

UNSHELIVING EVOLUTION

October 9, 2007

While walking by the elephant exhibit one day in December of 2006, my son-in-law asked me about evolution and how I resolve the notion with my faith. "I shelve it," I replied after some discussion—a clear admission of my inability to square Darwinism with the Bible creation story I had been taught from my youth. It was only later that I realized the spiritual conflict my answer represented was not dissimilar from one I have often marveled at in the greater Christian community concerning the nature of God. During my 1977 mission in Lutheran Norway and later life in Protestant North Texas, I often found Christians who—despite the teaching of their particular denomination—favored the more intuitive godhead taught by Mormonism—a SEPARATE Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Similarly, we Mormons take our eager children to dinosaur exhibits and marvel at the fascinating fossil record—testifying of eons of plant and animal life—laid open to us on the Discovery Channel and in natural history museums. We'll talk openly of such Scouting and family trips even as we wait for Sunday School or Sacrament Meeting to begin. But as soon as the subject of creation is raised, we "shelve" the conflict and quote from Mormon Doctrine (or the like) which allows for none of it. It's an odd thing, really, the way we are able to compartmentalize this important topic.

That December 2006 question is not rare. Indeed, because I've studied them both, I'm occasionally asked how I resolve conflicts between science and faith. I'm only now learning—via Internet—that words of historical pillars in the church suggest that I've never really needed to try.

Victor Poulsen

P.S. The thought of distributing this little research project is oddly disquieting to me—a telling sign of the dubious position evolution suffers from in the Mormon community. Yet it's a curious thing that I should feel anxious about quoting men of great stature in the church—some of whom we all sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators. And so, I've resisted the temptation to provide a lot of my own less esteemed commentary here. Rather, I'll let BOTH sides of the following exchange speak to my feelings:

When Helen Whitney suggested that some members *"would rather find things out about the Church history, doctrine through teachings, rather than the Internet,"* Elder Oaks replied, *"That's an old problem in Mormonism—a feeling of members that they shouldn't have been surprised by the fact that this or that happened, they should've been alerted to it. I HAVE FELT THAT THROUGHOUT MY LIFE."* (emphasis mine)

James E. Talmage: "[*The Earth and Man*](#)", Address Delivered in the Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Utah Sunday, August 9, 1931 and subsequently published in a 1931 church pamphlet and the December 1965 issue of *The Instructor* magazine.

EVOLUTION

"Geologists say that these 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, from the marine algae to the advanced types of flowering plant—to the apple tree, the rose and the oak."

DEATH BEFORE THE FALL

"The oldest, that is to say the earliest, rocks thus far identified in land masses reveal the fossilized remains of once living organisms, plant and animal...These lived and died, age after age, while the earth was yet unfit for human habitation."

SCIENCE AND THE GOSPEL

"Within the Gospel of Jesus Christ there is room and place for every truth thus far learned by man or yet to be made known."

David O. McKay: [*Letter to Dr. A. Kent Christensen*](#), February 3, 1959

OFFICIAL CHURCH POSITION

"The Church has issued no official statement on the subject of the theory of evolution."

"Neither 'Man, His Origin and Destiny'...nor 'Mormon Doctrine'...is an official publication of the church."

SCIENCE AND REVELATION

"...any conflicts which may seem to exist between the theory [of evolution] and the truths of revealed religion can be dealt with by suspending judgment as long as may be necessary to arrive at facts and at a complete understanding of the truth."

Bertrand F. Harrison: "[*The Relatedness of Living Things*](#)", *The Instructor*, July 1965, pp. 272-276

CREATION BY EVOLUTION

"Well, last week when we were discussing the creation of the world you said that life on earth could not have come about by evolution. We both agree on the one really essential aspect, that God created all living things; but when you say that He could not do so by an evolutionary process, are you not in effect saying that God could not do with the beasts and the lilies of the field what man can do with cows and dogs or wheat and roses?"

"Still I see no great problem; there are so many explanations. For example, evolution might account only for man's physical body; the addition of that '*divine spark*' that sets man apart from the other animals might have been the final step that created the man, Adam. Whichever way it came about, I am willing to wait until some future time for the details."

"I never try to convert anyone to evolution, but I do believe in helping people to understand enough to judge for themselves. What I was trying to do was to convince you that one can believe in evolution and still believe in the Gospel. I believe the Gospel embraces all truth; then if evolution is true, it is part of the Gospel."

NATURAL SELECTION

"By contrast, life may have begun as one or a number of simple, one-celled organisms. These organisms developed the ability to duplicate themselves by some process so the products were similar to, but not necessarily identical with, the parent cells. Thus, there would be slight variations among the offspring. It seems quite logical that those individuals which were best adapted to their environment would be the ones most likely to survive; and, if they lived long enough to reproduce, they would be the ones which would leave offspring."

"You see Charles Darwin was strongly impressed by the fact that men have been able to make great improvements in domestic plants and animals by selective breeding; this was one of the things that led to his theory of evolution...Darwin reasoned that those which were best adapted to their particular environment would live and reproduce, thereby leaving progeny similar to themselves. Here then was a mechanism for the selection of the favored races that would survive. Darwin termed it '*natural selection*,' in contrast to the '*artificial selection*' practiced by man in improving domestic plants and animals."

Bible Dictionary, "[Fall of Adam](#)", 1979

NO DEATH BEFORE ADAM

"The fall of Adam is one of the most important occurrences in the history of man. Before the fall, Adam and Eve had physical bodies but no blood. There was no sin, no death, and no children among any of the earthly creations."

Morris S. Petersen, "[I Have a Question](#)" *Ensign*, Sept. 1987, pp. 28–29

AGE OF THE EARTH

"From the fossil record we learn that the dinosaurs were the dominant animals on earth between 225 and 67 million years ago."

William E. Evenson, "[Evolution](#)" *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1992, vol. 2, p. 478

"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 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]."

Gary James Bergera and Ronald Priddis: "[Organic Evolution Controversy](#)", Signature Books, 1985

1895

"One of [Brigham Young] Academy's most enthusiastic advocates of evolutionary theory was English professor **Nels Nelson**. As early as 1895, he had argued in the church's Contributor magazine that all Darwinism lacked was provision for the intelligent supervision and design of the universe. Viewing Nelson as able and committed to defend the church's interests in such topics, the church helped subsidize in 1904 the publication of his Scientific Aspects of Mormonism..."

1909

"Subjects ranging from communism to eugenics were hotly debated both in and out of class [at BYA]. 'I recall one occasion in which there had been a good informal talk in a little group,' Henry Peterson later wrote. President [**George H.] Brimhall** 'spoke up and said, 'I too am an evolutionist.'"

1911

"Without mentioning names, he accused 'four or five of the [BYU] teachers' of championing organic evolution and higher biblical criticism. The theory of evolution, he alleged, was 'treated as a demonstrated law and their applications of it to gospel truths [had given] rise to many curious and conflicting explanations of scripture. Its relations to the fall, the atonement and the resurrection,' he wrote, 'are, perhaps, the most important and damaging to the faith of the students'...Committee members recommended that 'the services of those three teachers in the B. Y. University be dispensed with unless they change their teachings to conform to the decision and instructions of the Board of Trustees of the Brigham Young University '"

1924

"Elder **James E. Talmage**, heading a program of lectures at BYU by leading church authorities, added a modicum of balance by suggesting that there may have been a special creation of man, independent of other animal life which may have evolved."

1927

"BYU's Y News termed Charles Darwin 'a man possibly as great in his chosen field [as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were in theirs],' adding, 'throughout his long life the only thing he feared and shunned were hate and prejudice.'"

1929

"Twenty-four years later, during the dedication of the Eyring Science Center, **Harvey Fletcher**, then on the faculty of Columbia University, observed to the audience, 'I think in most scientific societies this would be considered a most unusual thing, to dedicate to the Lord a building of science.' But, he continued, God-fearing scientists 'will eventually be saviors of our culture and civilization.'"

1936-1948

"Elder **John Widtsoe** began a gospel question-and-answer series in the Improvement Era, including his analysis of some of the arguments against evolutionary theory. He contended, as had Talmage, that the earth was very old and that the seven days of creation were of indeterminable length. Evolution, he wrote, was a plausible theory deduced from a number of observable facts but could be revised in light of new scientific discoveries. Twenty years after B.H. Roberts, Widtsoe acknowledged the existence of 'human-like beings before the coming of Adam,' adding, 'The mystery of the creation of Adam has not yet been revealed.' To one reader, Widtsoe privately explained in 1948, 'If [the Lord] chose to place man-like beings upon the earth before the days of Adam, I really have no right to find fault with that'"

1954

"[President David O.] McKay subsequently asked Apostle Adam S. Bennion, former superintendent of church schools, to solicit responses to Elder [Joseph Fielding] Smith's book from qualified LDS scientists.

Elder Bennion enlisted the cooperation of **Henry Eyring**, dean of the Graduate School at the University of Utah, who invited geologist William Lee Stokes and chemist Richard P. Smith to join him. *'I can understand Man: His Origin and Destiny as the work of a great man who is fallible,'* Eyring wrote to Bennion. *'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.'*"

1958

"Thus it was with relief that pro-science academicians listened to Elder **Hugh B. Brown**, an assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who suggested to BYU students and faculty in 1958, *'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.'*"

1959

"Almost a full year later, the First Presidency met with **Apostles Petersen** and **Romney**, who had been asked to carefully review Mormon Doctrine. Both reported that the book had not been cleared for publication by the church's reading committee. Elder Petersen remarked that he had located more than 1,000 doctrinal *'errors,'* while Elder Romney reported that he had identified nearly forty problem areas, including the treatment of *'evolution,' 'evolutionists,' 'pre-Adamites,' 'status of animals and plants in the Garden of Eden,'* and the *'meaning of the various accounts of creation'*. The First Presidency concluded that the book *'[was] full of errors and misstatements, and [that] it [was] most unfortunate that it [had] received such wide circulation.'*...A second, revised edition of Mormon Doctrine appeared several years later, although almost no changes were made to mitigate the book's views on evolution."

1964

"In October 1964 the church's Improvement Era printed an article on the age of the earth which concluded that the earth was 13,000 years old, *'roughly the age chronicled for it in the Bible.'* In response to a number of criticisms, **Bertrand F. Harrison**, chair of BYU's botany department, was asked the following year to write an article for the church's Sunday school teachers' magazine, the Instructor, on organic evolution. David Lawrence McKay, a son of President **David McKay** and a member of the general church Sunday school superintendency, read Harrison's article to his father, who approved it for publication. Harrison's essay, 'The Relatedness of Living Things,' was printed in the July 1965 Instructor and was the most pro-evolution article ever to have appeared in an official church periodical."

1966

"Biology professor **Howard C. Stutz**, who taught BYU's first graduate course in evolutionary biology, asserted, *'Not only is the concept of organic evolution completely compatible with the gospel as found in the scriptures, but it is the very heart of it.'*"

1971

"When **Dallin Oaks** replaced Ernest Wilkinson as BYU president in August 1971, he soon learned of serious problems on campus regarding the role of evolution at the university. In his first address to the faculty in September he asked that guilty parties, particularly among members of the religion faculty, *'stop casting aspersions on [the] testimony and devotion of their colleagues'* in the sciences."

1977

"In mid-September 1977, the College of Physical and Mathematical Sciences, with the cooperation of Religious Instruction, began offering a series of one-hour science and religion seminars...After the first two sessions, William O. Nelson, secretary to the Quorum of the Twelve, complained to Elder Benson, *'The program is heavily weighted in favor of a pro-evolutionary approach.'* Benson shared Nelson's memorandum with Elder Mark Petersen, who forwarded a copy to President **Oaks**, with the comment: *'Some of the brethren have been very concerned about [this topic]...and, of course, hope that no evolution*

will be taught at the BYU under any circumstance.' Oaks responded again that the university could not *'ignore the theory of evolution...'*"

1979

"Speaking to church educators at BYU in mid-August 1979, **Marion G. Romney**, second counselor in the First Presidency, explained that if *'there are some things in the strata of the earth indicating there were men before Adam,...they were not the ancestors of Adam.'*"

Convinced by this time of the need for a stronger statement, **Oaks** responded decisively to Hinckley: *'If we stopped teaching this theory, within a few years students from BYU would not be admitted to...graduate schools. At that point we would cease to function as a recognized university and would, in the eyes of the world (especially the world of higher education), be little more than a seminary with added courses in the humanities. I have no doubt whatever that our accreditation as an institution of higher education would be lost. The issue is that loaded.'*"

1980

"McConkie delivered the harshest denunciation of organic evolution to date. Speaking on 'Seven Deadly Heresies' infecting the church, he contended: *'There are those who say that revealed religion and organic evolution can be harmonized. This is both false and devilish'*"

1982

"Former dean **Lester Allen** was asked to submit to the church an informed, albeit unofficial response to criticisms that the church was anti-science. Allen wrote, *'...the theory of organic evolution is a product of good science. It is a powerful, well-substantiated tool for explaining many facts and [observations] in nature. Numerous LDS scholars find [the theory of evolution] both scientifically sound and not in conflict with God's revelations...To the LDS scientist,'* he concluded, *evolution 'is an expression of God's omnipotent control of nature—not beyond law but fully in accord with it.'* During the church's next General Conference in October 1984, however, both Elders Packer and McConkie delivered separate anti-evolution addresses."

NOTES:

1. Because of ubiquitous familiarity with [contrary statements](#) in the Mormon community, my purpose here was to highlight less familiar comments supporting evolutionary ideas.
2. *The Instructor* was a church magazine for Sunday School teachers. President David O. McKay was editor in 1965.
3. A search of **LDS.ORG** for:
 - James E. Talmage's "The Earth and Man" yielded 3 unique hits—2 quotes from and 1 reference to the document.
 - Bertrand F. Harrison's "The Relatedness of Living Things" yielded nothing.
 - "Organic Evolution" yielded 4 unique hits—contrary remarks by Ezra Taft Benson (1975), Gordon B. Hinckley (1984), Russell M. Nelson (1988), and Robert L. Millet (1992).
 - "Darwinism" yielded 1 unique hit—the same 1984 contrary remark by Gordon B. Hinckley
 - "Natural Selection" yielded 1 unique hit—the same 1988 contrary remark by Russell M. Nelson.
4. Who's who:
 - **James E. Talmage** (1862-1933) was called as an Apostle in 1911. He was a geologist and fellow of several prestigious scientific societies.
 - **John A. Widstoe** (1872-1952) was called as an Apostle in 1921. Dr. Widstoe was also a noted author, scientist, and academician.
 - **David O. McKay** (1873-1970) was called as church president in 1951. He was an educator and valedictorian of his 1897 U of U class.

- **Joseph Fielding Smith** (1876-1972) was called as church president in 1970. He was a religious scholar and a prolific writer.
- **Hugh B. Brown** (1883-1975) was called as an Apostle in 1958. He was an attorney, businessman, author, and professor of religion at BYU.
- **Harvey Fletcher** (1884-1981) was the Founding Dean of the BYU College of Engineering. He invented the hearing aide and stereophonic sound.
- **Marion G. Romney** (1897-1988) was called as an Apostle in 1951. He was a prosecuting attorney, Utah state legislator, and Book of Mormon scholar.
- **Henry Eyring** (1901-1981) was a theoretical chemist and president of two prestigious scientific societies. Dr. Eyring authored many books on science and religion.
- **Bruce R. McConkie** (1915–1985) was called as an Apostle in 1972. He held a Juris Doctor degree and was a theologian and prolific author.
- **Dallin H. Oaks** was called as an Apostle in 1984. He is a former Utah Supreme Court justice and president of BYU.
- **Bertrand F. Harrison** was a professor of botany at BYU and a member of the Deseret Sunday School Union General Board in 1965.
- **Howard C. Stutz** was a Biology and Botany Professor at BYU for 35 years. He was a Bishop and is now an emeritus Patriarch.
- **A. Lester Allen** was a professor of zoology and dean of the College of Biological and Agricultural sciences at BYU.
- **Morris S. Petersen** was professor of geology at BYU and a stake president in 1987.
- **William E. Evenson** was a professor of physics and astronomy at BYU.

"If a thing is wrong, nothing can save it, and if it is right, it cannot help succeeding." Henry B. Eyring