

## AN EXPLANATION OF THE BYU LIBRARY PACKET ON EVOLUTION

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I am grateful to the editors of *Perspective* for devoting a portion of this edition to suggestions on teaching organic evolution here at BYU-Idaho. Although most of our courses will never address evolution since it is such an emotionally charged topic, faculty at BYU-Idaho should know how to handle this topic sensitively. Also, since any discussion on organic evolution has implications for the personal beliefs of LDS students, the position of the Church on organic evolution should be presented accurately in the classroom.

The reader should be aware that this article is not an introductory essay on either the theory of organic evolution or a history of the reactions of the LDS Church to evolution. For a description of the scientific evidence pertaining to evolution, the reader should look at other sources (Smith, 1975; Stephens & Meldrum, 2001). Also, creationism (along with its more recent titles of creation science and intelligent design) has been described and defended elsewhere (Behe, 1996; Matthews, 1990; Smith, 1973) and will not be addressed in this article. And finally, since the turbulent history of the LDS Church and evolution has been covered so extensively elsewhere (Bailey, 2001; Jeffery, 1993; Sherlock, 1993; Sherlock & Keller, 1993; Stephens & Meldrum, 2001), it would be redundant to review it here. The purpose of this article is to introduce and describe the current position of Brigham Young University on organic evolution and to share the guidelines the BYU faculty were given for handling the topic of organic evolution in university courses.

### HISTORY OF THE BYU LIBRARY PACKET ON EVOLUTION

Like other Bible-believing Christians, members of the Church have struggled with the issue of organic evolution. LDS students at Church-owned schools have wrestled many years with the evidence presented in science courses and their understanding of the contents of the Standard Works of the Church. At BYU, administrators responded independently for many years to students' questions about the Church's position on organic evolution. In an effort to accurately communicate the Church's position, the administration at BYU decided to formalize a statement on organic evolution.

At that time (1991), Dr. William E. Evenson was the Dean of the College of Physical and Mathematical Sciences at Brigham Young University. Evenson had recently researched the Church's position while writing the article "Evolution" for the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Because of

this experience Evenson was asked by the university administration to put together a packet of Church statements. With assistance from Dr. Robert L. Millet, Dean of the College of Religion at BYU, Evenson submitted a collection of statements to the administration. The BYU President's Council approved this collection, and it was submitted to the BYU Board of Trustees, which consists of the First Presidency, members of the Council of the Twelve Apostles, and other Church leaders. The Board approved the packet and attached a cover letter to the collection. This collection of official statements was placed in the BYU library under the title *BYU Library Packet on Evolution*, and it has been accessible to students since 1992. The end result of this entire process is that the *BYU Library Packet on Evolution* has become the official position of BYU on organic evolution.

It should be noted that many articles and statements by general authorities about evolution were considered for inclusion in the *Library Packet*. One of possible interest to the reader is a talk given by Elder James E. Talmage entitled, "The Earth and Man" (Talmage, 1931). This talk was given special consideration because Talmage delivered it in the Tabernacle at the request of the First Presidency. However, the decision was ultimately made to include in the *Library Packet* only those statements that had been written specifically by the First Presidency.

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#### CONTENTS OF THE BYU LIBRARY PACKET ON EVOLUTION

The *Library Packet* begins with the previously mentioned cover letter from the BYU Board of Trustees. In the letter the Board explains that the *Library Packet* contains all the statements issued by the First Presidency on evolution, and then the Board gives the following clarification regarding the many other general authority statements on evolution:

Various views have been expressed by other Church leaders on this subject over many decades; however, formal statements by the First Presidency are the definitive source of official Church positions. (BYU Board of Trustees, 1992)

The point of this paragraph deserves special attention with regard to the current topic because of the high respect Church members have for any instructions from Church officials. This respect can cause a perception of official status for frequently repeated statements of general authorities. This paragraph reminds Church members to use more caution in identifying the official doctrine of the Church.

After the cover letter, the following previously published statements from the First Presidency are included in the *Library Packet*:

- “The Origin of Man,” first published in 1909 as a specific response to the discussion on organic evolution. This statement was republished in the February 2003 issue of the *Ensign*.
- “Words in Season from the First Presidency,” concerning the Church’s position on science, first published in 1910.
- “‘Mormon’ View of Evolution,” which was published in 1925. This publication was mostly a reiteration of the Church’s 1909 statement on organic evolution.

And finally, the *Library Packet* contains the article from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* written by Evenson. This was included because during the compilation of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, this article was specifically approved by the First Presidency (Evenson, 2001) and so it represents a recent statement on that topic.

The reader is invited to investigate the contents of the *Library Packet* (it can be located on the BYU web page), but a summary of the important concepts are described briefly in the following list (Evenson, 2001):

- Men and women are created in the image of God and are the spiritual offspring of God.
- Adam was the first man.
- God organized the earth from preexistent elements.
- The fall of Adam made the atonement of Christ necessary for mankind’s salvation.
- The specific processes by which life came to earth are not known.

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As can be seen from this summary, the First Presidency takes no position on the validity of the theory of organic evolution, especially with regard to the development of plant and animal life on earth. With regard to human evolution, these statements emphasize the divine nature of the spirit of man as the offspring of God and the importance of the atonement of the Savior.

Two paragraphs in the 1909 statement would probably be considered the only official statements specifically against evolution, and these paragraphs address the evolution of mankind. Addressing the suggestion that “the original human being was a development from lower orders of the animal creation,” the First Presidency responds that “[t]hese, however, are the theories of men.” Although comments about the evolution of life on earth are absent in this 1909 statement, these sentences clarify the position of the First Presidency that mankind is not a result of evolution from simpler or less intelligent life.

Although the previously identified paragraphs deny any evolution in the development of humans, it appears that this position was reconsidered in lieu of a more neutral one. Evidence of this reconsideration comes through

a later statement from this same First Presidency in the *Improvement Era*, explaining that whether the bodies of man “evolved,” “were transplanted from another sphere,” or “were born here in mortality,” these “are questions not fully answered in the revealed word of God” (Priesthood Quorums’ Table, 1910). This explanation seems to allow a broad range of viewpoints concerning mankind’s origins as being compatible with LDS doctrine. Also as a result of this apparent reconsideration, all later statements issued by the First Presidency fail to comment on the origin and development of the physical bodies of mankind.

The final document in the *Library Packet* is probably the one most noteworthy, since it is both the most recent and the most concise statement regarding the Church and evolution. This document is the Evenson article titled, “Evolution” from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Although several longer drafts of this article were submitted, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve ultimately approved a short article of five small paragraphs (Evenson, 2001). As an added note to the significance of this article, four paragraphs from it are currently used by the First Presidency as the official response to members’ written requests about the Church’s position on evolution. Because these paragraphs best represent the Church’s current position on evolution, I have included the text below.

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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 (Doctrine and Covenants 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. Ivans, 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. (Evenson, 1992)

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE BYU LIBRARY PACKET ON EVOLUTION

The *Library Packet* represents the official position of BYU regarding evolution. As already explained, these documents have a specifically neutral position on evolution. That Church authorities have approved this neutral position might be confusing to some members because of scriptures that appear to contradict the principles upon which evolution is based. For example, the Book of Moses specifically states that there was no death before Adam (Moses 6:48). As a response to these contradictions, Evenson expressed the view that apparently many Church leaders interpret these creation passages as figurative (Evenson, 2001). In fact, some LDS writers have suggested that the original message of these creation stories was symbolic and not to be interpreted literally (Hutchinson, 1988; Norman, 1988). Elder Talmage emphasized this principle of properly interpreting scripture with this paragraph from his Tabernacle address:

Let us not try to wrest the scriptures in an attempt to explain away what we cannot explain. The opening chapters of Genesis, and scriptures related thereto, were never intended as a text-book of geology, archaeology, Earth-science or man-science.... We do not show reverence for the scriptures when we misapply them through faulty interpretation. (Talmage, 1931)

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Whether the creation scriptures should be interpreted literally or figuratively, several benefits exist from maintaining a neutral position on organic evolution. LDS writers have identified a few that I would like to review in the following paragraphs.

First, Church members should avoid following the path of other evangelical faiths without considering carefully how our doctrine differs from theirs (Evenson, 1992). For example, one of the fundamental dogmas associated with a literal interpretation of the creation story is creation *ex nihilo*, or creation out of nothing. This doctrine states that God created the world from absolutely nothing because He is in the absolute sense omnipotent. However, Joseph Smith taught that God formed the Earth from already existing matter (Smith, 1958). Other doctrines closely associated with creation *ex nihilo*, such as a belief that the earth was created in six 24-hour periods, or that species are immutable, are also unspecified or ignored in official LDS theology (Jeffery, 1973). In summary, we should be careful about jumping onto the creationist bandwagon because of the other theological cargo that is riding along.

A second benefit of not formalizing a statement about evolution is that we should avoid “jumping to quick conclusions or seizing upon simple answers” (Evenson, 2001). In both theology and science, it is easy for Church members to follow others’ trends of attacking opposing viewpoints with simplistic clichés or emotionally charged logical fallacies. For example, creationists have attacked evolution with arguments that claim that it

contradicts the second law of thermodynamics or that it is “just a theory.” For Church members to repeat these arguments demonstrates a severe lack of understanding of the scientific principles involved.

And lastly, we should not just simply attribute the theory of organic evolution to the evil designs of scientists devising means to turn others’ faith from God. There are far too many evolution scientists who are devout in their Christian faith (including our own) to draw any conclusions that belief in evolution has been detrimental to a belief in a supreme being. In contrast, many scientists have claimed that a deeper understanding of the processes of life has developed in them a deeper conviction of the existence of God. Renowned LDS scientist Henry Eyring summarizes this idea with this comment about Church members’ attitudes toward the scientific process:

We should keep in mind that scientists are as diligent and truthful as anyone else. Organic evolution is the honest result of capable people trying to explain the evidence to the best of their ability...

In my opinion it would be a very sad mistake if a parent or teacher were to belittle scientists as being wicked charlatans or else fools having been duped by half-baked ideas that gloss over inconsistencies. That isn’t an accurate assessment of the situation, and our children or students will be able to see that when they begin their scientific studies. (Eyring, 61)

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#### INTENT OF THE BYU LIBRARY PACKET ON EVOLUTION

At the request of BYU administrators, Evenson followed up the publication of the *BYU Library Packet on Evolution* with a letter in the student newspaper. In this article Evenson related the process of putting together the *Library Packet* and then shared the following suggestions for its instructional use at the university (Evenson, 1992):

- In classes where evolution is discussed, faculty should refer students to the material in the *Library Packet* along with other items they may choose to distribute.
- If additional materials about the Church and evolution are distributed, those should be clearly separated from the *BYU Library Packet* to avoid the impression that those materials are the position of the Church.
- If additional materials about the Church and evolution are distributed, those should include a fair sampling of the diverse viewpoints among LDS leaders, including some statements in favor of evolution, some against, and some in the middle.

- In class instruction, faculty should “avoid the implication that a greater sense of unanimity or resolution of this topic exists [among Church leaders] than is actually the case.”
- In their expressions of personal views, faculty should avoid contention.

As already mentioned, the theory of evolution is an emotionally charged topic. This is evidenced through instructors’ and students’ use of one-sided quotations from Church authorities, and also through the lack of common courtesy afforded others of differing views when discussing the theological implications of organic evolution. Evenson reminds us in these instructional suggestions that instructors should be accurate, even-sided, and considerate in their presentation of this sensitive topic.

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#### CONCLUSION

The *BYU Library Packet on Evolution* is a carefully constructed document to articulate the official BYU position on organic evolution. BYU officials felt that this document would be an important resource for students and faculty. Since BYU went to the effort to formalize a position on evolution, it presents several questions for our consideration here at BYU-Idaho. Does our institution feel a need for an official statement on organic evolution? Should our institution approve the same statement, or could we benefit from a shorter statement (such as the Evenson article)? If BYU-Idaho does adopt an official statement, how should we make it available for students’ use? And finally, should we implement the instructional suggestions from Evenson? These are questions that we might need to consider as faculty and administrators of BYU-Idaho. ☺

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