

“Mormons” in *Leviathan Wakes*: Applying the Church/Sect Typology



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Popular perception of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has changed over the last two hundred years. The portrayal of Mormons in science fiction can serve as a window to understanding outside conceptualizations of the church in real life. This essay examines popular social perceptions of the church through the lens of the book *Leviathan Wakes*, the first volume in the *Expanse* book series by James S. A. Corey. In doing so, it utilizes a religious studies approach, with sociologist Max Weber’s church-sect continuum as a framework (which classifies different types of religious groups) as seen elsewhere in Armand Mauss’s work, *The Angel and the Beehive*. I argue that the portrayal of “Mormons” in *Leviathan Wakes* illustrates the fact that in some ways, the Mormon movement functions both as a church and as a sect in popular imagination. Some of these imaginative features include segregation from the larger society through a pioneering exodus to a new frontier, family values that differ from the norm,¹ and administrative and economic structures capable of supporting the creation of a new nation (or world, in the case of *The Expanse*). Through this examination of science fiction, one can see that elements of Latter-day Saint history continue to reverberate through the popular perception of Mormons.

In his book *The Angel and the Beehive*, Armand Mauss builds on Max Weber’s church-sect typology, which set the groundwork for decades of sociological research regarding the development of Christian religious movements. The church-sect typology describes a continuum, at one extreme end of which are “churches”—large-scale institutions that exist in little or no tension with the outside society. On the opposite extreme of the spectrum are “sects.” These are small, often splinter groups, that exist in a state of high tension with the outside society. As such, sects are often viewed as threatening and can evoke negative reactions in the larger society around them. While tension with society is a key element of identity building in a sect, if the level of tension becomes too extreme, the sect must assimilate into the larger society to survive. As a movement assimilates and becomes more mainstream, it tends to gain more recruits, become institutionalized, and can eventually swing to the other side of the continuum. In short, a sect can eventually develop into a church, existing in little or no tension with the mainstream society.

Using this typology as his backdrop, Armand Mauss argues that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints underwent periods of assimilation (e.g., following the 1890 abolishment of polygyny) followed by periods of retrenchment (e.g., during the ERA movement). In assimilating, the movement grew, gained many converts, and became better known in American society. However, the periods of retrenchment preserved the strong sense of identity held by members of the church by retaining (or even building) tension with mainstream society. Thus, Mauss illustrates how the Latter-day Saint movement has encompassed the benefits of becoming a

“church” while simultaneously retaining many of the traits of a sect (Mauss x-xi, 198-199). This essay explores how popular perceptions of the “Mormons”—as represented in *The Expanse*—reflect Mauss’s evaluation of the LDS movement.

Science fiction provides a unique window for looking at the contemporary cultural view of Latter-day Saints—it is an alternate reality, built on semi-truths, that requires enough resonance with the real world to feel authentic. In the case of *The Expanse*, it is a potential future that presumably builds on a past that is largely the same as that which we know. Therefore, Corey, the author of *The Expanse*, is projecting his own imagination of how society as he understands it might develop in a space age.² Thus we can analyze elements of how Corey views members of the movement now through his treatment of Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes*. In building his Mormons of the future, Corey heavily draws upon the early history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as more modern history, to create an image of a people that feels recognizable in his alternate reality. In order to achieve this narrative feat, Corey pulls from the exact elements that might be used to classify the movement as a sect—the areas in which Mormonism had (or has) tension with the outside society. Although Corey does not expend many words on the group of people, what little he does write is telling, and allows the reader to flesh out the group in their imagination through analogy to Latter-day Saints in our present reality.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began serious assimilation into American society during the events surrounding Utah’s acquisition of statehood in 1896. The road to statehood proved to be a battleground, owing to the perceived threat that the church posed to American society more broadly. There were three main ways in which the church threatened the notion of “Americanness” and in which the church had to compromise in order to be considered “American.” These were polygyny (sexual and familial norms), communal living (financial structure), and theocratic government (political structure) (Alexander 4, 307-308; Flake 20-22, 61-62). These three elements were threatening enough that many nineteenth-century Americans could not coexist with the Saints. The ideological friction only escalated with time, to the point that for its own survival, the church essentially abandoned these three elements. They abolished the practice of polygyny in 1890 (Flake 30), liquidated the majority of their communal holdings (Alexander 6, 182), and embraced the American democratic political structure through the process of Utah’s 1896 acquisition of statehood (Alexander 35-36). In short, the church assimilated into American society politically, financially, and socially/sexually. Corey leans on two of these assimilation techniques (sexual/familial norms and financial structure) in constructing his narrative, and it can be argued that the presence of the third (political) is at least implied. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, Corey’s depiction resonates with current as well as historical church activity. Throughout the entire narrative, he employs the pioneer heritage of the Saints as a framework for his depiction.

The first mention of Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes* comes early, in the second paragraph of the book: “One moon of Uranus sported five thousand, the farthest outpost of human civilization, at least until the Mormons finished their generation ship and headed for the stars and freedom from

procreation restrictions" (ch. 1). With a single sentence, Corey establishes a group preparing for a massive migration into an unexplored frontier. They are motivated by continuing pushback on religious procreative norms, to the point that the community has chosen to leave the dominant social order altogether rather than make concessions to it. This narrative echoes the history of the church's early Mormon migration to Utah and also their alternative family and sexual norms. These included the practice of polygyny, which was cited as a means of bringing more children onto the Earth, thereby keeping God's commandment in the Garden of Eden to "multiply and replenish the earth" (Doctrine and Covenants 132.63). Decades after abandoning polygyny, the church's stances on contraception and abortion appear to have continued to reflect this concern with multiplying and replenishing. This idea remains current in the church today, as evidenced by this statement in the 1995 touchstone document, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World:" "We declare that God's commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force" (Hinckley, et al.). So far as we know, the Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes* do not practice polygyny (which ironically would have fit well with the multi-person relationships depicted in the books).³ But they do manifest serious concerns regarding governmental birth control measures and family size control, reflecting the church's historical anxiety regarding the Edenic edict. While the idea of polygyny eventually led to violence in nineteenth-century America (Mason 63), in *The Expanse*, the alternative family ideal merely marks the community as eccentric but harmless. This image harmonizes well with the idea of a church that has managed to maintain some of the social tension expected of a sect, while still existing to an extent within the mainstream. In *Leviathan Wakes*, reproductive ideals clearly separate the Mormons from the larger society. This very separation is one of the factors that marks the movement as a sect.

The depiction of Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes* also aligns well with the church's current relationship toward family and sexual norms. There are several areas in which the church has run counter-culturally with regards to family and sexual ideals. Many of these have coincided with church political action. The church has consistently engaged in political discussion surrounding family structure, gender roles, and sexual norms, beginning with its extensive lobbying for women's suffrage (Madsen 129-130, 348-351) and promotion of polygyny (Flake 43-44; Gordon 18-19, 202-203). In more recent years, the church aggressively lobbied against the ERA in the 1970s (Mauss 117-118; Bradley-Evans Introduction, Appendix 5) and against marriage equality, especially in the early twenty-first century (Prince; see also McKinley and Johnson). The church's attitude toward sexual behavior differs from that of the national norm to the extent that if a player on a Brigham Young University sports team engages in sexual relations outside of marriage, he or she will face disciplinary action from the school. This discipline almost always includes a loss of playing privileges for at least one athletic season and may even result in being expelled from the university. These proceedings historically have attracted media attention, perhaps due to their contrast with national attitudes toward sexuality (Ioselevich).

While *Leviathan Wakes* does not overtly discuss Mormon political efforts to gain reproductive freedom, it does presume the confidence to form a new political (potentially theocratic) system.

Granted, we can't know all of the details of Mormon history in this alternate universe, but their space exodus conveys a sense of disempowerment in Mormon life—the inability to live by their beliefs in the face of larger political powers. This disempowerment reflects the early history of the movement, especially the migration of Latter-day Saints from Ohio, to Missouri, to Illinois, and finally to Utah. Moreover, it is entirely possible that while unmentioned, the movement in the book had attempted to find other alternatives to their solution through political recourse. This is not a foreign idea to any who are familiar with the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as discussed above.

Moving beyond family and political norms, while the Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes* clearly do not see eye-to-eye with the majority of the population of the solar system, they are a large enough group to have the labor force and the finances necessary to carry out their plan. When *The Expanse's* main characters first see the starship *Nauvoo*, they comment: “Ballsy bastards. No guarantee there's even a planet worth a damn on the other end of that hundred-year trip.’ ‘They seem pretty sure,’ Holden replied. ‘And you don't make the money to build a ship like that by being stupid. I, for one, wish them nothing but luck’” (Corey ch. 17). *Leviathan Wakes* does not present the church's wealth as being necessarily negative. But it is not surprising that church finances make it into the depiction of Mormons. Throughout its history, the church's financial state has garnered attention. In the early days of the church, the communal nature of ownership led to immense church holdings, which mainstream Americans found to be a threat to the capitalist-protestant work and financial ethic. Under the Edmunds-Tucker Act, this led to the government seizure of most communally held church assets (Alexander 4-6) and culminated with the disincorporation of communal holdings in the 1890s (Alexander 6, 182). During this time, the church began to strongly emphasize the payment of tithes and offerings. Today, all members in good standing donate ten percent of their income as tithing to the church, and many donate even more in other offerings. This practice paved the way for the church to become financially solvent in the early twentieth century (Alexander 4-6). Church finances continued to be a source of curiosity and conjecture, particularly once the church stopped publicly releasing its financial reports in 1959 (Walch). In 1996, *Time Magazine* speculated the church's holdings to be at least \$30 billion (Van Biema 51, 54), which the church denied as an over-exaggeration (Hinckley). Thus, while the church's exact financial status was (and is) unknown, society viewed the church as being exceptionally well off,⁴ much as the Mormons are depicted in *Leviathan Wakes*. Granted, perhaps Mormon membership in *Leviathan Wakes* has diminished, and the church is merely enjoying the leftovers of more popular and prosperous days. However, even if such were the case, having the ability to construct the most massive starship to date would seem to indicate that at one point, the organization either had sufficient membership to amass enormous financial holdings, or else had a small membership of the extremely wealthy. This would signify that at least for a time, the movement could have been classified as a church, since sects are generally small in membership and tend to attract members of lower socio-economic status; growth in numbers or in wealth characterize movement towards a church (Koehrsen 320-321).

The final way in which Corey capitalizes on Mormon separation from society is the way in which he describes the starship *Nauvoo*. He utilizes temple-centric imagery, reflecting an understanding of the importance of the temple in LDS doctrine. Shortly before commandeering the starcraft, one of the main characters muses:

The structure echoed the greatest cathedrals of Earth and Mars, rising up through empty air and giving both thrust-gravity stability and glory to God. It was still metal bones and woven agricultural substrate, but Miller could see where it was all heading. A generation ship was a statement of overarching ambition and utter faith. The Mormons had known that. They'd embraced it. They'd constructed a ship that was prayer and piety and celebration all at the same time. The *Nauvoo* would be the greatest temple mankind had ever built. It would shepherd its crew through the uncrossable gulfs of interstellar space, humanity's best hope of reaching the stars. Or it would have been, if not for him.
(Corey ch. 46)

This passage does more than merely depict a people devoted to their faith. In a sense, the temple-starship imagery serves as a focal point for the key ways in which the Mormons of *Leviathan Wakes* continue to function as a sect. They maintain tension with society and retain a distinct identity from the rest of the solar system through constructing an ideological and, eventually, physical separation from the world around them. Their willingness to leave human civilization—to migrate to a different planet—in order to maintain their familial ideals is directly embodied in their starship. Moreover, their temple-craft demonstrates both financial power sufficient to achieve their commitment and a confidence in their ability to create a new Mormon empire.

Temple building has been a continuous and central part of Latter-day Saint devotion. Joseph Smith first articulated the vision of building a temple in 1832, less than three years after the church's initial organization (Doctrine and Covenants 88.119). The construction of temples initially required significant sacrifice on the part of the Saints. However, in more recent decades, the church has hired professional construction companies to undertake the building of a staggering number of temples: as of May 2021, there are 252 temples worldwide, including those announced or under construction (Temple List). Similar to their function in *Leviathan Wakes*, temples are not merely monuments to the financial status of the church. They are considered to be a physical and ideological separation from the rest of the world. Temples physically separate Latter-day Saints from the world due to their entry requirements: any who enter must be current members of the church in good standing. Temples also serve as an ideological separation from the rest of the world. They are a place where Saints encounter the divine and where families transcend time: according to Latter-day Saint doctrine, temple rituals overcome death's power to separate spouses, parents, and children from each other. Thus, Corey's choice of temple imagery completes his construction of an authentically "Mormon" people—a people who, much like in our current reality, function both in a large-scale, institutional church, while still maintaining the strong sense of identity and the tension with the outside society that characterize sects.

My analysis in this article focuses solely on the Mormons as depicted in *Leviathan Wakes*. However, the Mormon starship *Nauvoo*—which is commandeered, renamed *Behemoth*, converted into the Medina Station, and is never returned to the Mormons—continues to play a significant part in the later books as a colossal battleship and then bridgepoint to new worlds. This development presents opportunity for further investigation, perhaps regarding the nature of Latter-day Saints' pacifism and militancy, their response to confiscation of property, or even their reaction to anti-Mormon sentiment, and whether members of the church (or the church as a whole) are viewed as standing up for themselves, or whether they can simply be trodden upon without repercussion. History provides examples of a spectrum of Latter-day Saint responses. Moreover, the seizure of the temple-ship may play upon anxieties regarding the desecration of the sacred and the danger of the government encroaching upon separate, holy space. The confiscation of the ship also invites an analysis of ways in which Mormon beliefs have fed into outside groups' political agendas. Such questions are beyond the scope of this article, but they underscore the ways in which Corey's authentic depiction of the Mormons and the *Nauvoo* provides rich fodder for discussion.

James S. A. Corey's treatment of the Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes* depicts a people who are large enough to be considered a "church" by Weberian standards. This is based on their implied political confidence and on their financial ability to build the mammoth starship *Nauvoo*. Such financial ability suggests a relatively large member base at some point, due to the practice of gathering tithing from church members. This in turn points to a movement that is mainstream enough to attract and retain converts. However, the Mormons' counter-cultural family ideals and intense level of piety indicate a movement that still maintains a level of tension with the outside society, which is an important part of maintaining identity as a group. Thus, much as in Mauss's assessment of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in real life, the Mormons in *Leviathan Wakes* function simultaneously as both a sect and a church. Corey's astute characterizations of family values, financial stability, and temple imagery draw from accurate representations of Latter-day Saints and allow him to generate an authentic portrayal of a potential alternate reality.

Notes

1. The norm varies by context. For example, in nineteenth-century America, strict monogamy was the norm, which the church challenged through polygamy. This contrasts with *The Expanse*, in which multi-person relationships are the norm, but having numerous children in a single family unit is not the norm.
2. James S. A. Corey is a pseudonym for two male authors. I use he/him pronouns to refer to the authorial unit.

3. *Editor's Note*: The “alternative” family arrangements depicted in *The Expanse* are democratic and gender-equal (and often gender-fluid), and are thus quite different from patriarchal polygyny.
4. This perception was not necessarily incorrect. A former employee of Ensign Peak (the church’s financial firm) leaked the financial reports of the church in 2020, prompting some to decry the ethics of maintaining secrecy around what some might consider to be an obscene amount of money (\$100 billion). Discussion also centered around the usage of largely donated funds, with some calling for a revocation of the church’s tax-free status. See: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-mormon-church-amassed-100-billion-it-was-the-best-kept-secret-in-the-investment-world-11581138011>. *Leviathan Wakes* (2011) predates the 2020 leaks and steers away from any discussion on financial ethics. It focuses precisely on the repercussions of that wealth for the storyline, namely that the church is using its enormous wealth to promote Mormon family values.

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