

SACRED GROVES AND WICKED PROBLEMS

Jared Farmer

This is a lightly revised script of a plenary lecture—a “lunchtime polemic,” in the words of the speaker—delivered on June 3, 2022, at the Mormon History Association Conference, in Logan, Utah, on the campus of Utah State University, the speaker’s alma mater.

I’m standing at this lectern in large part because I wrote a book called *On Zion’s Mount*. Many, many times since 2007, the year I finished the manuscript in Los Angeles and relocated to Long Island, I have promised myself I will never ever write more words about Mormonism.

I now accept: This is a vow I’m predestined to break, again and again.

In my new book, *Elderflora*, a study of sacred trees, tree-ring science, and long-term thinking, I write explicitly about my LDS upbringing, and go out of my way to use Mormon language and referents. I even structured one chapter as a chiasmus! I guess I’ve reached that stage of life when I accept what I can change in myself, and what I cannot—or would not.

As part of becoming a western expat in Suffolk County, New York—the orient of the American East—I had to confront The Question at every wine-and-cheese event. “Where are you from?” a friendly academic stranger would begin. “Well, I was born and raised in Utah,” I would begin. “Oh . . .,” they would reply, their face turning cloudy. “Really? Utah—that’s . . . interesting.” And then they would half whisper: “May I ask you, are you . . . a Mormon?” In these episodes of exoticization, I never knew what to say. The available identifiers seemed

unsuited for me, unintelligible to them: Jack Mormon, recovering Mormon, ex-Mo, po-Mo, lapsed, inactive, less active, backslider, “it’s complicated.” So, when the current prophet announced that Latter-day Saints should not be called Mormons, I felt sweet relief and existential clarity: I’m a Mormon, yes, I am!

Heck, yeah.

Fifteen years ago, though, when I wrote *On Zion’s Mount*, I was much more circumspect. That’s the most personal book I’ve written, and the least revealing to my readers, including my imagined audience of tenure file reviewers. I didn’t tell them I’m from Provo. Moreover, I didn’t divulge how my analysis of Utah Lake and Mount Timpanogos, of Lake Utes and mountain-home Mormons, is the story of the author losing his religion.

I’ll tell you what I mean by that. Although I never had a testimony to bear about the restored gospel, I became, in my college years in Cache Valley, deeply enthused by the nineteenth-century idea of gathering in a sacred homeland. I felt I belonged in Utah, belonged *to* Utah, and I wanted to assist societal reconsecration of an intermountain landscape that was, in my view, being defiled by improvident, unbeautiful development. I hoped that my Timpanogos project would reveal something exalted, or at least redemptive, about the post-1847 record of place-making in the eastern Great Basin—something that could sustain my heterodox practice of being LDS. In other words, I was looking for something within the violent story of US settler colonialism that could be rehabilitated—something sacred, something cross-cultural, and also something more than human.

I can’t speak for my readers, who now own that book as much as I do, but speaking personally, I failed in my spiritual task. When I closed *On Zion’s Mount* with a performative statement about the healing power of place-love, I was, to be candid, faking it. The burning in my heart had gone out. Although I secured my academic future by writing that book, I lost, in the process, my deepest sense of belonging.

I did give it one more try in 2014, a sabbatical year when I lived in Salt Lake City. I broke my vow, again, and wrote a place-based manifesto in the form of an illustrated e-book, *Restoring Greatness to Utah*, in which I applied the historical lessons of Utah Lake to Great Salt Lake. This work was, I now recognize, a product of the Obama era, when I foolishly permitted myself to feel some optimism about the United States creating a more perfect union in order to address the planetary crisis of anthropogenic climate change. In 2014, I could write this paragraph:

Long before Great Salt Lake diminishes to an emergency level, Utahns should decide as a citizenry that they are willing to sacrifice suburban lawns for avian habitat; that they are willing to pay more for recycled water; and that they will never allow the quantity and quality of the lake's water to fall below the level and standard necessary to support the bird refuges. Unless Utahns build a constituency to save their terminal lake, they will terminate it by degrees. The Great Salt Lake will lessen from a life-sustaining habitat to a truly dead sea.

Now, just eight years later, Utah's lakes and reservoirs have reached emergency levels. Antelope Island is a peninsula; so many marshlands are dusty salt pans; the land itself has become an inversion layer. As of 2022, the "Great" in "Great Salt Lake" is about as accurate as the "Point" in "Point of the Mountain."

And what about Utah Lake, that overlooked body of water I tried so hard to place at the center of Utah history? Well, if you've been following the news from Happy Valley, you've probably heard about a shady real estate proposal with backers in a legislature overrun with unscrupulous developers. The litigious company behind the plan calls itself Lake Restoration Solutions. Its promotional literature attempts to marry the language of ecological restoration with that of the Restoration with that of the de facto religion of contemporary Utahns—capitalism. The mockup for the proposed "restoration" looks like Dubai-on-Lehi: A double causeway leading to a beehive island set within a Delicate Arch archipelago.

I put this scheme in the same category as the proposed Lake Powell aqueduct. It's mind-boggling to witness developers—who share a genealogy with confidence men—dreaming up megaprojects as if it's morning in the American Century, when in fact the heating of the atmosphere has made the world system and the birth climate of everyone in this room, regardless of your age, obsolete.

When my maternal grandfather, the priesthood holder who confirmed me, was born, the global average atmospheric carbon level was 294 parts per million; when my mother, who turns eighty this month, was born, it was 310; when I was born to her, it had climbed to 330 parts per million. It passed 350—what's now the illusory decarbonization goal for the *least*-bad worst-case scenario—in my high school years. When my eight-year-old, who already understands something about carbon accountability, was born, the Keeling Curve read 395. Today, the number is 422 and rising, the highest level in four and one-half *million* years.

All is not well.

Because I'm a Mormon who never unlearned the habits of magical thinking; because I'm a Mormon who's tired of feeling embarrassed and ashamed of my home culture; because I'm a human who acknowledges the sacred beauty of the evolutionary inheritance on Earth, what Darwin called the Tree of Life; and because I'm a parent who worries about trees and forests, and the children who must grow and play in the ruins we are preparing for them—I cling to the hope like unto a slender reed that maybe, just maybe, Latter-day Saints will, someday, *as soon as possible, please*, accept the urgent moral responsibility to be one of the few politically powerful Christian groups in America to take the wicked problem of climate seriously.

In 2015, the pontiff raised the bar for engagement with the climate crisis, the extinction crisis, and the moral calamity that connects them. I'm not expecting the Corporation of the President to be as progressive as Pope Francis, or even the Community of Christ. I'm not holding my

breath for a frameable document called “The Kindred: A Proclamation to the Biosphere.” No, I’m merely waiting for the corporate church to be like other multibillion-dollar nonprofit corporations—like, say, private universities.

I work for the University of Pennsylvania, which is hardly a radical left-wing socialist institution. Penn is best known for the Wharton School, regularly ranked #1 in business and management. Wharton helped create what the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change calls “business as usual.” On Walnut Street in West Philadelphia, Wharton has a raised temple to entrepreneurship called John M. Huntsman Hall; it looks something like a premium Marriott. But you know what? When it comes to climate ethics, I would take Penn over the Brethren any day of the week, including Sunday. Penn, like all major universities, like most Fortune 500 companies, has a Sustainability Office. Penn issues five-year climate action plans and yearly assessments. To its community of donors, Penn discloses metrics on Scope 1, 2, and 3 emissions in line with IPCC protocol. Penn has a policy on divestment (too bad it didn’t arrive sooner, but at least it exists). Penn has target dates for net-zero energy use and a net-zero endowment.

By comparison, what does the Corporation of the President and its financial arm, Ensign Peak Advisors, publicly present to its community of donors? Effectively nothing. There’s no plan, no pledge, no disclosure, just a few platitudes and scriptural citations. What on Earth is the Church doing with one hundred billion dollars? Heck, with money like that, it could by itself save the Great Salt Lake by leasing or purchasing additional water rights. As I said, I’m not a Latter-day Saint, so I’m not in a tithe payer’s position to feel aggrieved. But as a *Mormon*, I feel embarrassed; I feel ashamed. Forget about climate action; there’s not even *less-active* Earth stewardship discernable here.

Who can glory in un-Christlike inactivity when everyone knows who will suffer most from drier droughts, hotter heat waves, rising seas, intensifying storms and floods, shortages of water, and failures

of crops? *Everyone knows*. The victims and the refugees of fossil-fuel profligacy will be the weak, the lowly, the vulnerable, the poor—all the kinds of people that Jesus embraced in his fold.

Bear with me here. Maybe this is just a mental exercise, but how would we—and by “we” I mean Mormons like me as well as Saints like most of you—how would *we* encourage anxious engagement in the good cause of Earth care? What would it take for BYU to employ hundreds like George Handley, and to graduate whole classes of students akin to Katherine Hayhoe, professor of climate science, world-renowned science communicator, all-around choose-the-right person, and evangelical Christian?

The most direct path would be to simply relate the teachings of the New Testament to the facts revealed by climate science. The gospel doctrine on global heating seems clear: Inaction is wickedness.

But would-be Earth stewards could also work with heritage. LDS history, being shallow in time compared to Catholicism, which itself encompasses so much pagan and Indigenous material, does not have so many cultural footings. Perhaps just a couple. For simplicity’s sake, I’ll call these less-than-firm foundations the standard of the Josephites and the land of the Brighamites.

If you’re inclined to be a Josephite, what could your ensign evoke? You’ve got seer stones and divinations, a revelation in a woodlot, the plat of Zion, the concept of the gathering, prophetic statements on diet and animals and economy—all of which could, hypothetically, become the basis for, let’s say, a low-carbon, plant-forward, back-to-the-land movement of degrowth based on self-sufficiency, the generosity of frugality, and the sacred commonwealth of plants, animals, and the children of God. Something not unlike Wendell Berry’s Kentucky homestead. Denmark, a country of heritage for so many Utah Mormons, and one of the greenest polities on the globe, could be another source of inspiration. Communities of Josephites might be established anywhere, regardless of environmental or political setting, including Africa and

Latin America. The movement would transcend the Mormon Culture Region. However, in the context of the Beehive State in the election year 2022, I must point out that Josephites would cast out the GOP and vote independent.

By way of comparison, let's say you're inclined to be a Brighamite: what's in your toolbox? You've got not just the concept but the *practice* of the gathering in the Great Basin; you've got apocryphal statements about This Is the Place, apocryphal comments about resources belonging to all; real experiments in communalism like the United Order; and, of course, irrigation ditches, backlot gardens, welfare farms, fire-and-brimstone sermons about the evils of mining, and all that hymnody about our dear mountain home above a desert made to blossom as the rose. As part of the rich inheritance from the pioneer past, you get tarnished things, too: a legacy of adopting Indigenous children that looks a lot like enslavement, multiple misnamed "Indian wars" that included massacres of innocent Natives, and wholesale dispossessions of Utes, Goshutes, Paiutes, and Shoshones. But Brighamites could, hypothetically, atone for their ancestors, brush up on their John Wesley Powell, read the scholarship of Tom Alexander, look to modern Israel for ideas on environmental design and urban planning, and become water-wise, smart-growth, high-tech bioregionalists with a long-term resource management philosophy. This renewed place-making project would be specific to the Intermountain West. In Utah, Brighamites might support a weaker form of federalism, and, with it, the responsibility of managing national parks and forests, but they would do so as true stewards, not as extractivists and developers posing as flag-waving, gun-toting Sagebrush Rebels. Brighamites could plausibly vote Libertarian or independent, but, after Trump, they would never again support Republicans.

In my twenties, when I conceived my Timpanogos project, I yearned to be my own kind of Brighamite. *On Zion's Mount* was intended, at least in its conception, to provide a useful history. Then my historical

training got in the way. Or, perhaps I should say, the past got in my way. The archives revealed too much. Maybe I shouldn't have looked so diligently. As it says in the Hebrew Bible, more knowledge brings more sorrow.

To my surprise, I now find myself reapproaching the flagstaff of the Josephites, whereto I was drawn in my teenage years. Back then, I actually liked the peculiar idea of the Prophet communicating with a salamander, and I was a shade disappointed when the story turned out to be a deception. I wanted to belong to a culture of supernatural rocks—not just pebbles that fit in the hand or hat, but cobbles and boulders and mesas and mountains; I wanted additional animals with personhood, and thousand-year plants with communicative powers. The closest thing to a faith-promoting experience I had growing up was attending a book launch with my dad at BYU's Bean Museum. The promoted book was *Coyote's Canyon*. I would have been fifteen, I think.

The author, Terry Tempest Williams, struck me as more prophetic—possessed of bolts of peculiarity that pierced the fog of business as usual—than any GA I'd ever heard; and the animistic manner in which she invoked ancestors, animal persons, and slickrock shook me. I wanted to join the Coyote Clan. But in graduate school, as part of my disciplining in historical thinking, I became disenchanted with Williams. I grew ironic, then cynical, about so-called “spiritual-but-not-religious” people, including myself. Only now, in middle age, amid the pervasive American culture of death and the palpable decline of the US republic, have I re-evaluated Williams as both the feyest and the sanest Mormon in a world befogged by fossil fuel capitalism. I want to dance alongside her in the Garden of Earthly Delights. I want to join her in a prayer circle in a sacred grove of piñon and juniper.

However, I'm still a card-carrying historian, so, when I was preparing this address, I felt compelled to do some research on *the* Sacred Grove—capital S, capital G. Several fine scholars have recently

published on this place-topic, including Steven Harper and Anthony Sweat. (As an aside, I have to give props to MHA archivists, librarians, booksellers, bloggers, genealogists, and historians, both professional and amateur. You are amazing! Only after I left Utah and became a professor did I appreciate the LDS emphasis on archival and historical excellence—truly one of the remarkable outcomes of this nineteenth-century millenarian movement.)

As many of you know, the first Church-sponsored artistic depiction of the cordwood patch where Joseph received his celestial visitation came *after* the Manifesto, and that timing is not accidental. The Sacred Grove was yet another sign of aspirational Americanization as well as respectability within the world's parliament of religions.

For the word "grove" was overgrown with canonical allusions. Educated Americans of the 1890s could still recite by heart William Cullen Bryant's "Forest Hymn" from 1824, which began, "The groves were God's first temples." And the phrase "sacred grove" had long been used by English translators for various consecrated places with trees in the ancient Mediterranean: the Greek *alsos*, the Roman *lucus* and *nemus*. It's significant that early tourists and rangers in the Sierra Nevada referred to populations of giant sequoia—the all-American supertree—as groves. The life of a sequoia was compared to Roman and Christian spans of time, and a grove of *Sequoiadendron* was, in painterly representation, clearly a *lucus*: a forest with light-filled clearings. Likewise, the site of the First Vision, as now canonized in LDS art, was a *lucus*.

But back when Joseph F. Smith visited western New York in 1905 after dedicating the obelisk near Sharon, Vermont, he was a not-quite-pilgrim to what he referred to as "the woods." The site began to be called the "Sacred Grove" the following year; gradually, over the next decade and a half, it became a heritage site with arboreal monuments—organic obelisks, if you like—including, believers said, the very maple that witnessed Joseph pray. In the meantime, several ward chapels in Salt Lake

and Los Angeles commissioned their own stained-glass depictions of the First Vision.

After World War II, it became common throughout the Mormon Culture Region for self-taught local painters, primarily women, to donate Sacred Grove paintings to their chapel or stake center. In Queens, New York, the Church displayed a life-sized diorama with trees for the 1964 World's Fair. A similar diorama became a fixture at Temple Square, as commissioned from the same artist who built the Grand Canyon at Disneyland.

By 1966, the Sacred Grove had become sufficiently correlated by the Brethren and internalized by members that Bruce R. McConkie, in the second edition of *Mormon Doctrine*, felt obligated to clarify that Latter-day Saints were in no way paganish or Catholic when they went on pilgrimage to Palmyra. He wrote, "It is not a shrine in the sense that many denominations have shrines, nor is there any sanctity now attached to the trees and land there located. But it is a spot held sacred in the hearts of those who believe in the truth of salvation, because they glory in the transcendent event that took place there." In other words, these maples were witness trees, not consecrated trees; things, not beings.

In the 1960s and 1970s, at Mormon BSA camps, leaders often referred to campfire devotional meetings under canopies of conifers as "sacred grove moments." "Every grove can be a sacred grove," said a General Authority in 1975, speaking instrumentally about leveraging such environmental cues to inspire boys to resolve to serve missions.

Something similar, minus the missionizing, took place at MIA girls camps. At Camp Zarahemla in the northern Wasatch, at Camp KoHoLoWo in the southern Wasatch, and at Camp LoMia on the Mogollon Rim, leaders instructed young women to pray in patches of pines, firs, and spruces designated as sacred groves. Some of these camps also featured pseudo-Indigenous playacting, as described in Judith Freeman's *Latter Days*, the best Mormon memoir I've ever read. (I could say much more about "playing Indian," but I'll refrain.)

My point is simply to acknowledge a seven-decade-old artistic tradition—including beautiful stained glass at the new Palmyra Temple—that imagines second-growth sugar maple as the Sacred Grove; and a secondary tradition, slightly less old, of imagining western conifers as simulacra of eastern angiosperms. That's pretty interesting, and shows again how traditions are adaptable. What I didn't yet find in my research is any example of Latter-day Saints adapting further—that is, sacralizing groves-to-be through planting and tending, extending this tradition to arboriculture.

While writing *Elderflora*, I was struck by the number of religions and spiritual traditions that feature sacred groves. Some of these practices and sites are millennia old. You find consecrated trees in Africa, the Mediterranean, South Asia, East Asia, and Mexico, among other cultural hearths. By comparison, the veneration of plants within modern Mormonism could be described as a scrawny sapling. This is a religion with a singular sacred grove, not a religious culture of grove-keeping. Indeed, the culture has prioritized orchard ownership and orchard land redevelopment. Rows of fruited trees don't make a grove. But I wonder, could the welfare farm and the sacred grove come together in a distinctively LDS form of stewardship?

I think about the stake center in Provo where my father baptized me, and where my mother played the organ each Sunday. It's an edifice of master-planned blandness at the base of majestic mountains, with nary a picture window for worshipers, surrounded by a large parking lot, adjacent to a larger expanse of overwatered turf. It's hard for me to imagine a religious landscape more at odds with its God-given surroundings. If this is what it means to make the desert blossom as the rose, I'll take sagebrush and Brigham Tea. On second thought, I'll take trees—as many trees as possible, drought-tolerant species and varieties, native *and* non-native, all the shade givers and air purifiers and carbon storers we can plant and tend—cultivated less for us than for those who follow. Arboriculture can be an act of communion with future

descendants, congregants, and neighbors. Cared-for trees are living embodiments of charity.

As I leave you, in the bowels of the Taggart Student Center, within the shadows of the Bear River Range, I offer you seeds from a volunteer tree of wisdom.

What if Latter-day Saints replaced church lawns in the Intermountain West with community gardens, and gave the summer bounty to the local needy? What if they dug up half of every Church-owned parking lot—for, growing up, I never once saw the hardtop more than half-filled with cars, as if anyone on my block needed to drive in the first place—and replaced all that heat-trapping petroleum-based tarmac with the durable solar-powered carbon-capture devices called trees? What if every temple, tabernacle, stake center, and ward building had an adjacent sacred grove for praying to heavenly parents and for contemplating earthly ethics? What if Saints turned McConkie on his head and *always* attached sanctity to *all* the groves and *all* the lands on which they grow?

Is it remotely possible that, by the end of my career, when a stranger asks me, “Are you a Mormon?” their follow-up question will not concern missionaries, polygamists, fundamentalists, MLM, Coca-Cola, or secret underwear, but rather the prominent, inspiring, worldwide practice of sacred groves?

If Latter-day Saints can stage large-scale festivals, pageants, roadshows, parades, and reenactments, all with volunteer labor, I have no doubt they can belatedly carry out urgent, meaningful climate action—from the level of asset management by Ensign Peak Advisors to the level of chapel landscape repair by local ward members. True, compared to Catholicism, there may be scant cultural material to work with, but there’s enough to get going. And the more we make, the more there will be. The short history of the LDS Church is basically a tradition of reinvention. There have been so many different Mormonisms in just two hundred years, not even counting the schismatic offshoots. There

are permutations and adaptations yet to come. Some could be worse; some could be better.

In the Holocene's terminal phase, a forced ending to a geological dispensation that could nonetheless go on for centuries, I pray, in my own secular way, that this ice-capped blue planet with elderflora, this perfect terrestrial kingdom, inspires all seekers of goodness and beauty to labor together to make these latter days last longer.

JARED FARMER is the Walter H. Annenberg Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania.