

On Zion's Mount

Ten Questions for Jared Farmer By JARED FARMER

On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape

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What is *On Zion's Mount* about?

It's a cultural biography of one mountain: Mount Timpanogos, Utah (the site of Robert Redford's Sundance Resort). I show how the mountain became "visible" as a landmark. I use this local history of place-making to illustrate a national history of displacement.

All over America, settlers and their progeny displaced native peoples and native geographies even as they created new places and place attachments. As part of becoming "native" to their new home, settlers freely appropriated from the people they just dispossessed. They bestowed pseudo-Indian place names and told fake Indian legends about those named landforms. Mount Timpanogos is one such storied place.

Utah is a great case study for this historical dynamic because Mormonism, a religion indigenous to the United States, originally embraced American Indians as spiritual kin, the "Lamanites" from the Book of Mormon. Only in Utah did a US colonial population conceive of having a homeland in the Native American sense; an endemic spiritual geography. They called it Zion. Early Mormons anticipated that they would build the New Jerusalem with the help of Indians. But prophecies, dreams, and intentions didn't become realities. The basic story of Utah's formation—settlers colonizing indigenous land, organizing a territory, dispossessing natives, and achieving statehood—could not be more American. Despite Utah's reputation for weirdness, Utah history is weirdly typical when it comes to the outcome of Indian-settler relations.

What inspired you to write the book?

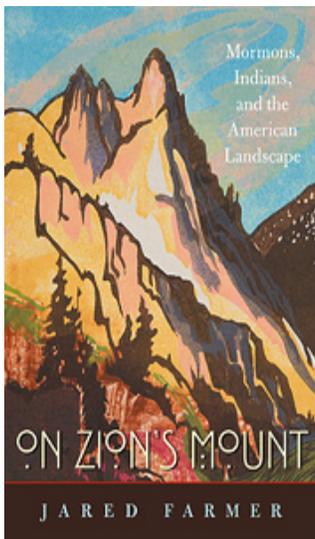
I grew up in the shadow of Mount Timpanogos, so naturally there's a personal backstory. I acknowledge as much in the book, but I don't dwell on it. Ironically, studying my home forced me to become an expatriate. As an academic, I wanted to produce a local history with national significance. Instead of writing a "Mormon history" or a "Utah history," I wanted to produce an American history set in the Great Basin involving actors (Mormons, Utes) who practiced religion. Writing the biography of a landmark seemed like a creative way to do this.

What's the most important take-home message for readers?

There's no such thing as an innocent landscape.

What are some of the biggest misconceptions about your topic?

First, that the Great Basin—the vast inland drainage between the Sierra Nevada and the Wasatch Range, everything between Reno and Salt Lake City—is a wasteland. Next, that Utah history began with the arrival of the Mormons; that Utah history and Mormon history are essentially the same thing; and that Utah history has no relevance outside the American West. Third, that polygamy was the only interesting thing going on in territorial Utah. And last, that only “card-carrying Mormons” (those with the church-issued ID cards called “temple recommends”) are allowed to do research at the Church Archives in Salt Lake City.



Can you say more about Mormon sacred space?

In the nineteenth century, Mormons—members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church)—were essentially Christian Zionists. Their “homeland” mentality was quite un-American. True, many American groups, not just hyperreligious ones, have looked upon the United States as a providential nation; a place prepared for them by God. But a providential nation is different than a providential homeland.

The word “homeland” has become so charged—and now so banal—since 9/11 that we have forgotten that the United States is, in terms of political science, an anti-homeland: a republic of citizens from any or all ethnic, religious, and genetic backgrounds, a people united by their shared allegiance to the Constitution. In theory the United States could adopt any language as its official language, could take any size or shape, and contain any kind of terrain. By contrast, Native Americans generally have specific homelands tied to specific landforms with unique names from their languages. By creating a sacred homeland, pioneer Mormons more closely resembled Indians than other contemporary Anglos.

Today, a residue of this mentality persists among “ethnic Mormons” in Utah. However, the homeland ethos faded dramatically in the twentieth century. The LDS Church has not actively encouraged Zionism in many, many decades. Since the 1960s, with the advent of the modern missionary program, the church has set its sights beyond the rim of the Great Basin. It wants to become a global religion. This goal hasn't yet been achieved, but the church can now credibly claim to be a hemispheric religion.

When it comes to making and maintaining sacred space, the modern, corporate LDS Church has two main programs, each with different geographies. For its tithe-paying base—Utah Mormons—it has created a string of pilgrimage sites that stretch from Joseph Smith's family

farm in upstate New York, to Nauvoo, Illinois (something like a Mormon version of Williamsburg, Virginia), to Martin's Cove, Wyoming, the site of a terrible handcart disaster in 1856 that has been converted into a faith-promoting heritage site. These and other hallowed places allow Utah Mormons to commemorate the "pioneer trek" to the Great Basin. The sacred narrative of getting to Utah is more important than Zion itself.

The other church program is the worldwide creation of temples: those special-use limited-access buildings used for rituals (not the regular open-access church buildings used for Sunday services). In the pioneer period, temples were grand edifices that echoed Utah's mountains in their architecture. Each was different. But since 1997 the Church has built or authorized the construction of one hundred "mini-temples," most of them beyond the Mormon Culture Region. In the pursuit of globalization, it is no longer practical or financially feasible for the church to continue erecting temples on the scale of the landmark pioneer structures.

As designed by church architects, the mini-temples accord to standard floor plans and contain standard furnishings. From a certain angle, they are not so different from hotel conference centers. The sacred temples are sealed off from nature—no sunlit windows or fresh-air conduits. Mormonism, a movement that began with an outdoorsy prophet who encountered God in a woodlot, who used magical rocks to translate scriptures buried in a holy hill, who led the Latter-day Saints to a unique Center Place in North America on the borders of the Lamanites, is now managed by a global corporation that manufactures generic, fungible, sacred space with plush carpeting and upholstery. That, too, seems very American.

Are you hoping just to inform readers? Give them pleasure? Piss them off?

Mostly I want to tell a great American story. In the process I'm willing to challenge some popular notions held by Mormons about their history. But I'm not obnoxious about it. By temperament, I'm both a contrarian and a reconciliator. I don't belittle religion. Anti-Mormonism pisses me off.

In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the US Protestant establishment vilified Utah Mormons as foreign, deviant, dangerous, violent, secretive, conspiratorial, theocratic, repressive, despotic, anti-democratic, un-American, un-Christian fanatics who followed a false prophet, read phony scriptures, worshiped in strange buildings, lived in desert communes, grew long beards, and kept women in political and sexual oppression. They were variously likened to "Oriental," "Asiatic," "Turkish," and "Mohammedan" peoples.

In 1902, when the Utah legislature elected LDS Church apostle Reed Smoot as senator, the US Senate refused to seat him for four years while it conducted hearings and investigations on the question: Can a faithful Mormon also be a loyal American? Traces of these attitudes persist. The media routinely conflates the LDS Church with Mormon fundamentalists (more properly called fundamentalist believers in late-period Joseph Smith).

Did you have a specific audience in mind when writing?

I wanted to reach two entirely different lay readers: local Mormons who could use something besides insular, faith-promoting history; and non-Mormons outside Utah who could use an informed, even-handed historical account of life “behind the Zion Curtain.”

The timing seemed right. The past ten years has been something of a Mormon moment in American media culture. Think about it: the 2002 Winter Olympics, the Elizabeth Smart kidnapping, the Warren Jeffs trial, Mitt Romney’s past and present bids for the GOP nomination, *American Idol* runner-up David Archuleta, the PBS documentary *The Mormons*, HBO’s adaptation of *Angels in America*, HBO’s original series *Big Love*, Richard and Joan Ostling’s investigative nonfiction *Mormon America*, John Krakauer’s polemical nonfiction *Under the Banner of Heaven*, David Ebershoff’s experimental fiction *The 19th Wife*, Brady Udall’s tragicomic novel *The Lonely Polygamist*, the continuing controversy over Prop. 8 in California, and, reportedly, an upcoming off-Broadway “Mormon musical” by Trey Parker and Matt Stone, who already produced a *South Park* episode about Mormonism.

As a history professor, I also had numerous professional audiences in mind:

- Environmental historians (who generally downplay religion and culture)
- Utah historians (who too often underplay non-Mormons and native peoples in the state’s past)
- Mormon historians (who too rarely engage with outside scholarly trends)
- Local historians (who seldom ask large-scale questions despite doing fantastic archival research)
- Historians of the United States (who generally overlook the Great Basin)
- Religious studies scholars (who generally know less about Mormonism than other US religions, and who might be interested in the racial and environmental aspects of Mormon history)
- Native American historians (who generally know less about the Great Basin and Mormon-Indian relations than other western regions and federal-Indian relations)
- Historians of the American West (who often lose interest in the story of Mormonism after 1890, when the LDS Church disavowed plural marriage)
- Historians of “collective memory” (who might be interested in a book-length study of a “memory site” that doubles as a natural landform)
- Cultural historians (who might be intrigued by the geographic dimension of “playing Indian,” and the interplay of religion and landscape)
- Folklorists and toponymists (who might be curious to see how an environmental historian uses their work)
- Historical geographers (who should be interested in an in-depth, longterm study of place-making, its context, and consequences)

Where does the book’s title come from? What alternative title would you give?

An alternative would be “A Memorial of Place and Displacement.” Not a marketable title, but a

literal summation of the project. “On Zion’s Mount” is more metaphorical, and has multiple possible meanings. The phrase comes from a Mormon hymn:

*High on the mountain top a banner is unfurled.
Ye nations, now look up; It waves to all the world
In Deseret’s sweet, peaceful land,
On Zion’s mount behold it stand!*

(“Deseret” was the name of the polity Mormons hoped to establish in the Great Basin.)

How do you feel about the cover?

Love it! The designer, who has an exceptionally cool name—Annamarie Why—did a terrific job with the layout and typography. I also like the name of the art piece: “Tip Top of Timp.” It’s fitting that this painting does not replicate the normative front-side wide-angle view of the mountain; instead, it shows an aspect of the backside. The painter, Roman Andrus, has personal significance to me. He was the leading portraitist of his generation in Provo, Utah, and did a large color study of my maternal grandfather (a man of the nineteenth century, the son of a polygamist). That portrait hung the living room of my childhood home—a room that had a picture window facing Mount Timpanogos.

Is there any book out there you wish you had written?

I wish I’d written *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It also deals with place-making and the profaning of sacred space. The Mesopotamian epic has all the elements for a timeless meditation on religion and environment—totemic animals, animistic rivers, prophetic mountains, sacred forests, sacralized buildings—in addition to great descriptions of sex and violence. Certainly the story has more staying power than any history book!