

The Mormon Myth of Evil Evolution

Michael R. Ash

SEVERAL YEARS AGO while teaching the priests' quorum, part of my lesson focused on the deceptive methods used by Satan. I asked my class for suggestions as to what tools, techniques, and deceptive teachings Satan employs. Some of their responses included the immorality in movies, television, and music, or the notion that there is no God. Then the bishop, as president of the priests' quorum and a regular attendee of the class, said, "Evolution." In the years since this event, I've found that there are a number of members who believe that evolution is a doctrine of the devil. It is apparent that many members are not familiar with the official position of the church on the topic of evolution, nor of the past history associated with this issue. The purpose of this paper is not to take a position on whether evolution is correct or is in error, but rather to demonstrate that the church's official stand on the subject is *neutral* and that many faithful Latter-day Saints, including LDS scientists, accept evolution as a currently valid scientific theory.

The controversy among members of the church regarding evolution has been around since shortly after Darwin published his *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. Some of this controversy took place among the faculty at BYU as well as between members of the church leadership. Whereas some prominent Latter-day Saints viewed the teachings of evolution as the theories of men or the wiles of Satan, others have viewed evolution as the method by which God created tabernacles for spirits. In 1909, after decades of controversy, the First Presidency issued an official statement regarding this matter entitled, "The Origin of Man":

Adam, our great progenitor, "the first man," was, like Christ, a pre-existent spirit, and like Christ he took upon him an appropriate body, the body of a man, and so became a "living soul." The doctrine of the pre-existence,—revealed so plainly, particularly in latter days, pours a wonderful flood of

light upon the otherwise mysterious problem of man's origin. It shows that man, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal body to undergo an experience in mortality. It teaches that all men existed in the spirit before any man existed in the flesh, and that all who have inhabited the earth since Adam have taken bodies and become souls in like manner.

It is held by some that Adam was not the first man upon this earth, and that the original human being was a development from lower orders of the animal creation. These, however, are the theories of men. The word of the Lord declares that Adam was "the first man of all men" (Moses 1:34), and we are therefore in duty bound to regard him as the primal parent of our race. It was shown to the brother of Jared that all men were created in the beginning after the image of God; and whether we take this to mean the spirit or the body, or both, it commits us to the same conclusion: Man began life as a human being, in the likeness of our heavenly Father.

True it is that the body of man enters upon its career as a tiny germ or embryo, which becomes an infant, quickened at a certain stage by the spirit whose tabernacle it is, and the child after being born, develops into a man. There is nothing in this, however, to indicate that the original man, the first of our race, began life as anything less than a man, or less than the human germ or embryo that becomes a man.¹

Some have suggested this statement takes an anti-evolution stance. However, the First Presidency's statement doesn't address the mutability of species. Some have also claimed that since Adam is to be regarded "as the primal parent of our race," this rules out the possibility of evolution. Race, however, is not a biological distinction. James C. King, of the *New York University School of Medicine*, notes:

What constitutes race is a matter of social definition. Whatever a group accepts as part of itself is within the pale; what it rejects is outside. Acceptance and rejection are not absolute but can exist in various degrees. . . .

. . . [T]he fact [is] that what constitutes a race and how one recognizes a racial difference is culturally determined. Whether two individuals regard themselves as of the same or of different races depends not on the degree of similarity or their genetic material but on whether history, tradition, and personal training and experience have brought them to regard themselves as belonging to the same groups or to different groups. . . . [G]roup differentiation [is]. . . based on cultural behavior and not on genetic difference.²

1. *Improvement Era*, November 1909, 75-81.

2. James C. King, *The Biology of Race* (N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), 160, 163. See also

http://www.standard.net/standard/news/news_story.html?sid=20010628232006.6CA90+cat=news+template=news1.html

Therefore, Adam can be the “primal parent of our race”—or *cultural group*—without discarding the evolutionary model. When it was recognized that the First Presidency’s statement didn’t address the origin of man’s physical body, questions among members persisted. Less than six months after the official “statement,” the following information was printed in the April 1910 *Improvement Era*:

Whether the mortal bodies of man evolved in natural processes to present perfection, thru the direction and power of God; whether the first parents of our generations, Adam and Eve, were transplanted from another sphere, with immortal tabernacles, which became corrupted thru sin and the partaking of natural foods, in the process of time; whether they were born here in mortality, as other mortals have been, are questions not fully answered in the revealed word of God.³

Thus, three possibilities were suggested for the creation of man’s physical body: 1) evolution via a natural process as directed by the power of God; 2) transplantation from another sphere; 3) birth in mortality by other mortals. None of these three fits the typical “creationist” model.

Because the official “statement” didn’t resolve the issues of evolution or the mutability of species, the controversy among members, and even BYU faculty members, continued. Evolution was being taught by faithful LDS professors at BYU, while other BYU professors (and at times, students or parents of students) opposed such teaching.⁴ In 1911 the controversy grew more intense, and several BYU faculty members became embroiled in this issue, resulting in bitter feelings and even some changes of employment.⁵

The 1911 BYU controversy prompted President Joseph F. Smith to conclude that “evolution would be best left out of discussions in our Church schools.”⁶ The matter was pushed to a back burner. While President Smith personally believed that the theory of evolution was an “hypothesis” and “more or less a fallacy,” he also stated that the church was

3. *Improvement Era*, April 1910, 570. Although there was no author’s name attached to this statement, a number of scholars have suggested that Joseph F. Smith was responsible for the material since he and Edward H. Anderson were the editors (see Duane E. Jeffery, “Seers, Savants and Evolution: The Uncomfortable Interface,” *Dialogue* 8 (Autumn/Winter 1973): 60; David John Buerger, “The Adam-God Doctrine,” *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1982): 41; Erich Robert Paul, *Science, Religion, and Mormon Cosmology* [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992], 175).

4. Gary James Bergera and Ronald Priddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1985), 150.

5. *Ibid.*, 134-48.

6. *The Juvenile Instructor* 46 (April 1911): 208.

"not undertaking to say how much of evolution is true, or how much is false" and that "the Church itself has no philosophy about the modus operandi employed by the Lord in His creation of the world."⁷ Then in 1913, in a conference address in Arizona, President Smith added another interesting comment to the issue:

Man was born of woman; Christ, the Savior, was born of woman and God, the Father, was born of woman. Adam, our earthly parent, was also born of woman into this world, the same as Jesus and you and I.⁸

Six years later Heber J. Grant became president of the church. After six years of serving in office, President Grant saw a need to reiterate the 1909 official statement on "The Origin of Man" with a few modifications. The First Presidency's "'Mormon' View of Evolution" reaffirmed the divinity and role of Jesus Christ, that Adam was "our great progenitor, 'the first man,'" and that "the doctrine of pre-existence pours a wonderful flood of light upon the otherwise mysterious problem of man's origin." The statement also reaffirmed that man is a "child of God, formed in the divine image and endowed with divine attributes."⁹

Sixteen years earlier, the original 1909 statement had concluded: "It is held by some that Adam was not the first man upon this earth, and that the original human being was a development from lower orders of the animal creation. These, however, are the theories of men." As already noted, some people incorrectly interpreted this as an anti-evolution comment. This ambiguous comment was no longer found in the 1925 statement.

Some of the Apostles had taken an interest in this controversial subject, and they were not always in agreement with one another. Joseph Fielding Smith was opposed to evolution, whereas B. H. Roberts was more open to the possibility. During the mid 1920s, Elder B. H. Roberts began compiling notes for a book on church history and doctrine. In 1927 he began developing his notes into what he hoped would be a study course for the seventies throughout the church.¹⁰ Roberts believed that "Adam represented the beginning of the Adamic Dispensation, but before him, a whole race of human beings had lived and died on earth. These 'pre-adamites' were simply destroyed in a great cataclysm that

7. *Ibid.*, 208-9.

8. *Deseret News*, December 27, 1913, sec. 111, p. 7; reprinted in the *Church News* section of *Deseret News*, September 19, 1936, pp. 2, 8; quoted in Jeffery, "Seers, Savants and Evolution," 62.

9. Editors' Table, *Improvement Era* 28 (September 1925): 1090-91

10. Richard E. Sherlock and Jeffrey E. Keller, "'We Can See No Advantage to a Continuation of the Discussion': The Roberts /Smith/Talmage Affair," *Dialogue* 13 (Fall 1980): 63.

'cleansed' the earth before Adam, leaving only fossilized remains as the meager evidence of their presence."¹¹ To Roberts, the evidence for pre-Adamites was overwhelming. In 1928 he finished his *magnus opus* and sometime later submitted it to the publication committee, consisting of five apostles, who rejected his work primarily because of his reference to pre-Adamites. Roberts was told it might be possible to print his book, with modifications, but he refused the suggestion.

In April 1930, speaking to a genealogical conference, the young Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith—while admitting that the Lord had not revealed the method of creation—denounced the belief in death or mortal existence before the fall: "The doctrine of 'pre-Adamites' is not a doctrine of the Church, and is not advocated nor countenanced in the Church." Smith's talk was reprinted in the October 1930 *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*.¹² When Smith's comments came out in print, B. H. Roberts complained to the brethren, challenging the validity of Joseph Fielding's claims. Smith's views were now on public record, whereas Roberts's views were still confined to his unpublished manuscript. Three months later, the Quorum of the Twelve reviewed both Smith's and Roberts's arguments. During this time, Apostle James Talmage, a trained biologist, took interest in the topic and apparently was "sympathetic to much of the spirit of Roberts's efforts."¹³ After some denunciation of Smith's geological sources, Talmage "made it clear to his assembled brethren that all reputable geologists recognized the existence both of death and 'pre-Adamites' prior to 6,000 years ago, the presumed date of the fall of Adam."¹⁴ Smith of course disagreed, but the First Presidency took a position of neutrality by stating:

The statement made by Elder Smith that the existence of pre-Adamites is not a doctrine of the Church is true. It is just as true that the statement: 'There were not pre-Adamites upon the earth' is not a doctrine of the Church. Neither side of the controversy has been accepted as a doctrine at all.

Both parties make the scripture and the statements of men who have been prominent in the affairs of the Church the basis of their contention; neither has produced definite proof in support of his views. . . .

Upon the fundamental doctrines of the Church we are all agreed. Our mission is to bear the message of the restored gospel to the people of the

11. *Ibid.*, 65.

12. Joseph Fielding Smith, "Faith Leads to a Fulness of Truth and Righteousness," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 21 (Oct. 1930): 145-58; quoted in Jeffery, "Seers, Savants and Evolution," 63.

13. Sherlock and Keller, "We Can See No Advantage," 98.

14. *Ibid.*, 99.

world. Leave Geology, Biology, Archaeology and Anthropology, no one of which has to do with the salvation of the souls of mankind, to scientific research, while we magnify our calling in the realm of the Church. . . .¹⁵

The brethren thus suggested that Smith and Roberts drop the issue. Talmage, who had not been part of the publication committee which had reviewed and rejected Roberts's book, was now drawn into the discussion because the issue was brought before the entire Quorum of the Twelve.¹⁶

Talmage had devoted much of his adult life to harmonizing science and religion. In 1884, while attending John Hopkins University, Talmage listened to a Methodist preacher denounce the "evils of Darwinism." Following the lecture, Talmage wrote in his journal: "[B]elief in a loving God perfectly accords with my reverence for science, and I can see no reason why the evolution of animal bodies cannot be true—as indeed the facts of observation make it difficult to deny—and still the soul of man is of divine origin."¹⁷ Following his college years, Talmage seems to have eventually rejected the evolution of man for lack of evidence, but not for any scriptural reasons. He did, however, believe in pre-Adamites.

Taking a position of neutrality, the First Presidency requested that the issue be dropped from public discourse. James Talmage, who was at the meeting in which the presidency discussed their decision, wrote in his diary: "This is one of the many things upon which we cannot speak with assurance and dogmatic assertions on either side are likely to do harm rather than good."¹⁸ Unfortunately, Smith's talk—and position—had already been published, and Talmage, as well as others, found that many students "'inferred from Elder Smith's address that the Church refuses to recognize the findings of science if there be a word in scriptural record in our interpretation of which we find even a seeming conflict with scientific discoveries or deduction, and that therefore the "policy" of the Church is in effect opposed to scientific research."¹⁹ In fact, Talmage recorded in his journal that an unnamed member of the First Presidency felt that "'sometime, somewhere, something should be said by one or more of us to make plain that the Church does not refuse to recognize the discoveries and demonstrations of science, especially in relation to the subject at issue."²⁰

15. Quoted in Jeffery, "Seers, Savants and Evolution," 64.

16. Jeffrey E. Keller, "Discussion Continued: The Sequel to the Roberts/Smith/Talmage Affair," *Dialogue* 15 (Spring 1982): 81.

17. *Ibid.*, 81.

18. April 7, 1931, reprinted in *The Essential James E. Talmage*, ed. James P. Harris (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1997), 237.

19. Talmage Journals, Nov. 21, 1931, quoted in Keller, "Discussion Continued," 84.

20. Keller, "Discussion Continued," 84.

In August 1931, that “something” came from James Talmage. The geologist-trained apostle delivered a talk in the tabernacle entitled “The Earth and Man,” wherein he discussed “fossil remains of plants and animals” which, according to scientists, point to “a very definite order in the sequence of life embodiment.” “These primitive species,” explained Talmage, “were aquatic; land forms were of later development. Some of these simpler forms of life have persisted until the present time, though with great variation as the result of changing environment.” Talmage also referred to the studies of geologists which demonstrated that “very simple forms of plant and animal bodies were succeeded by others more complicated; and in the indestructible record of the rocks they read the story of advancing life from the simple to the more complex, from the single-celled protozoan to the highest animals.” While never directly mentioning evolution, Talmage’s choice of words suggests he was open to the possibility. As for the beginning of mankind, Talmage wrote: “In due course came the crowning work of this creative sequence, the advent of man!”

While Talmage did believe in pre-Adamites, he wasn’t as sure regarding the connection between these beings and “man.” He said he did not regard “Adam as related to—certainly not as descended from—the Neanderthal, the PG Cro-Magnon, the Peking or the Piltdown man.” Talmage also recognized that we did not, as yet, have all the information. “Discrepancies that trouble us now will diminish as our knowledge of pertinent facts is extended. The creator has made record in the rocks for man to decipher; but He has also spoken directly regarding the main stages of progress by which the earth has been brought to be what it is. The accounts can not be fundamentally opposed; one can not contradict the other; though man’s interpretation of either may be seriously at fault.”²¹

After much discussion among the brethren (during which Talmage sent a letter to John A. Widtsoe, who replied with words of encouragement), and following a few minor modifications, Talmage’s talk was printed in the November 1931 *Deseret News*, as well as in a separate church pamphlet at about the same time (the “pamphlet” was referred to in the original *Deseret News* article). It was reprinted again in the December *Millennial Star*. Then, in December 1965 and January 1966, it was printed as a two-part article in the *Instructor*.

Accounts vary as to what directive, if any, Talmage had been given concerning the topic, content, and publication of his talk. Historian

21. James A. Talmage, “The Earth and Man,” address delivered in the Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Utah, Sunday, August 9, 1931; also available on-line at <http://www.fri.com/~allsop/eyring-1/faq/evolution/Talmage/1931.html>

James B. Allen believes that Talmage gave his talk "at the request of the First Presidency."²² According to Talmage's diary, President Anthony W. Ivins (first counselor in the First Presidency) as well as three other members of the Council of the Twelve—including Joseph Fielding Smith—were present during his talk. And while the brethren recognized that Talmage's remarks were contrary to Smith's earlier address, the other brethren (excepting Smith) expressed their "tentative approval" of what Talmage said in the address.²³

However, in 1935 President Heber J. Grant and his two councilors sent a reply to Sterling Talmage, son of (now deceased) James Talmage, claiming that it was President Ivins (also now deceased) who disagreed with the view of Joseph Fielding Smith and who had arranged for Talmage to deliver his talk in a meeting over which Ivins presided. According to this letter, Grant claimed that all but one of the Quorum of the Twelve were against publishing Talmage's talk. Finally, however, Ivins saw to the printing of the address without the consent of President Grant. Grant was quick to point out in his letter that he was not condemning the material in Talmage's lecture, but rather that the address was not officially sanctioned by the church. "This does not mean that his [Talmage's] views are not orthodox," wrote the First Presidency, "they may or may not be; it only means that whether or not, they are not the official utterances of the Church and are not binding upon the Church and stand only as the well-considered views of a scholar and an apostle of the Church."²⁴

This letter to Sterling Talmage suggests that the publication of Talmage's talk was not only opposed by most of the brethren, but had been published without the consent of the First Presidency. However, this contradicts James Talmage's diary entry on November 21, wherein he recorded that his address had "come under consideration. . . investigation. . . [and] discussion" by the "First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve." Talmage wrote in his diary that "the majority of the Twelve have been in favor of the publication of the address from the time they first took it under consideration."²⁵ Reed Smoot's journal likewise mentioned that a "majority" of the brethren favored printing the lecture with some minor changes.²⁶ Even Rudger Clawson's official report recorded that

22. James B. Allen, "The Story of *The Truth, The Way, The Life*," *BYU Studies* 33 (1993): 727.

23. April 5, 1930; reprinted in Harris, *The Essential Talmage*, 239.

24. Reprinted in Sterling B. Talmage, *Can Science Be Faith-Promoting?*, ed. Stan Larson (Salt Lake City: Blue Ribbon Books, 2001), 245.

25. April 5, 1930; in Harris, *The Essential Talmage*, 239; emphasis added.

26. Keller, "Discussion Continued," 39.

after Talmage agreed to make some modifications, the brethren adopted a motion to publish the address.²⁷ Finally, President Grant's own diary entry of November 17, 1931, contradicts his 1935 letter by noting that "'we. . . authorized its [Talmage's address] publication and also gave authorization for it to be printed in the same form as the radio addresses, for distribution.'"²⁸

There are various theories as to why the accounts differ, but in the end we just don't know why there appear to be conflicting stories. When President Grant sent this letter to Sterling Talmage in 1935 (four years after his father's tabernacle address), James Talmage and the two original First Presidency councilors—Ivins and Charles Nibley—had all since passed away. Perhaps the accounts conflict due to failing recollection over the passage of time. Regardless, Talmage's presentation and publication of "The Earth and Man" was the only exposition of a Quorum member to have been reviewed and approved by at least some, if not all, of the First Presidency, and then published officially by the church.

Meanwhile John Widtsoe had also taken interest in the topic of evolution. In 1927, Widtsoe gave a lecture at an outdoor institute for church school educators. One participant recorded:

Brother John A. Widtsoe had courses, trying to provide these seminary men with a rational perspective on the relation of science and religion. . . . [Widtsoe] converted me to the biological theory of evolution. . . . I thought. . . that the theory of evolution was cut and dried. But Brother Widtsoe in his very tentative and very cautious way didn't openly advocate it, but presented the theory so basically and so logically that, in part, it lead to my accepting [it].²⁹

In 1934, three years after Talmage's tabernacle address, Widtsoe wrote a letter to Sterling Talmage:

It is very likely that the time is ripe for someone to begin right now to prepare a wise, temperate, scientific statement on the doctrine of evolution, not forgetting the relationship of the doctrine to other good gospel doctrines. Our own views [Widtsoe and Sterling Talmage] with respect to evolution are fairly well known. Evolution as a law seems to me to have been demonstrated. Its metes [measures] and bounds are gradually being determined.

As for the origin of man, or the origin of animals, or the origin of

27. *Ibid.*, 86-87.

28. Heber J. Grant Diary, 16 and 17 November 1931, according to typescript in Strack Collection; quoted by Stan Larson, ed., in Talmage, *Can Science Be Faith Promoting?*, lviii (emphasis added).

29. "The Twentieth Annual Convention of Teachers in the Schools and Seminaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," 21-22 Oct. 1925, Brimhall Papers, quoted in Bergera and Priddis, *BYU: A House of Faith*, 150.

anything else, I do not see that science has given us any satisfactory answer so far. I accept without reservation the doctrine that man was a preexistent being who came to earth to inhabit a mortal body. How the body was created has not, as far as I know, been revealed to man.³⁰

In another letter to Sterling three months later, Widtsoe added that he was cautious about the evolution of species, and he would “hold [his] judgement with respect to the origin of man in suspense” because “existing facts” did not satisfy his mind. Nevertheless, “[i]t would not hurt my feelings at all if in the wisdom of the Almighty the body of man was prepared in just the way you [Sterling] outline in your article [“Is Evolution a Faith-Promoting Principal?”], and then that the spirit of man, the eternal ego, was placed within the body so prepared.”³¹

The church’s decision to remain neutral on the topic of evolution prevented all of the brethren from getting church approval to publish anything official on the issue. Related topics, however, including the controversy over the age of the Earth, continued to appear in the official LDS magazine, the *Improvement Era*. By at least 1939, some of the magazine’s articles began to discuss, once again, pre-Adamites and evolution. In 1943, Widtsoe published his *Evidences and Reconciliations*, wherein he wrote:

The law of evolution or change may be accepted fully. . . . It is nothing more or less than the gospel law of progress or its opposite. . . . The theory of evolution which may contain practical truth, should be looked upon as one of the changing hypotheses of science, man’s explanation of a multitude of observed facts. It would be folly to make it the foundation of a life’s philosophy.³²

Widtsoe was also involved in writing several such articles for the *Era*. One such article, printed in 1948, was titled “Were There Pre-Adamites?” In this article, Widtsoe continued to remain cautious as to the creation of man, but wrote, “[I]t must also be admitted that no one can safely deny that such manlike beings did at one time roam over the earth. . . . How all this was accomplished is not known. The mystery of the ‘creation’ of Adam and Eve has not yet been revealed.”³³

By 1952 the LDS scientist-leaders who were open to the possibility of evolution had all passed away, including James Talmage (died 1933),

30. April 20, 1934, reprinted in Talmage, *Can Science Be Faith-Promoting?*, 222-23.

31. July 17, 1934, reprinted in *ibid.*, 228-29.

32. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, 156.

33. John A. Widtsoe, “Evidences and Reconciliations,” *Improvement Era*, May 1948,

B. H. Roberts (1933), and John Widtsoe (1952). Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith, who still opposed a belief in pre-Adamites, was left with little opposition to his views. In 1953 he tested the waters by giving a public discourse at BYU entitled "The Origin of Man." A year later he published, without approval of then-prophet David O. McKay, a book on this subject, *Man: His Origin and Destiny*, which became widely accepted by church members. Researcher Duane E. Jeffery has noted: "The work marked a milestone. For the first time Mormonism had a book openly agnostic to much of science."³⁴ As Smith promoted his book, other LDS leaders were careful to point out that only the president of the church could declare doctrine. President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., second counselor in the First Presidency, delivered a speech entitled "When are the Writings or Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture?" just nine days after Smith presented his theories to Seminary and Institute teachers at BYU.³⁵ Smith's scientific theories were also criticized by eminent LDS scientist and dean of the University of Utah, Henry B. Eyring.³⁶ Others, however, came to Smith's support. Adding credibility to Smith's publication, Elder Sterling Sills said in the October 1954 conference:

I hope I do not embarrass President Joseph Fielding Smith by speaking about his recent great book entitled *Man: His Origin and Destiny* which I think is one of the great books of the Church. I would like to see every person in the world read this great book, for what knowledge could be more important and helpful to man than the ideas therein presented. President Smith has packed into this book the study, meditation, and devotion of a lifetime, but through our reading we may make all of these ideas our own in a week or a month. This is one of the advantages of a great book.³⁷

During the controversy over Smith's publication, William Lee Stokes, head of the Department of Geology at the University of Utah, wrote to President McKay inquiring about the church's position on Smith's theories. President McKay responded by noting: "On the subject of organic evolution the Church has officially taken no position. The book *Man, His Origin and Destiny* was not published by the Church and is not approved by the Church. The book contains expressions of the author's views for which he alone is responsible."³⁸ LDS historian Richard

34. Jeffery, "Seers, Savants and Evolution," 65.

35. *Ibid.*, 66.

36. See Steven H. Hatch, "The Reconciliation of Faith and Science: Henry Eyring's Achievement," in *Dialogue* 15 (Autumn 1982): 89.

37. *Conference Report*, October 1954, 28.

38. McKay to Stokes, February 15, 1957, cited in William Lee Stokes, "An Official Position," in *The Search for Harmony Essays on Science and Mormonism*, ed. Gene A. Sessions and Craig J. Oberg (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 291-94.

D. Poll and his wife also discussed Smith's book with President McKay and recorded McKay's comments:

President McKay said that the book has created a problem. Being written by the president of the Quorum of the Twelve, it has implications which we can appreciate. The book has not been approved by the Church; we are authorized to quote him on that. The work represents the opinions of one man on the scriptures. Brother Smith's views have long been known. Striking the desk for emphasis, President McKay repeated that the book is not the authoritative position of the Church. He does not know how it came to be chosen as a text for the seminary and institute teachers last summer, but the choice was unfortunate.³⁹

LDS historian Lowell Bennion recalls a similar meeting with McKay where the prophet told those present that Elder Smith's work "'had not been authorized or approved, and that it did not represent the position of the church. . . on such matters as the age of the earth and the theory of evolution.' He added that, had he known in advance, 'the book never would have been used as a text at the B.Y.U. summer session.'"⁴⁰ A concerned David O. McKay asked Adam S. Bennion, an apostle and former superintendent of church schools, to solicit responses to Elder Smith's book from qualified LDS scientists. Elder Bennion invited the opinions of Henry Eyring, geologist William Lee Stokes, and chemist Richard P. Smith. Eyring wrote to Bennion: "'I can understand 'Man—His Origin and Destiny' as the work of a great man who is fallible. . . .It contains many serious scientific errors and much ill humor, which mar the many beautiful things in it. Since the gospel is only that which is true, this book cannot be more than the private opinion of one of our great men.'"⁴¹ Then in a 1973 interview, Eyring, when asked about the age of the Earth controversy, cited his disagreement with Smith's book, but added:

I would say that I sustained Brother Smith as my Church leader one hundred percent. I think he was a great man. He had a different background and training on this issue. Maybe he was right. I think he was right on most things and if you followed him, he would get you into the Celestial Kingdom—maybe the hard way, but he would get you there.

The Church, according to a letter from President McKay, has no position on organic evolution. Whatever the answer is to the question, the Lord has already finished that part of His work. The whole matter poses no prob-

39. Richard D. Poll, "The Swearing Elders: Some Reflections: A Response to Thomas Blakely," *Sunstone* 10 (January 1986): 16.

40. George T. Boyd, "'Notes from an Interview with President David O. McKay,'" March 1955, as quoted in Bergera and Priddis, *BYU: A House of Faith*, 154n.

41. Quoted in Hatch, "Reconciliation of Faith and Science," 89.

lem to me. The Lord organized the world and I am sure He did it in the best way.⁴²

Smith, however, was very adamant and vocal about his views, and by June 1955 there were rumors of a growing rift between Smith and President McKay. McKay despised controversy in the church and was not pleased with the controversy which Smith's book had created. Nevertheless, the prophet made no attempt to publicly or privately silence Elder Smith. Some LDS intellectuals recognized that there would be unavoidable differences of opinion on a variety of topics among members, and even among the brethren. Speaking to BYU students and faculty in 1958, Elder Hugh B. Brown said:

Both religionists and scientists must avoid arrogant dogmatism. . . . Scientists and teachers of religion disagree among themselves on theological and other subjects. . . . Even in our own church men take issue with one another and contend for their own interpretations. But this free exchange of ideas is not to be deplored as long as men remain humble and teachable.⁴³

Joseph Fielding Smith's son-in-law, Bruce R. McConkie, took sides with his father-in-law and in 1958 published *Mormon Doctrine*. Like Smith's book, *Mormon Doctrine* was widely accepted by members. Following on the heels of Smith's theories (nearly one-third of his references were to the ten books authored by Smith),⁴⁴ McConkie denounced evolution. "Those educational philosophies," he wrote in his 1958 compendium, "which deny Christ and the divine origin of man as an offspring of God (meaning especially the theories of organic evolution), are spawned and sponsored by Satan."⁴⁵ While McConkie's book appealed to LDS members in general, not all members or general authorities welcomed McConkie's new publication.

From the perspective presented by the writings of Smith and McConkie, many members have come to the conclusion that the church is officially anti-evolution. However, there have been other publications through the years which should have dispelled such a myth. In 1965, for example, David Lawrence McKay, son of President McKay and member of the general church Sunday School superintendency, brought to the attention of his father an article by BYU botanist Bertrand Harrison which discussed organic evolution. McKay enjoyed the article enough to

42. Edward W. Kimball, "A Dialogue With Henry Eyring," *Dialogue* 8 (Autumn/Winter 1973): 103.

43. Hugh B. Brown, "What Is Man and What He May Become," 24 March 1958, in *Speeches, 1957-58*, quoted in Bergera and Priddis, *BYU: A House of Faith*, 157.

44. Bergera and Priddis, *BYU: A House of Faith*, 157-8.

45. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 180.

approve it for publication in the July 1965 *Instructor*. Bergera and Priddis note that this “was the most pro-evolution article to ever have appeared in an official church periodical.”⁴⁶ By December of the same year, Talmage’s “The Earth and Man,” was reprinted in the *Instructor* as well.

Bruce R. McConkie, however, continued to advance his anti-evolutionary views, and in 1980 listed evolution as one of the “seven deadly heresies.”⁴⁷ Other apostles likewise favored the Smith-McConkie view of evolution. In the October 1970 general conference, for instance, Elder Ezra Taft Benson said:

If your children are taught untruths on evolution in the public schools or even in our Church schools, provide them with a copy of President Joseph Fielding Smith’s excellent rebuttal in his book *Man: His Origin and Destiny*.⁴⁸

For a more balanced or neutral perspective, we cite the words of then-prophet Spencer W. Kimball, who, speaking at an all-women’s fireside, said:

Man became a living soul—mankind, male and female. . . . We don’t know exactly how their coming into this world happened, and when we’re able to understand it the Lord will tell us.⁴⁹

In 1971 Dallin Oaks replaced Ernest Wilkinson as BYU’s president and quickly discovered the serious nature of the controversy over evolution among students and faculty. While Oaks took a balanced role, he allowed and defended the teaching of evolution at BYU.⁵⁰ BYU’s current view toward evolution is expressed in a letter from Michael Whiting (a BYU professor who teaches evolution) to my friend Marc Schindler, who queried Whiting regarding an on-line discussion in which someone claimed that if evolution were “true” then it would be taught at BYU. Since it wasn’t taught at BYU, this person claimed, then the church must have a problem with it.

Michael Whiting To Marc Schindler, March 3, 2000

46. Bergera and Priddis, *BYU: A House of Faith*, 159.

47. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Seven Deadly Heresies,” BYU fireside at the Marriott Center June 1, 1980; transcript available on-line at

<http://www.coolcontent.com/McConkie/heresies.html>

48. *Conference Report*, October 1970, 49.

49. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Blessings and Responsibilities of Womanhood,” 1 Oct. 1975, printed in *Ensign*, March 1976, 72.

50. See Bergera and Priddis, *BYU: A House of Faith*, 161-68; also available online at http://www.fri.com/~allsopey/eyring-1/faq/evolution/Relatedness_1965.html

Dear Marc,

The topic of evolution is handled at BYU the same way as at other universities. I teach Zoology 475 (Evolutionary Biology) to about 150 students every semester, the course has been on the books for at least the last 15 years, and there is no indication that it will ever be done away with. The first presidency has given its approval of the course, and (wisely) allows the professors to teach it in line with the current theories and data in evolutionary biology. The group of evolutionary biologists at BYU has actually grown in the last 3 years, and we have one of the largest and most active graduate programs in Phylogenetic Systematics (essentially, organismal genealogy) in the country. And we most recently received a large infusion of money from the BYU administration to expand the evolutionary biology program to foster collaboration with statisticians and computer scientists. The only thing different about evolutionary biology at BYU is that I try to incorporate [*sic*] a few lectures on the history of the idea of evolution in the LDS faith within the courses I teach. So evolutionary biology is in fact one of the largest and most successful graduate programs at BYU (over the past three years my research colleagues and [I] brought in roughly 2 million dollars in external research grants, 48% of which is directly deposited in the church's coffers as "indirect costs"), and there are plenty of LDS faithful who are not upset at the notion of a creation that follows natural principles.

So following the logic of the member who challenged you, since BYU does teach evolution and it is a very successful program at the "Lord's University," then it must be true. Though of course I detest such logic.

Cheers,
Mike⁵¹

Through the years, various LDS leaders have taken either one side or the other on the evolution issue. While anti-evolution articles or comments have occasionally appeared in the *Ensign*, some neutral and subtly pro-evolution articles have appeared as well. The most recent, and the most authoritative, words on the official LDS position on evolution are found in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. This five-volume reference set printed in 1992 with the strictest of supervision by the brethren (overseen by Neal A. Maxwell and Dallin H. Oaks) and edited by Daniel H. Ludow, who was executive secretary of the Church Correlation Committee, contains two articles relevant to our topic. Under the *Encyclopedia's* heading, "Origin of Man," by LDS anthropologist, John L. Sorenson, we read:

51. About.com, LDS Apologetics message board; "The Question," #71, 2608.71 in reply to 2608.64; online at

<http://forums.about.com/n/mb/message.asp?webtag=ab-lds&msg=2608.71>.
Michael Whiting and BYU undergraduate, Taylor Maxwell, were responsible for the 16 January 2003 cover story for the scientific journal, *Nature*. Using some of the latest DNA researching techniques, Whiting and Maxwell discovered revolutionary information which enhances the study of evolutionary biology. ("Loss and Recovery of Wings in Stick Insects," *Nature*, 421: 264-267.)

Many sympathetic to science interpret certain statements in LDS scripture to mean that God used a version of evolution to prepare bodies and environmental surroundings suitable for the pre-mortal spirits. . . . Certain statements of various General Authorities are also used by proponents of this idea to justify their opinions.

Other Latter-day Saints accept a more literal reading of scriptural passages that suggest to them an abrupt creation. Proponents of this view also support their propositions with statements from scripture and General Authorities.⁵²

Sorenson also notes that "the current state of revealed truth on the LDS doctrine of man's origin may permit some differences of opinion concerning the relationship of science and religion."

Under the title "Evolution," we find an article by William E. Evenson, a BYU professor of physics, who worked through a long process to complete the article which was eventually used in the *Encyclopedia*. The article began as 1,000 words long but grew until it reached 4,500 words. Evenson relates that "finally, in the spring of 1991, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve" reviewed the material and "decided that they wanted only a short article referring to the First Presidency statements on the subject, which are the only definitive source of Church doctrine. The resulting entry in the *Encyclopedia* is only 258 words long."⁵³ The article reads:

The position of the Church on the origin of man was published by the First Presidency in 1909 and stated again by a different First Presidency in 1925:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, basing its belief on divine revelation, ancient and modern, declares man to be the direct and lineal offspring of Deity. . . . Man is the child of God, formed in the divine image and endowed with divine attributes. . . .

The Scriptures tell why man was created, but they do not tell how, though the Lord has promised that he will tell that when he comes again (D&C 101:32-33). In 1931, when there was intense discussion on the issue of organic evolution, the First Presidency of the Church, then consisting of Presidents Heber J. Grant, Anthony W. Ivins, and Charles W. Nibley, addressed all of the general authorities of the Church on the matter, and concluded:

Upon the fundamental doctrines of the Church we are all agreed. Our

52. Ludlow, Daniel H. et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Doctrine, and Procedure of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992) 3:1053.

53. William E. Evenson, "LDS Doctrine and the Theory of Evolution," cited by Stan Larson, ed., in Talmage, *Can Science Be Faith Promoting?*, xxxi.

mission is to bear the message of the restored gospel to the world. Leave geology, biology, archaeology, and anthropology, no one of which has to do with the salvation of the souls of mankind, to scientific research, while we magnify our calling in the realm of the Church. . . .

Upon one thing we should all be able to agree, namely that Presidents Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, and Anthon H. Lund were right when they said, "Adam is the primal parent of our race" [First Presidency Minutes, Apr. 7, 1931].⁵⁴

Evenson notes that "the role of organic evolution in the development of life on earth is a good example of an issue that is not settled in the Church."⁵⁵

In the same year that the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* was published (1992), Evenson was asked to put together a packet on evolution for BYU students who were interested in the church's position. The contents of this packet were formally approved by the BYU Board of Trustees, which included the First Presidency, a majority of the Quorum of the Twelve, and several other general authorities.⁵⁶ This packet, which is still available at the BYU library as well as on the internet,⁵⁷ contains the first three First Presidency statements on the subject (1909, 1910, and 1925) as well as the article on evolution from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.⁵⁸ The cover page to this packet notes: "Although there has never been a formal declaration from the First Presidency addressing the general matter of *organic evolution* as a process for development of biological species, these documents make clear the official position of the Church regarding the *origin of man*" (emphasis in original).

Ironically, while the official LDS position on evolution is neutral, the majority of evolution-related comments appearing in official church publications have been hostile to evolution.⁵⁹ For example, in the

54. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 2:478.

55. Evenson, cited by Larson, ed., in Talmage, *Can Science Be Faith Promoting?*, xxxii.

56. *Ibid.*, xxxiii and nn 5 and 6.

57. See <http://zoology.byu.edu/zool475/pdf%20files/Evolution%20Packet.pdf> and <http://eyring.hplx.net/Eyring/faq/evolution/trustees1992.html>

58. Evenson, cited by Larson, ed., in Talmage, *Can Science Be Faith Promoting?*, xxxii n6.

59. For example, a search for stances on evolution as recorded in the past thirty years of church publications yielded some lopsided results. I was able to find ten instances wherein a given LDS speaker/author expressed hostility towards evolution: see Elder Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon is the Word of God," *Ensign*, May 1975, 63 ff; Elder Bruce R. McConkie, "The Glorious Gospel in Our Day," *Tambuli*, April 1980, 82 ff; Elder Bruce R. McConkie, "Christ and the Creation," *Tambuli*, Sept. 1983, 22 ff; Elder Boyd K. Packer, "The Pattern of Our Parentage," *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, 66 ff; Bruce R. McConkie, "The Caravan Moves On," *Ensign*, Nov. 1984, 82 ff; Elder Russell M. Nelson, "The Magnificence of Man," *Ensign*, Oct. 1987, 44 ff; Robert L. Millett, "So Glorious a Record," *Ensign*, Dec.

1980/81 Melchizedek Priesthood study guide, in a lesson entitled "The Divine Origin of Man," the manual quotes Joseph Fielding Smith's *Seek Ye Earnestly*: "Now, evolution leads men away from God. Men who have had faith in God, when they have become converted to that theory, forsake him."⁶⁰

More recently, two other articles suggesting hostility to a neutral stance on evolution can be found in the *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* and in the February 2002 *Ensign*. In the *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church*, which was the instruction manual for the Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society for the year 2001, we find selected portions of the 1909 First Presidency statement on the "Origin of Man" which hint that acceptance of evolution is contrary to the gospel.⁶¹ In the February 2002 *Ensign*, we find a reprint of the same 1909 First Presidency statement without noting the 1910, 1925, 1931 statements, or the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* additions to the topic.⁶² To *Ensign* readers unfamiliar with the additional insights added in these post-1909 statements, the reprinted 1909 statement may imply a rejection of evolution on gospel grounds.

Like other myths, both inside and outside the church, the myth of "evil evolution" is perpetuated by the masses who are unfamiliar with information which refutes such falsehoods. The topic of evolution is not unique in this aspect. For instance, while readers of *Dialogue* are aware that President George Albert Smith refuted the June 1945 "Ward Teachers' Message" which claimed that "when our leaders speak, the thinking

1992, 6ff; Elder George R. Hill, III, "Seek Ye Diligently," *Ensign*, June 1993, 21 ff; Lisa M. G. Crockett, "Roots and Branches," *New Era*, August 1999, 28 ff; "Gospel Classics: The Origin of Man," *Ensign*, Feb. 2002, 26ff. In contrast, I found six comments on evolution that were either liberal, neutral, or open-ended: see Dr. Sherwood B. Idso, "Visitors from Outer Space—Meteorites," *Friend*, Jan. 1979, 11 ff; F. Kent Nielsen, "The Gospel and the Scientific View: How Earth Came to Be," *Ensign*, Sept. 1980, 67 ff; George A. Horton, Jr., "A Prophet Looks at Genesis; Insights from the Joseph Smith Translation" *Ensign*, Jan. 1986, 38 ff; Don Lind, "Things Not Seen," *Tambuli*, June 1987, 42 ff; Morris S. Peterson, "Questions and Answers: Do We Know How the Earth's History as Indicated from Fossils Fit with the Earth's History as the Scriptures Present It?" *Tambuli*, April 1988, 29 ff; Robert J. Woodford, "In the Beginning: A Latter-day Perspective," *Ensign*, Jan. 1998, 12 ff.

60. "The Divine Origin of Man," *Choose You this Day: Melchizedek Priesthood Personal Study Guide 1980-81* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 39; see also Joseph Fielding Smith, *Seek Ye Earnestly* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1970), 283.

61. "Sons and Daughters of the Eternal Father, From the Life of Joseph F. Smith," ch. 37 in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 331 ff.

62. "Gospel Classics: The Origin of Man," *Ensign*, Feb. 2002, 26 ff.

has been done,"⁶³ many Latter-day Saints are not only unaware of President Smith's refutation of the statement, but some Saints repeat the declaration as if it were doctrinal. Similarly, a 1985 survey conducted by Richley Crapo at the University of Utah, found that a number of issues which are accepted or rejected by members at a "grass roots" level are contrary to official LDS positions.⁶⁴ On the subject of evolution, for instance, Crapo's survey discovered that 57 percent of those polled believed that the official LDS position was anti-evolution, and only 38 percent correctly identified the official position as neutral. 25 percent of those who personally accepted evolution believed that their views were contrary to a supposed official anti-evolution position of the church, and 70 percent of those who rejected evolution believed that this was the official church stance on the subject.⁶⁵

While a greater number of Latter-day Saints will read *Ensign* articles which generally disesteem evolution, there is some comfort in the fact that in addition to the aforementioned *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* articles and the BYU evolution packet, other conservative albeit less familiar LDS publications are more liberal in their approach to organic evolution. *BYU Studies* and *FARMS Review of Books*, for example, tend to express an overwhelming pro or neutral stance toward the topic.⁶⁶

The popularity of these alternate sources of LDS-related publications, as well as publications such as *Dialogue* and *Sunstone* and the

63. *Ward Teachers' Message for June 1945*, "Sustaining the General Authorities of the Church," *Improvement Era*, June 1945, 354. For President Smith's refutation of the idea, which he said did "not express the true position of the Church," see "A 1945 Perspective," an accompaniment to L. Jackson Newell's "An Echo From the Foothills: To Marshal the Forces of Reason," *Dialogue* 19 (Spring 1986): 36-38; emphasis in original.

64. Richley H. Crapo, "Mormonism and Evolution," working draft for the August 2001 *Sunstone Symposium*, originally posted to Mormon-L and reposted August 13, 2001 on Eyring-L (ey@hplix.net). Copy of repost in author's possession.

65. Richley H. Crapo, "Grass-Roots Deviance From Official Doctrine: A Study of Latter-day Saint (Mormon) Folk-Beliefs," at <http://cc.usu.edu/~FATH6/grassrts.htm>. See also Crapo, "Mormonism and Evolution" (*ibid.*).

66. See Nissim Wernick, "Man, the Pinnacle of Creation," *BYU Studies* 10 (Autumn 1969), 31 ff; Hollis R. Johnson, "Civilizations Out in Space," *BYU Studies* 11 (Autumn 1970), 3 ff; Richard Sherlock, book review of Neal Gillespie, *Charles Darwin and the Problem of Creation*, in *BYU Studies* 22 (Winter 1982), 119 ff; A. Lester Allen, "Science and Theology: A Search for the Uncommon Denominator," *BYU Studies* 29 (Summer 1989), 71 ff; Scott Wolley review of *The Book of Mormon: Jacob through Words of Mormon, to Learn with Joy*, eds., Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., in *FARMS Review of Books*, 3 (1991): 106; Michael F. Whiting, review of Clark A. Peterson, *Using the Book of Mormon To Combat Falsehoods in Organic Evolution*, in *FARMS Review of Books*, 5 (1993): 212; Daniel C. Peterson, "Editor's Introduction: Doubting the Doubters," *FARMS Review of Books*, 8, no. 2 (1996): x.

mushrooming growth of the LDS-information-websites—many of which advance a neutral or pro position to evolution⁶⁷—suggests that in time we may see the demise of the Mormon myth that teaching or accepting evolution amounts to apostasy.⁶⁸

67. For a few examples see
<http://www.cs.umd.edu/users/seanl/stuff/Evolution.html>,
<http://www.etungate.com/Evolution.htm>, and
<http://zoology.byu.edu/bioethics/chapter4.htm>.

68. Special thanks to Marc Schindler for his helpful comments and suggestions.