The Hope for Extraordinary Ecological Improvement

Aaron R. Kelson

Aaron R. Kelson teaches economics and geography at Mesabi Range Community Technical College in Virginia, Minnesota, and has been writing about Latter-day Saint perspectives on the Creation for more than ten years.

In a message titled "Repentance and Change," Elder Dallin H. Oaks stressed that the culture of the gospel of Jesus Christ differs from the cultures of all nations and ethnic groups on earth. Elder Oaks said, "The changes we must make to become part of the gospel culture require prolonged and sometimes painful effort, and our differences must be visible."[1] As individuals and communities extend themselves in this effort, beneficial changes should become increasingly apparent across all aspects of social organization and culture, including the health and vitality of the Creation upon which we depend.

Western American Latter-day Saints (LDS) are not exempt from the challenge of exchanging ingrained cultural ideals for higher ones that would improve life. This cultural struggle is apparent in LDS attitudes toward the Creation. Attitudes toward the Creation are a defining ideological trait of every culture. The late U.S. Representative Wayne Owens (1937–2002) said, "Our doctrine is enormously progressive as it relates to the environment, but our cultural interpretation has not followed suit."[2] When we consider the post-settlement history of land use in the Great Basin, the struggle between Western culture and doctrinally ideal culture among LDS settlers is apparent. Before presenting the brief review of that history that follows, it is important to note that the struggle is ongoing and the outcomes follow no predictable pattern either in favor of or in opposition to the health of the Creation. The struggle engages a generation at a time, a community at a time, and even an individual at a time.

Ecology in Zion and Babylonian Cultures

When Latter-day Saint settlers arrived in the Salt Lake Valley on July 21, 1847, they brought a rugged land-use culture to the landscape but also some powerful Creation-centered doctrinal teachings that softened attitudes about the development and use of the area's natural resources. Among these was a revitalized belief in the direct link between the health of the Creation and the righteousness of the people. This link is a dominant theme in both the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon. It is also emphasized in the writings of the Prophet Joseph Smith and in the writings of many other modern prophets. To provide some scriptural context, we can refer to the arrival of the ancient Israelites in the land of Canaan. Moses told them that if they would be obedient to the commandments and statutes God gave them, they would be assured of rain in due season, a land that yielded its fruits and other increase, bread to the full, and even the absence of evil beasts (see Leviticus 26:3–6). Conversely, the Israelites were told that if they rejected His commandments, God would send back the ferocious wild beasts, stop the earth from yielding its increase, and would make the land desolate (see Leviticus 26:14–32). Early Latter-day Saints believed that promises such as these were part of gospel culture and that they would be fulfilled through their faithful efforts in the Great Basin.

Initially, the Great Basin region did seem to blossom like a rose (see Isaiah 35:1). Agricultural yields were adequate and even abundant in many locations, crop variety increased, and pure air and water invigorated the Saints' spirits. The ecological blessings made available through righteous living seemed to be apparent. President Brigham Young said, "Why there is not another people on the earth that could have come here and lived. We prayed over the land, and dedicated it and the water, air, and everything pertaining to them unto the Lord, and the smile of Heaven rested on the land and it became productive."[3] However, it was not long before the ecological health of the Great Basin region began to decline. As the number of inhabitants in the area grew, pressure on natural resources intensified, but another factor was at work in weakening the area's ecological health.

Thomas Alexander argues that the introduction and acceptance of secularized entrepreneurship, coupled with advances in science and technology and a neglect of religious principles, caused the ecological damage that began to be evident.[4] In short, the ecological decline was caused by the assertion of the Euro-American entrepreneurial tradition, which is so much a part of Western culture. We may also extend this cultural threat to the Saints' faith-based attitudes toward the Creation back to a more ancient culture, one that is at the root of the Euro-American entrepreneurial tradition. As Hugh Nibley has so comprehensively argued, the antithesis of Zion, which the Saints hoped to establish, is Babylon. Babylonian culture was not barbaric. Rather, it is associated with a scientifically and economically advanced civilization. Ancient Babylonia, because of the kingdom's Code of Hammurabi (the earliest recorded system of contract law) and its desire to exploit every available trade opportunity in the region, is sometimes referred to as the world first "business civilization." It was an exquisitely organized society for the purpose of getting gain and is the prototype of the Euro-American entrepreneurial tradition that consistently challenged early LDS settlers in the Great Basin and that continues to be among the significant challenges to the full adoption of gospel or Zion culture everywhere.

The differences between Zion and Babylon are frequently subtle; hence, they are easy to overlook even by those who are striving to see the differences. But, natural-world features can sometimes signal some of the differences. For example, the topographies of the ancient kingdoms of Zion and Babylon are meaningfully different. God told the Israelites that they were going to a land of hills and valleys, one that "drinketh water of the rain of heaven" (Deuteronomy

11:11). No major river runs through the land, so to get precious moisture the Israelites understood that they would need rain in that limited area. And, to receive rain they understood they would need to be obedient. The link between the Israelites' spiritual status and the life-giving qualities of the land was certain. This connection was not so evident in the nearby kingdom of Babylonia. Two major rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, provided abundant water for irrigated agriculture. The Babylonians did not have to be as concerned about receiving rain in the proximity of their heavily populated cities, as long as there was sufficient precipitation in distant highland areas. Although the ancient Babylonians believed in an impressive pantheon of gods, their faith in extensive irrigation was typical of a culture that viewed economic success as being the result of their own efforts and organization. In Zion, survival depended on the rain, so it was always understood to be a miracle no matter what human efforts were made to bring that about.

If the miracle of the Creation is neglected or even forgotten in the struggle to survive, the scriptures teach that the physical and spiritual implications can be serious. Some consequences are predictable. In 1953 the U.S. Department of Agriculture published a study by then assistant chief of the Soil Conservation Service, Walter Clay Lowdermilk (1888–1974), that would be considered remarkable in contemporary political circles. The title of the publication was "Conquest of the Land Through Seven Thousand Years." Lowdermilk concluded his study by articulating what he called "The Eleventh Commandment."[5]

> Thou shalt inherit the Holy Earth as a faithful steward, conserving its resources and productivity from generation to generation. Thou shalt safeguard thy fields from soil erosion, thy living waters from drying up, thy forests from desolation, and protect thy hills from overgrazing by thy herds, that thy descendants may have abundance forever. If any fail in this stewardship of the land thy fruitful fields shall become sterile stony ground and wasting gullies, and thy descendants shall decrease and live in poverty or perish from off the face of the earth.

Babylon the Great fell, according to Lowerdermilk, in large measure because its inhabitants had neglected the eleventh commandment. They had relied too much on their own strength to succeed and had forgotten to consider and care for the source of life and blessings. The land, he somberly added, does not lie.

Early Post-Settlement Land-Use in the Great Basin

Evidence from Utah's early land use history shows signs of neglect for the eleventh commandment. Utah's limited forests were nearly decimated after just eighty years of settlement. Early domestic demands were significant, but harvest levels were probably sustainable until two other events dramatically escalated the demands placed on Utah's limited forest resources. The first was the coming of the railroad, and the second was the advent of precious metal mining. Although Babylonian tendencies had been present in the Territory since the time of settlement, according to Brigham Young, they became more evident at this time in Utah's history. A report on railroad tie production in northern Utah's Tooele County remarked, "The work of destruction is going on so rapidly, and the supply is so limited, . . . in five years time from the present not a tree six inches in diameter will be found in the county."[6]

Despite some foreboding about its impacts, the coming of the railroad was considered by LDS leaders to be largely compatible with the original goals of settlement.[7] On the other hand, precious metal mining was not looked upon favorably by LDS leadership. Yet, it is likely that LDS settlers were indirectly involved in the mining effort through such secondary activities as providing miners with wood for use as mine props. The enticement of substantial profits through the sale of mine props led to the wanton

destruction of most of the few remaining virgin forest stands in the Wasatch Range. In one case, a speculator cut more than one million board feet of old-growth timber at the headwaters of Big Cottonwood Canyon, leaving it to rot when sales failed to materialize. Tree ring counts later identified the trees as being over four hundred years old.[8]

The heavy demands placed on Utah's forests by the needs of permanent settlers, railroad tie production, and mine props were devastating, especially since no serious efforts were made to replant harvested forests. Upon examining the forests in Utah near the end of the 1800s, former chief of the U.S. Division of Forestry Bernhard Fernow (1851–1923) concluded, "Forestry has no meaning in Utah. . . . The native growth of forest exercises the mind of the people not at all."[9]

To further complicate the problem of land-use degradation in early post-settlement Utah, growing herds of grazing animals blanketed the highland areas. There seemed to be little understanding or concern for the extreme impacts the herds were exerting on the fragile environment. The consequences of decades of inappropriate grazing practices were tragically noted in a government report, "Between 1888 and 1905, the Wasatch Range, from Thistle to Salina, was a vast dust bed, grazed, trampled, and burned to the utmost."[10]

Before long, the consequences of resource degradation in Utah became evident to all. With the removal of much of the high-elevation vegetation through overlogging and overgrazing, precipitation was no longer retained in mountain watersheds. When snowpack melted in the spring, devastating floods began to occur. From 1888 to 1946, at least twenty-three major floods occurred in Utah from Cache County in the north to Washington County in the south, causing numerous injuries, heavy livestock losses, and the deaths of at least thirteen people.[11] One highly publicized flood in 1945 washed over City Cemetery in the foothills of Salt Lake City, carrying caskets into the streets below.

The Wellsville Area Response

Settlers living in the vicinity of northern Utah's Wellsville Mountains saw this tragic story unfold on their doorsteps. Extensive timber harvesting, unregulated grazing, and uncontrolled agricultural fires were responsible for removing much of the area's natural vegetation.[12] Decades of such abuse resulted in the familiar consequences: vegetation removal, massive soil erosion, catastrophic flash floods, noxious weed invasions, and the degradation and drying up of precious water supplies. It seemed that in the rush to develop and mimic behaviors consistent with the dominating influence of Western culture, principles of gospel culture beneficial to the Creation were being suppressed.

In other locations of Utah, such as in the mountains east of Sanpete Valley near the home of my ancestors, degraded highland forests were made part of the Forest Reserve System. In reserve forests, scientific management methods were applied to restore the ecological health of the damaged ecosystems. Inclusion in the Forest Reserve System was not an immediate option for the Wellsville Mountains, however. The range was originally owned by the Southern Pacific Railroad.[13] After mining exploration revealed that the mountains contained no economically extractable precious metal deposits, the railroad sold its land to ranchers at "dirt cheap prices."[14] Most of the Wellsville mountain range eventually became the property of one man, John Keith Spires. Spires owned approximately twenty thousand acres in the Wellsvilles and leased additional acreage from other land owners.[15] If the Wellsvilles were going to be protected, a different approach was needed.

One man who had grown up at the foot of the range and had formed a strong emotional attachment with the area, Robert Haslam Stewart, was alarmed by what was happening.[16] Stewart was working as a member of Utah State University's extension staff assigned to Box Elder County, west of the Wellsvilles. Stewart understood why the Wellsvilles were being destroyed

and hoped that someone would do something to correct the problem, but he was reluctant to take the lead. Finally, he recorded that he said to himself one morning in the mid-1930s, "Maybe you are that someone to do something!"[17]

Stewart drove around the entire mountain range that very day, discussing the problem with influential farmers and community leaders. He learned that many people were anxious to be part of an organized effort to reclaim the Wellsvilles. It was clear to Stewart that a successful program would require strong leadership and that it should be integrated with the cultural ideals of area residents. Stewart and his family were LDS, but Stewart was probably more recognized for his professional credentials than for his leadership in the LDS community. Stewart's efforts were greatly augmented when an LDS bishop and influential farmer in Mendon, John O. Hughes, whose father had been killed in a flash flood, offered his complete support.[18] The strength of their partnership came from the union of sound science with faithful discipleship, and ultimately that combination enabled them to succeed.

Early meetings with those who agreed to support Stewart and Hughes led to the decision that the only way to reclaim the Wellsvilles was to purchase all of the privately held land and then give the land to the USDA Forest Service to manage as part of the National Forest System. To further the objective of purchasing the privately held land in the Wellsvilles, Stewart and Hughes formed the Wellsville Mountain Area Project Corporation.[19] A seven-member board led the corporation, but it was Stewart and Hughes who shouldered most of the responsibility for rallying community support. They spoke to any group that would listen; they organized 115 tours of the Wellsvilles to explain what was happening to the mountains; they published articles in local newspapers.[20] It was not long before financial contributions began coming in. In 1937 one year after the corporation was organized, the Wellsvilles produced a catastrophic flood, devastating farms and houses in Petersboro and Beaver Dam, two small communities just north of the range. Though unfortunate, the flood was a blessing to the cause as contributions increased immediately afterward.[21]

Not everyone was convinced of the necessity of the project, however. Some were angry that Stewart and Hughes would consider turning over so much land to the federal government.[22] Some argued that the floods were not the result of overgrazing but were "an act of God almighty."[23] This attitude had been expressed elsewhere in Utah as well. When settlers in Monticello (in southeastern Utah) had denuded the mountain slopes and overgrazed the meadows in the Abajo Mountains, the spring water runoff increased. Rather than attributing the floods to the inability of precipitation to percolate into the soil, some believed they were signs from God. One Monticello settler said about a flood, "It was a glorious sight, being about four hundred yards across."[24]

Some opponents attempted to have Stewart fired from his position at Utah State University. But Stewart and Hughes were able to endure the opposition because they presented their arguments in the language and in the context of gospel culture. They reminded area residents that water provided them with baths, lawns, flowers, and other blessings necessary for the pleasant home and community environment that should exist in Zion. Appealing to local residents' faith in God's providence, they stressed that God had created the system of high-elevation moisture retention and gradual release so that people could live in the arid West.[25]

The efforts of the corporation were successful. Almost all of the privately held land in the Wellsvilles was purchased. After the land was acquired, in an inspiring display of a commitment to a culture whose principles improve all aspects of existence, community-led and financed reclamation efforts were made even before the land was transferred to the control of the USDA Forest Service. Ironically, the federal government

declined to accept title to the land for more than a year. The government was finally convinced to accept the title when it had received more than seventy-five petitions and private letters with hundreds of names in support of the transfer.[26] The transfer was finalized by presidential proclamation in 1939, and the land became part of the Cache National Forest.[27]

On September 6, 1996, the U.S. Board of Geographic Names approved the request of Robert Stewart's son, John Stewart, to rename one of the peaks in the ecologically reborn Wellsville Mountains as "Bob Stewart Peak." The proposal had strong local support. The 8,626-foot peak stands as a fitting tribute to one of the courageous and visionary men responsible for harmonizing the effort to reclaim the Wellsvilles with the faith of the surrounding communities. Although Stewart and Hughes acted out of a personal attachment to the mountains, their achievement came because they were successful in linking the ecological health of the area with the goals and ideals of a Zion society. Area residents knew that the appeals made by Stewart and Hughes were not manipulative but that they shared the vision of a culture based on principles more worthy than economic advancement by any means the legal system permits.

LDS Culture and the Creation Today

Stewart and Hughes sparked a latent gospel culture to action not by challenging the worldview of local residents but by clarifying the culture and by providing an organizational structure through which Creation-centered cultural ideals could be implemented. In the process, local residents were given the opportunity to reexamine and reaffirm their Creation-centered values. The people involved were convinced that their values had been right for proper land use all along, but they were willing to admit that they had applied their beliefs too restrictively. When they realized that a commitment to gospel culture includes active and intelligent participation in efforts to sustain the health and beauty of the Creation, they went to work and began to experience the full miracle of the rains once again.

Latter-day Saints in many lands face similar Creation-centered challenges today. As we progress in incorporating gospel culture more fully in our lives, a deep sense of incongruence with physical surroundings that are ugly, polluted, and deprived of life grows within us. We are familiar with the many ecological promises God has made, such as the declaration in our tenth article of faith that the "earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory." We wonder how we can participate with other like-minded people, including those not of our faith, in helping such promises be fulfilled, for we find them to be motivating, ennobling, and harmonious with what we know about the eternal nature of all mankind. We do not want to repeat past mistakes in our actions toward the Creation. Rather, it is our hope that the ebb and flow of intelligent, faith-directed action toward the Creation will give way to sustained improvement in attitudes and behaviors that are consistent with the eternal value of the Creation and its integral role in our own development.

Signs that our people are ready to accept more of the Creation-centered principles that stem from gospel culture are encouraging. Having studied the link between the Creation and LDS faith for over a decade, I am confident in saying that a growing number of our people understand that if the Creation is in the process of being made desolate so that common miracles like rain, regeneration, and the diversity of life can no longer bless humanity as they have in the past, then we have changes yet to make. While fully repairing anthropogenic damage to the Creation's health may be beyond our individual or even our collective abilities, many committed Latter-day Saints and other like-minded people look forward to the time when powers higher than our own will complete the Creation's restoration to full health. But we know that we have a part to play in that restoration. The stellar example of Stewart and Hughes serves us well. If we choose

to bless the Creation as Stewart and Hughes did by the intelligent application of our faith, should we be surprised by results that are nothing short of extraordinary? It is comforting and simply logical, given the comprehensive nature of gospel culture, for us to hope that faith-directed efforts to bless the magnificent Creation will reap extraordinary rewards in due time.

Notes

1. Dallin H. Oaks, "Repentance and Change," *Ensign*, November 2003, 37.

2. Wayne Owens, "Wilderness in the Hand of God," in *New Genesis: A Mormon Reader on Land and Community*, ed. Terry Tempest Williams, William B. Smart, and Gibbs M. Smith (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1998), 224.

3. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–1856), 10:302.

4. Thomas Alexander, "Latter-Day Saints, Utahns, and the Environment: A Personal Perspective," in *New Genesis*, 209.

5. W. C. Lowdermilk, *Conquest of the Land through 7,000 Years*, U.S. Department of Agriculture Soil Conservation Service: Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 99 (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), 30.

6. Franklin B. Hough, *Report on Forestry* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1882), 198.

7. Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).

8. Franklin B. Hough, *Report on Forestry* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1878).

9. Bernhard E. Fernow, *Report on the Conditions of the Rocky Mountains*, Department of Agriculture Forestry Division: Bulletin No. 2 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1888).

10. Robert V. R. Reynolds, *Grazing and Floods: A Study of the Conditions in the Manti National Forest, Utah*, U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service: Bulletin 91 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1911), 6.

11. Aaron R. Kelson, "Wilderness and Adjacent Lands: Policy Development and Current Management Directions" (PhD diss., Utah State University, 1997).

12. John Hughes, interview by John Stewart (1973), audiotape, Special Collections, Utah State University, Logan.

13. John Stewart, "Savior of the Wellsvilles," *Herald Journal*, January 12, 1986.

14. Stewart, "Savior of the Wellsvilles," 14.

15. John Hughes, interview by John Stewart.

16. Sydney Storm, "America's Most Beautiful Valley," *American Forests* 72, no. 1 (1967): 1–5.

17. John Stewart, "Savior of the Wellsvilles," 14.

18. John Stewart, "Savior of the Wellsvilles," 14.

19. Sydney Storm, "America's Most Beautiful Valley."

20. John Hughes, interview by John Stewart.

21. John Stewart, "Savior of the Wellsvilles."

22. John Hughes, interview by John Stewart.

23. John Stewart, "Savior of the Wellsvilles," 14.

24. Charles S. Peterson, *Look to the Mountains: Southeastern Utah and the La Sal National Forest* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 121.

25. John Hughes, interview by John Stewart.

26. "Forest Gets Wellsville Mountain," *Herald Journal*, April 3, 1939.

27. Wellsville History Committee, *Windows of Wellsville* (Providence, UT: Keith W. Watkins and Sons, 1985).