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Brigham Young and the Environment

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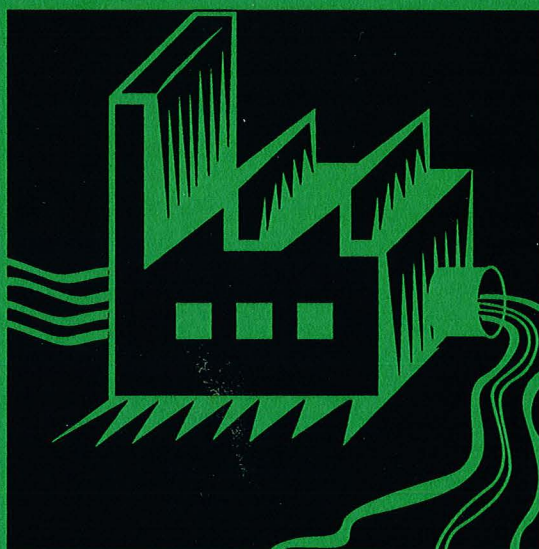
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ARIZONA HUMANITIES COUNCIL



THE BATTLE FOR THE WEST: ARIZONA AND LAND ETHICS

A Reader

THE BATTLE FOR THE WEST: ARIZONA AND LAND ETHICS

A Reader

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BRIGHAM YOUNG AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Michael Wurtz

Brigham Young was a product of the frontier. Moving from the forests of early nineteenth-century New England to the semi-arid desert of the Great Basin, he created his own rules based on pragmatism, which, combined with the Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) faith, molded a man of great self-confidence. He once said, "The revelations I receive are all upon natural principals." Young used those revelations to build the Kingdom of God in the mountains of the West.

Starting with the foundation of Salt Lake City, he instructed his faithful in coping with the inhospitable environment. From there he widened the Mormon domain to include the whole of what is now Utah as well as parts of Nevada, California, Arizona, and Idaho. In thirty years, Young turned Salt Lake City from an isolated frontier town to a religious capital. To exist under conditions that inspired explorer Jim Bridger to bet a thousand dollars that the Mormons could not raise one bushel of corn, Young created new policies concerning land and water, supported by followers who realized that faith and hard work

would be the only way to salvation and the settlement of the West.

Young was born in Vermont in 1801 to a sick mother and a father who preferred to teach lessons with a "word and a blow . . . but the blow came first." Both parents insisted that the children read the Bible and live under strict rules. The family moved to New York when Brigham was three years old, and there they lived on the edge of poverty, working mostly for neighboring farmers.

Shortly after his mother's death in 1815, Brigham was sent out on his own and began working as an apprentice in the construction trade. In 1824, employed as a carpenter, painter and cabinetmaker, Young married Miriam Works. Miriam gave birth to two children before she died in 1832, shortly after Brigham had been baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Brigham Young had been careful about choosing a religion. Perhaps this was due to growing up in a region later to be recognized as the "Burned-Over District," where many new religions were routinely founded. He had once felt that he should "Wait awhile! [Until] I reach the years of judgment and discretion [and] I can judge for myself." Until then he resolved to "take no course either with one party or the other." In 1830 he began reading the *Book of Mormon*, and in it he found something that appealed to both his sense of puritanism and practicality.

After his wife died, Young traveled to Kirtland, Ohio, to meet Joseph Smith, the prophet who founded the church after he professed to have translated the words of the angel Moroni. Moroni tells the story of refugees from Jerusalem who came to America in 600 b.c. and had been visited by Christ, who established his church on this

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continent. These refugees had been fighting each other on and off until the Lamanites, whom Mormons consider to be the ancestors of the American Indians, won by annihilating the Nephites, to whom Moroni belonged. In 1823 the angel Moroni, said Smith, guided him to the gold plates on which the angel had written this history. Seven years later the *Book of Mormon* was published.

Between 1832 and 1844, Young moved up through the church hierarchy. Early on, Smith asked him to take the word of God to the people, and Young spent much of this time traveling throughout North America and England on mission work. In 1840, Young succeeded to the presidency of the Quorum of the Twelve, making him one of the most powerful men of the church. Among his tasks he was to help settle new saints coming to Nauvoo, Illinois—his first brush with what was going to be a lifelong endeavor.

During these years the Mormons were constantly attacked by "gentile" populations in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, who feared the unusual customs of Mormonism, especially the practice of polygamy. When Joseph Smith was murdered in 1844, Young stealthily took over the church leadership and began the Mormon exodus to the Great Basin. The saints began to see the highly efficient, and hence effective, leader who would leave a permanent mark on the landscape of the American West.

Young's view of the environment began to show as he crossed the prairie. He would attempt to meet peaceably with the American Indians to ensure that the Mormons would be guaranteed safe passage. He would scold his followers if they would kill buffalo for sport, because

he felt "it was a sin to waste life and flesh," and because they might need the food later. His beliefs were well suited to the harsh realities of traveling across the Great Plains.

On July 24, 1847, Young proclaimed: "This is the place," when he first looked down upon the Salt Lake Valley. Here he was going to "build the Kingdom of God on Earth." Young promised, "God . . . will temper the elements for the good of His Saints; he will rebuke the frost, and the sterility of the soil, and the land shall become fruitful." But to earn God's assistance, he continued, the saints must work hard so that the desert would "blossom as the rose."

Orson Pratt, a point man for Young, heeded this advice and had already begun fulfilling that destiny by turning the waters of City Creek, near what was going to become Salt Lake City, onto the baked earth a day before Young had even seen the site of his future oasis in the Great Basin. By late afternoon Pratt's men had planted their first crops. But, as Leonard Arrington points out in *Great Basin Kingdom*, farming "was more than an economic necessity, it was a form of worship."

The strength of religious conviction, the lack of gentile opposition, and the ability to resolve almost any problem motivated Young to create new laws on the distribution of water and land. Water was the more precious commodity and required more thought. As Pratt demonstrated, the most important concept was irrigation. The Salt Lake Valley does not receive the annual twenty inches of precipitation needed to sustain farming; however, the nearby Wasatch Mountains drain a watershed that gets over forty inches of rain per year, and soon irrigation ditches ran from the foothills across the land.

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This baptism of the soil was not enough. The devoted Saint must make good use of that water, or he would lose it. This doctrine of "prior appropriation," where rights to the water were obtained by being first to use the water, was contingent upon the farmer putting that water to "beneficial use."

In addition, each farmer belonged to an irrigation district and was required to give ten percent of his time to help maintain the ditches. With these systems of distribution, the Mormons worked cooperatively to build dams and canals. But these systems would not even begin and land would not be distributed until Young had assurances that the spot to be settled had an adequate water supply.

Young directed how each new settlement was to distribute the land. No one but God could own the land; rather, the saints were stewards of its natural resources. Stewardship meant that the farmers could spend more time working the fields without worrying about how much their land was worth. Young advocated small diversified farms, large enough only to feed the family and have something to save for future needs. More important, these farms made it possible for the Saints to maintain their autonomy, freeing them from the economy of the eastern "Babylon."

Brigham Young's environmental ethic developed out of the necessities of frontier life in an arid domain. Young felt that the best way the saints were going to survive in the desert was through the absolute powers that he exhibited. With each success Young could claim not only victory but also supernatural sanction from God. With it, Young had absolute confidence the saints would carry out Smith's will to create a Zion that would encompass the whole of North America.

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