a place of survival and turbulence that also characterized the rest of the American West.
Introduction

In almost every culture, humans have developed religions to better explain and justify the natural world and other phenomena. As a result, nearly every religion also suggests a distinct set of attitudes toward nature, which inevitably informs the actions and perceptions of a particular faith’s followers. Mormonism, an apostolic Christian denomination that undeniably influenced the development of the American West and, specifically, gold rush California, does not stray from this trend. Although it deviates from the tenets of mainstream Christianity, Mormonism still roots itself in an Adam-Eve creation myth that establishes human dominance over the natural world. This relationship influences other parts of the religious doctrine as well, manifesting itself in Mormons’ cultural behaviors.

Nineteenth century miners in California not only degraded the environment through the extraction of gold, but also in their encampments and general behavior toward the previously more pristine land. Many of the values underlying this engagement link directly to Mormon beliefs and their interplay in Manifest Destiny and other Western thought. Mormon involvement in the California Gold Rush displayed the two halves of the paradox that make up Mormonism’s approach to environmental stewardship: in seeking a Western Eden they demonstrated a reverence for God’s natural creations, but in exerting such destructive force over the landscape they maintained the dominance of man over his environs. This paradox is a manifestation of the contradictions inherent in Mormon doctrine—contradictions that ultimately led to religious instability, and factored greatly into the environmental degradation that ravaged California.

To better elucidate the intersection of environmental stewardship and Mormonism in nineteenth century California, in this paper I will examine the attitudes toward nature expressed by Mormon texts, and compare these to the behaviors and goals of the Latter-day Saints in the
American West. Specifically, I will demonstrate the ways in which the social politics of California and of the LDS Church flaunted and upheld the Mormons’ purported beliefs. I will then explain the environmental impacts of mining in the context of Mormon doctrine, revealing the ways in which Mormons not only adapted to and influenced Gold Rush culture, but also thrust California into a cycle of environmental devastation that would impact the state ecologically, politically, and economically for years to come.

**Background**

Mormonism is a young religion, having been established in New York by Joseph Smith upon a revelation in 1823. Smith proclaimed the word of the plates of Nephi, brought to him by the angel Moroni, a resurrected figure who features prominently in Mormon text. From these plates Smith created his own texts, which became *The Book of Mormon* and *The Pearl of Great Price* (PBS: “The Early History of the Mormons”). He proselytized the beliefs within these books, which purported to be the word of Jesus Christ himself, and thus created the rapidly spreading Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (LDS Church). Although the culture that developed around the LDS Church often strayed from the accepted socio-religious norms of Christian America, the religion itself does not directly contradict the Bible, but rather supplements it and offers different versions of the events and tenets put forth by the Old and New Testaments.

Smith’s teachings first formed the LDS Church on the East Coast, but persecution quickly forced Mormon enclaves west, where they established strongholds in Iowa, Missouri, and Illinois. Upon Joseph Smith’s murder by an anti-Mormon mob in Nauvoo, Illinois in 1844, Brigham Young became the new president of the LDS Church, and began another westward exodus to Utah, along the route shown in Figure 1. Although the Mormons permanently settled
in what became Salt Lake City, they also had their sights set on California, which offered the Saints “virtually everything they sought” in a “place to build a new Mormon Zion” (Owens 23). Therefore, when prominent Mormon leader Samuel Brannan took a ship of Saints from New York to then-Mexican California in 1846, he did not envision building a mere colony, but rather a Mormon kingdom (Bagley). By 1848, the United States Army had already laid claim to Yerba Buena—what would become San Francisco—which prevented such visions from becoming realities (Jordan 404). Kingdom or not, the Latter-day Saints’ settlement in the San Francisco Bay and surrounding areas nevertheless undeniably influenced California’s development over the following decades.

Nature and Mormon Doctrine

The roots of the Mormons’ westward exodus lay largely in the religion’s attitudes toward nature, which appear throughout The Book of Mormon and The Pearl of Great Price in three main forms: control of nature, fear of nature, and reverence for nature. The Book of Mormon is Smith’s revision of the King James Bible and, similarly to the Old Testament, it clearly establishes the dominion of man over Earth. This anthropocentrism first presents itself in “The Book of Moses,” Smith’s version of Genesis in The Pearl of Great Price. In chapter three, the expressions of man’s superiority over nature appear when Adam is given “dominion over all the beasts of the field” and again later, when God commands that, “whatsoever Adam cal[ls] every living creature, that should be the name thereof” (Smith 14, 28). The natural world belongs to Adam from the start, and no less so once he and Eve fall from paradise. In chapter two of the Second Book of Nephi in The Book of Mormon, “after Adam and eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit they [are] driven out of the garden of Eden, to till the earth” (Smith 54). Thus, their purpose becomes extractive; once on Earth, humans use the natural resources to their
material advantage, first and foremost.

At the same time, Mormon texts also treat the wilderness as a mysterious, challenging, and frightening space. As early as the introduction to the First Book of Nephi, which opens *The Book of Mormon*, nature connotes fear and negativity; even the first paragraph instructs the reader that he or she will therein find tales of “sufferings and afflictions in the wilderness,” setting a tone for the rest of the text (1). From there, the word “wilderness” goes on to appear on ninety-seven pages of *The Book of Mormon*, and almost invariably in association with a trial put forth by God or other negative circumstances.

However, the reality of the relationship of the LDS Church to nature was not solely based in domination or trepidation. Mormons revered Eden, the paradigm of nature, and this—along with a desire for religious freedom—helped the Church’s mid-nineteenth century search for an Earthbound Eden in Utah and California. Such reverence appears clearly in historian and geographer Richard Francaviglia’s work *The Mormon Landscape: Existence, Creation, and Perception of a Unique Image in the American West*, which demonstrates how high-ranking Mormons explicitly impressed upon followers the necessity of imitating paradise. In one 1856 speech in Parowan, Utah, a Mormon leader expressed that he “felt anxious that [the settlers] should begin to beautify Parowan, and make it like the Garden of Eden” (Francaviglia 85). Beyond this attempt to construct a more perfect natural world, Mormons also deeply valued Utah’s natural landscapes for their ability to perpetuate the escapism and isolation that had initially sparked the search for refuge. The Mormons believed that they “inherit[ed] the chambers of the mountains: the rocks [were their] protection, and the oases of the desert [their] home” (Francaviglia 82). Such an outlook indicates not only a reverence for nature, but also an absolute reliance on its protective power that reveals human vulnerability. The same tension between
stewardship and exploitation reappeared in the Mother Lode region of California: the area was simultaneously an idyllic, secluded new Zion, and a land ripe for destructive—but profitable—mining enterprises.

**The Mormon Socio-Political Landscape**

This reverence-exploitation contradiction also appeared in other Christian denominations—notably East Coast Protestantism and Irish Catholicism—that were prominent in northern California during the Gold Rush. However, given that the Mormons arrived among the earliest of the Argonauts, they had the unique opportunity to not only lay first claim to the land, but also to establish social norms directly influenced by their religion and culture. However, the majority of these norms were dictated not by written doctrine, but by the leadership of the LDS Church. According to the religion, the president of the Church—at the time, Brigham Young (pictured in Figure 3)—was a prophet with direct access to God (Durham 52). This linkage of political and spiritual powers was yet another contradiction in Mormonism that greatly complicated Mormons’ behavior in the American West.

By 1848, five different Mormon groups had arrived in California. Other than Brannan (pictured in Figure 2) and the New York Saints, these groups included William Ide and Thomas Rhoads and their families, a group led by Captain Jefferson Hunt, and roughly 240 members of the “Mormon Battalion,” an army of Saints that had been establishing a wagon trail from the Midwest to southern California (Davies and Hansen 12). In March of that year, after the initial discovery of gold on John Sutter’s property, a bar on the South Fork of the American River also proved gold-rich, beginning the California Gold Rush in earnest (Davies and Hansen 28). The bar became known as Mormon Island (depicted in Figure 4), for the 100-150 Mormons of the Battalion who converged there before almost anyone else (Davies and Hansen 28).
This turn of events can largely be attributed to the work of Sam Brannan, the de facto leader of the California Mormons. With dreams of economic prosperity, he purposely misled the original discoverers of the placer gold to believe that he could secure property rights to the land for the Mormon Church, and then went on to convince members of the Battalion to mine there (Davies and Hansen 28). All of this occurred despite Young’s having banned precious metal mining on the grounds that it represented “direct bondage” to ungodly things, and out of fear that it would distract from establishing a successful colony (Davies 90; Thompson 1-2). Brannan then further flaunted Young’s gospel: safely ensconced in his own entrepreneurial enterprises in San Francisco, he attempted to collect a 30 percent “Lord’s tax” from each miner, a third of which went directly into his own pocket (Davies and Hansen 27-29). Under Brannan’s leadership, the Saints began to strike it rich, but without any genuine spiritual guidance, and these conflations of Church mandates and personal power ultimately estranged Brannan from the Utah Mormons. Around the time of this estrangement, however, Young also began permitting certain trusted apostles to mine for the economic benefit of the Church, a contradictory and confusing directive that made adherence to faith and financial success mutually exclusive (Davies 91).

Widespread Departure of California Mormons from the LDS Church

In many ways, Sam Brannan’s rejection of Church directives fitted into the broader social scene of the California Gold Rush, which often eschewed conformity in favor of prosperity in the rough new world of the American West. In effect, the LDS Church in Utah had significantly less practical importance than learning to navigate and assimilate to the mélange of culture that constituted California. Part of this departure from norms found elsewhere in the United States stemmed from the isolated wilderness that miners—including the Latter-day Saints—both sought and destroyed. Miner Joaquin Miller astutely observes this phenomenon in a description of the
human impact on the area encompassed by the foothills of the Sierra Nevada:

“Men are there, down in these dreadful canons, out of sight of the sun, swallowed up, buried in the impenetrable gloom of the forest, toiling for gold. Each one of these camps is a world of itself. History, romance, tragedy, poetry, in every one of them. They are connected together, and reach the outer world only by a narrow little pack trail, stretching through the timber, stringing round the mountains, barely wide enough to admit of footmen and little Mexican mules…to pass in single tile [sic]” (Miller in Merchant 118).

Such a description could have applied to almost any mining camp, hidden away from the harsh East Coast, and even from the burgeoning society of San Francisco. Miners’ reality was narrow and constructed, and under leadership such as that of Brannan—a man whose motives clearly lay in money, not piety—it would have been easy for Mormon settlers to adopt the more dominance-based approach to nature put forth by *The Book of Mormon*.

Although the concept of a quest for a new Zion remained ever-present, the rough, survival-oriented reality of nineteenth century California made it difficult to adhere to the reverence for isolated nature that had made the West so appealing in the first place. In fact, when the Saints traveled to California in 1847, they received specific instructions to avoid “public preaching or any noise or confusion concerning us [the LDS Church] or our religion in California,” which removed much of the spiritual focus from their quotidian lives (Davies and Hansen 281). Religious guidance remained sporadic, at best, until 1857, when Brigham Young recalled his followers to Salt Lake City to help defend the colony against persecution. However, the number of Mormons who responded to Young’s recall hovered under 50 percent, leaving the less religious Mormons to continue establishing the industrial and cultural norms of gold rush California (Davies 99). As a result, the moral impetus to respect nature was even further reduced,
just as improvements to mining technology made exploitation of the Earth easier than ever before.

**Environmental Degradation**

Although environmental destruction abounded from all ethnic and religious groups involved in the early Gold Rush, the Mormons’ early involvement in mining meant that they set the tone for an industry that would ravage the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. The root cause of the degradation likely stemmed from the widespread mentality that the supply of gold in the mines was inexhaustible (Merchant 107). Relying on the infallibility and infinite lifespan of their industry, miners adopted the view that their search for gold could continue indefinitely. As the reality of the supply dwindled, their methods became more creative, more extreme, and more extractive, leading to intense changes to the geology and ecology of the Sierra Nevada Foothills.

In 1848, when the Saints helped start the Gold Rush, miners primarily retrieved placer gold by panning at bends in the river (Davies and Hansen 118-119). This is exactly what happened at Mormon Island, which was positioned on an inner bend of the American River, where suction eddies and decreases in water velocity helped deposit gold. Despite the fact that placer mining generally harmed the land less than later-developed techniques, it still greatly impacted the vegetal growth along rivers, changing pre-existing habitats and ecosystems (Merchant 126-127). Beyond the direct destruction of vegetation caused by placer mining, the infrastructure necessary to support miners’ livelihoods also required ravaging the environment. Aside from gold, timber was one of the most important commodities, and led to deforestation to construct mining tools, buildings and, eventually, more permanent camps (Merchant 127).

By 1873, lode mining—a mining technique that removes gold directly from the gold-bearing veins of rocks, rather than waiting until erosion brings minerals to the surface—
surpassed placer mining as the main method of extraction. Although the Mormon stronghold had, by then, significantly dwindled, the accepted relationship between miners and the land continued. Hydraulic mining also became popular for its extreme efficiency, but the intensity of the operation, which eroded rock beds and filled rivers with silt and other debris, caused greater ecological devastation than any previous mining method. According to one account, “hydraulic mining produced such landscapes, so different from the original ‘as to be unrecognizable’” (Merchant 128). These landscapes have since remained unrecognizable, and are often unstable and unsafe even 150 years later (Merchant 128).

By the late nineteenth century, mining companies had largely replaced the more scattered mining camps that characterized the early Gold Rush, and their ability to ravage the foothills of the Sierra Nevada surpassed anything of which early Mormons would have been capable. The Yuba River, which ran through the Malakoff Diggins-North Bloomfield mining area (pictured in Figure 3), was one of many examples of an ecosystem devastated by the Gold Rush. The Sawyer Decision, an 1884 court ruling by Judge Lorenzo Sawyer that outlawed hydraulicking in California, outlines the downfall of the Yuba, a formerly 300 foot wide river formerly running through a deep channel. He writes, “Not only has the channel of the river through these bottoms been filled up to a depth of 25 feet and upwards, but this entire strip of bottom land has been buried with sand and debris many feet deep, from ridge to ride of high land, and utterly ruined for farming and other purposes to which it was before devoted” (Merchant 114). Therefore, not only did mining practices destroy the land, they also prevented the success of other operations, such as farming, that were critical to survival in gold rush California.

**Religious Contradictions and Linkages to the American West**

As a place where failure was often the rule, rather than the exception, frontier California
presented an inherent challenge to all belief systems, including Mormonism. The roughness of the American West necessitated survival, to which the long-persecuted Mormons of the LDS Church were already accustomed by the time the Gold Rush began. However, unlike elsewhere in the country, Gold Rush Saints had difficulty establishing “ecclesiastical enclaves” in California, which made it difficult for the spiritual aspect of Mormonism to inform their actions (Owens 25). Thus, despite the reverence for nature called for by Mormon doctrine, and the intention of finding and cultivating an Eden in the West, perhaps deferring to a dominant relationship to nature would have been the only practical option for Brannan and his followers. This possibility is complicated by the inextricability of Young’s power from the goals of the Mormon Church—his word was, quite literally, gospel. In that respect, the Mormons’ actions and sense of environmental stewardship paradoxically conformed to their religious beliefs, since continued participation in the Church relied on alignment with Young’s directives.

Conclusion

This examination of Mormon influence in mid-nineteenth century California is not to suggest that without Mormonism there would have been no Gold Rush, nor no environmental destruction. It does, however, imply that the timing of Mormon arrival in California made them one of the single most influential groups on the evolution of mining culture and society. Inevitably, this culture formed around pre-existing beliefs that the LDS Church brought west with them, but the paradoxical nature of these beliefs allowed for a lack of stewardship that carried through until the Sawyer decision, and even beyond. In a way, then, perhaps the ethos established as early as Mormon Island set California on course for an eventual commitment to legally mandated environmental protection. One of the earliest examples is the designation of Yosemite as the first state park in the United States, and among the first National Parks in the
country as well. Setting aside this natural space demonstrated the value of unblemished wilderness, and bore stark contrast to the wreckage caused by mining almost directly adjacent to the park. Thus, the culture of California itself played out the same paradox seen within Mormonism: devotion both to extraction and to the natural beauty and resources that made the state so attractive. In that regard, both Mormonism and the spirit of the Gold Rush fit neatly into the character of the early American West, a place of innovation, adaptation and pursuit of the success so often impossible in the stagnant East.
Figure 1: Persecution drove Mormons west starting in 1830. This map shows the route of Joseph Smith and his followers from Palmyra, New York to Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri. Smith’s assassination in 1844 sparked another exodus, this time led by Brigham Young, to Salt Lake City. In 1846, Sam Brannan also headed west by ship to California with 240 other Saints on board (The Essential America).

Figure 2, Left: California’s first millionaire and most prominent Mormon, Samuel Brannan, c. 1860. (Bringhurst 141)

Figure 3, Right: Brigham Young, leader of the LDS Church of the American West, c. 1850. (BYU Collection)
Figure 4: Illustration of Mormon Island in 1854. The roots of the Gold Rush can be traced to this bar on the South Fork of the American River, where Brannan first encouraged the Battalion boys to mine (Folsom History Museum).

Figure 5: Hydraulic mining of auriferous gravels at the North Bloomfield mine in the Malakoff Diggins area, c. 1880. Judge Lorenzo Sawyer outlawed hydraulicking in 1884 in what would become the first enforced act of environmental protection in the United States (CA Dept. of Parks and Rec.)
Works Consulted


Smith, Joseph. *The Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1921.


Images


