

Evolution and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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Introduction

Although the position of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter “LDS Church” or “Church”) on biological evolution is one of neutrality, that position has often been contested, obscured, complicated, or difficult to find. Some Latter-day Saints (LDS) might well be surprised to learn neutrality is the official position. The reasons for this complicated relationship partially track US intellectual trends, but also stem from uniquely LDS theological and cultural structures which do not fit neatly into mainstream Protestant patterns.

This document serves to explain relevant LDS positions and why evolution plays out differently than in Catholicism or Protestantism. I provide an executive summary, a longer outline of the relevant structures and their historical roles, followed by an exegetical/doctrinal summary, and short LDS bibliography. In order to maximize readability and concision, I have minimized references and nuancing exceptions at every turn, which I hope does not result in taking the general narrative for the whole of the story.

As author, I should make clear my own position; a religiously-committed LDS academic with a strong pastoral bent, my training includes Ancient Near Eastern Studies (BYU, 2001), Comparative Semitics (MA, PhD work, University of Chicago, 2001-2007), general science (City College of New York), and History of Christianity (PhD student, Claremont Graduate University.) After recent completion of doctoral exams in American Religious History, Reformation History, and History of Science, my approved dissertation topic is the post-1970 creation/evolution conflict in the LDS Church and its earlier intellectual roots. Besides my academic work, I contribute directly to the LDS community via blogposts, podcasts, and popular conferences.

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Executive Summary

The conflict with evolution is largely one of assumptions about the relationship between the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture, and exegesis of those two books. LDS have historically produced a large number of scientists, but with both a larger canon of scripture ambivalent on evolutionary issues and strong historical, cultural, and ecclesiological disincentives to formal exegesis, LDS scriptural acumen has not matched LDS scientific competency. Moreover, the young age of the Church, a non-professional hierarchy imbued with prophetic status, an open and expanded canon, and concomitant rejection of *sola scriptura* further complicate the LDS response. Consequently, although taught at BYU since the 1920s,¹ evolution's historical place among LDS has been quite mixed, and any resolution of conflict must take account of unique LDS aspects.

The observations of Cavanaugh and Smith on reconciliatory progress are apt here.

[A religious] tradition requires a dynamic of creative repetition.... any modifications, revisions, and reformulations will need to provide an account of how they are faithful extensions of the tradition.... what “counts” as a reason or warrant or evidence or a “good move” in this game is tethered to the heritage of the tradition. This doesn't mean there is no room for innovation or creative extension, but it does mean that in order for a “move” to count as an extension it will have to be judged as faithful to the tradition.²

For LDS to accept evolution more widely, “being judged as faithful to the tradition” will likely require some kind of top-down pro-evolution statement presented within a context of authoritative and continuing revelation, not merely scriptural arguments or scientific authority.

¹ Stand-alone “Evolutionary Biology” courses began at BYU in 1971.

² See “Beyond Galileo to Chalcedon: Resources for Reimagining Evolution, Human Origins, and the Fall” in Cavanaugh & Smith, eds., *Evolution and the Fall* (Eerdmans, 2017).

The Intellectual Contours of the LDS Encounter with Scripture, Science, and Evolution

First and perhaps most important to understand, LDS ecclesiology is entangled with LDS theology and scripture in a way foreign to both Protestantism and Catholicism. The primary locus of earthly authority is not scripture, but ongoing revelation from God to living prophets at the center of the LDS hierarchy: the President of the Church, his Apostolic counselors, and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. These constitute a *magisterium* of sorts, but imbued with prophetic status, thus entailing an expanded canon,³ an open canon,⁴ the rejection of *sola scriptura*, and a prioritization of the words of current Church leaders over those past.

Combined with inherited 19th century anti-elitist/clerical attitudes, the primacy of prophetic authority meant that formal theological or exegetical training was seen as, at best, fruitless human hubris attempting to ape revelatory epistemology and at worst, a Satanic obfuscation of true doctrine and a step towards apostasy.⁵ Since the prophetic office is embedded in a lay non-professional⁶ hierarchy, competition or conflict between statements of the hierarchy and those trained in Biblical studies or theology (whether LDS or not) naturally fell into polemical rhetoric of “God’s wisdom vs theories and philosophies of men.”⁷

³ I.e. the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine & Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.

⁴ In practice, the canon is only open a crack, as it is rarely added to.

⁵ Much of this remains, but with the increasing LDS graduate presence in religion, biblical studies, etc., has given way in some quarters to something akin to “plundering the Egyptians.” Yeo, *Plundering the Egyptians: The Old Testament and Historical Criticism at Westminster Theological Seminary (1929-1998)*, (University Press of America, 2009), 212.

⁶ That is, one does not *choose* the ministry, it is not a *profession* (let alone a paid one), and no formal training is required for leadership positions. For example, the leader of a local congregation (a Bishop) may be a professor or a bus driver. He becomes a Bishop when higher Church leadership asks him to serve as such, likely for a period of time from 5-10 years. During that time, he continues to earn his living through his day job. He may be then be asked to serve as a Stake President (leader of a diocese), and so on nearly all the way up the chain. Only at the highest levels is the day job set aside, and a support salary drawn from the Church, if necessary. Currently, the First Presidency consists of three men whose former careers were heart surgeon (Russell M. Nelson), state Supreme Court justice (Dallin H. Oaks), and Stanford/MIT business professor (Henry B. Eyring).

⁷ E.g. Elder Mark Peterson in 1962. “We must not put their views on doctrine ahead of ours. Ours comes

The prophetic gift was and often is perceived as obviating any exegetical need; there has never been an LDS Apostle with exegetical training.⁸ Consequently, although there are now numerous LDS scholars in Bible,⁹ ancient Near East, religious studies, etc., the majority of LDS writing on Genesis or reconciling science with scripture has been written either by scientists or non-specialists with no relevant training to either science or scripture, because (per traditional thinking) interpreting scripture requires no special expertise.¹⁰

This non-exegetical aspect cannot be overstated; one looks in vain for lay or official¹¹ LDS discussion of hermeneutical assumptions like concordism or historicism, issues of scriptural genre or ancient Near Eastern contexts like *Enuma Eliš*, etc. LDS shelves do not contain Joseph Smith's commentary series on Romans (or 1 Nephi, for that matter), Brigham Young's systematic theology, or Wilford Woodruff's exegetical debate over the syntax of *b'erēshīt* in Genesis 1:1. What one does find, in this summary sentence by Richard Mouw, is a Church operating with "the kinds of authority patterns that guided the life of Israel" in the Hebrew Bible.¹² Mouw's fuller differentiation of LDS authority patterns from Protestant (as is often assumed in interreligious dialogue) is both perceptive and gracious, but does not highlight the tensions inherent in an open canon,

by revelation. Those men are not inspired. They may be ever so skilled in other things, but they are not to be depended upon as interpreters of the meaning of the doctrine of the scriptures." As quoted in Dennis Horne, *Determining Doctrine* (Eborn Books, 2005), 121.

⁸ The rare exceptions either 1) received pastoral training in another denomination before conversion (e.g. Sidney Rigdon, trained as a 19th century Baptist/Campellite) or 2) did not serve in the highest ranks of the LDS hierarchy (e.g. Gerald Lund, who did non-degree post-graduate work in Bible at Pepperdine and the University of Jerusalem in Hollywood. Lund served in the Second Quorum of the Seventy from 2002-8.)

⁹ The first Old Testament PhD was Sidney B. Sperry in 1931 (University of Chicago), with quite a historical gap before more Old Testament scholars followed. <https://rsc.byu.edu/review/teaching-legacy-sidney-b-sperry> The first New Testament PhD was Stephen Robinson in 1978 (Duke.)

<https://religion.byu.edu/stephen-e-robinson>

¹⁰ But note recent moves away from this, e.g. Elder Ballard's words about the nature of prophetic epistemology and expertise, including Biblical studies. https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/m-russell-ballard_questions-and-answers/

¹¹ By which I mean, "published by the LDS Church."

¹² See Mouw, "What does God think about America? Some Challenges for Evangelicals and Mormons," *BYU Studies* 43:4 (2004), 10-11.

living prophets, etc.

Second, as the Church was founded only in 1830, the clear interrelationship of these authority patterns (and many other things) remains yet to be worked out in practice.¹³ Combined with the historical lack of exegetical training, this looseness creates conflict at all levels not only over the interpretation of relevant scripture, but also the authoritativeness of various declarations and statements made in different contexts. Some high-ranking LDS leaders have said there is an official position against evolution, and others of equal rank have said the contrary, each interpreting scripture and historical precedents differently. Keeping in mind that the “core competency” of Church leadership is magisterial revelation, no Church leaders (with one problematic exception)¹⁴ have claimed a revelatory position against evolution, which remands Church responses entirely to the realm of human exegesis and interpretation.

Third, the expanded LDS canon muddies the waters around evolutionary issues. On the one hand, the three lengthy LDS parallels to Genesis 1-4 (i.e. Moses and Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price, and the LDS temple liturgy) generally follow Genesis 1-4, lending strength to traditional “literalist” views.¹⁵ On the other hand, these passages sometimes differ starkly, and others seem to alternately undermine and support

¹³ See e.g. David Frank Holland, “The Triangle and the Sovereign: Logics, History, and an Open Canon” in Blaire G. Van Dyke, Brian D. Birch, and Boyd J. Peterson, eds. *The Expanded Canon: Perspectives on Mormonism and Sacred Texts* (Kofford Press, 2018), 21-24. Brian Birch, “Beyond the Canon: Authoritative Discourse in Comparative Perspective” in *ibid.*, 26-46.

¹⁴ Although not the thrust of his talk at BYU, Elder Boyd K. Packer claimed personal revelation against evolution. However, he did not inquire about evolution *per se*; “Do not mortgage your soul for unproved theories; ask, simply ask! I have asked, but not how man was created; I have asked if the scriptures are true.” He interpreted an affirmative divine response to this question to be incompatible with evolution as he understood it. See “The Law and the Light,” in *The Book of Mormon: Jacob through Words of Mormon, To Learn with Joy*, eds. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr., (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990), 1–31. <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/book-mormon-jacob-through-words-mormon-learn-joy/law-and-light>

¹⁵ See, e.g. Richard Draper, “The Creation of Humankind, and Allegory? A Note on Abraham 5: 7, 14–16” in John Gee and Brian Hauglid, eds., *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant: (FARMS/BYU, 2005)*. Available online at <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/book/astronomy-papyrus-and-covenant/>

traditional views. Whereas one passage seems an absolute obstacle to “death before the fall”¹⁶ and another implied a youngish earth,¹⁷ others imply a long stepwise developmental/evolutionary creation,¹⁸ and an earth peopled “many thousands of years” before Jesus.¹⁹ Uniquely LDS scripture thus does not cut the Gordian knot of evolution.

Fourth, as a result of its lay non-exegetical/atheological²⁰ tradition, LDS have not wrestled much with the nature of revelation, prophets, or scripture. In spite of sometimes blunt declarations otherwise, in practice LDS often treat revelatory discourse (both canonized scripture and from Church leaders) as inerrant and lacking any human aspects that affect the message.²¹ This results in a common unrecognized assumption that scripture is primarily of the genre “modern history,” providing reliable scientific facts and unchangingly consistent theological teachings, which in no significant way reflect the cultural or scientific views of its human writers. Thus, beyond coloring the reading of Genesis, unique LDS scripture which refers to e.g. Cain and Abel is taken as simply confirming the historical nature of Genesis.

Fifth, several of the above factors combined with early social and geographic isolation to create an intellectual separatism. The dominant assumption was that LDS had received a culture-free and purely divine Gospel by revelation (mediated through prophets, and accounting for changing circumstances), which had to be guarded in its purity from secular and sectarian incursions of a theological, cultural, or intellectual nature. Among other things, this meant that LDS generally did not interact with non-

¹⁶ Book of Mormon, [2 Nephi 2:22-25](#).

¹⁷ [Doctrine & Covenants 77:7, 10](#)

¹⁸ See Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 4, various verses, where the earth and waters are “prepared to bring forth” animal and plant life, and creation is “watched until it obeyed.”

¹⁹ Book of Mormon, [Helaman 8:18](#)

²⁰ See LDS philosopher James Faulconer, “Why a Mormon Won’t Drink Coffee but Might Have a Coke: The Atheological Character of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” *Element* 2:2 (Fall 2006). <https://thc.utah.edu/lectures-programs/faulconer-coffee.pdf>

²¹ Due to a few passages in the Book of Mormon, and [the Eighth Article of Faith](#) that “we believe the Bible to be the Word of God as far as it is translated [i.e. transmitted] correctly,” these quasi-inerrant assumptions are applied less to the Bible.

LDS scriptural scholarship.

Ironically, then, some of those charged with maintaining doctrinal purity in Church teachings imported inerrantist/creationist ideas. For example, Joseph Fielding Smith exchanged letters with George McCready Price in the 1930s,²² and enthusiastically pushed Price's creationist geology books on his fellow Apostles (to significant resistance), in personal letters, and his 1954 *magnum opus* against evolution (bibliography). In the 1970s and 80s, some BYU Religious Education faculty²³ distributed anti-evolution pamphlets widely on campus, citing earlier LDS authorities like Smith, but also sources like Whitcomb and Morris's anti-evolution *The Genesis Flood*. A 1980 worldwide 2-volume manual on the Old Testament for LDS college students quotes a Seventh-day Adventist creationism pamphlet for c. 2000 words against "supposed scientific evidence" in favor of evolution.

While BYU scientists touted their Apostolic approval to teach evolution and the neutral or positive Church statements, it is easy to see why many LDS have historically perceived the Church's position as somewhere between young-earth-creationist at the extreme or at the very least, anti-evolution.

Exegetical/Doctrinal Summary

In general, Church materials and lay members reflect an assumption that scripture is inherently and primarily historical in nature, "literal until proven guilty."²⁴ This lens colors how LDS read scripture to arrive at the positions below, and the historical lack of LDS trained in relevant fields who might recognize, question, or nuance those assumptions contributes as well.

²² On Price, see my piece at <https://religionandpolitics.org/2015/11/17/ben-carson-science-and-seventh-day-adventists/>

²³ Notably, the most vocal anti-evolution faculty were not trained in Bible-relevant fields, and some did not hold PhDs.

²⁴ Tremper Longman III, "What I Mean by Historical-Grammatical Exegesis— Why I am Not a Literalist." *Grace Theological Journal* 11:2 (1990), 148.

Age of the Earth: With some exceptions, LDS have long embraced the concordist day-age reading, although sometimes with a qualifier that Adam and Eve may have stayed in the Garden of Eden for potentially millions of years. Whereas the Book of Moses echoes Genesis' usage of "day, the Book of Abraham parallel to Genesis seems to reflect the day-age interpretation in its systematic replacement of "day" with the word "time."²⁵

Fossils, Dinosaurs, and "Pre-Adamites": Since a stark public conflict over this issue in the 1930s,²⁶ the Church has generally made no theological assertions about the fossils of humanoids, their age, relationship to humans, or how to integrate their existence with scripture. A few, through creative application of a statement by Joseph Smith, have argued that fossils appearing older than 6000 years are the result of the earth being created from fragments of other populated planets or previous creations. Similarly, a few have argued that dinosaurs co-existed with humans, and were wiped out by or before the deluge. The most recent Church publication (2016) touching this issue stated, "Did dinosaurs live and die on this earth long before man came along? There have been no revelations on this question, and the scientific evidence says yes. (You can learn more about it by studying paleontology if you like, even at Church-owned schools.)"²⁷ BYU has strong biology and paleontology programs, as well as both a paleontology museum and natural history museum.²⁸

Historical Adam: A primary historical sticking point against evolution appears to be the presence of a distinct Adam figure in LDS scripture but also liturgy and history e.g. Joseph F. Smith's canonized 1918 vision of the afterlife.²⁹ However, note that some Church sources have not seen a historical Adam as incompatible with evolution; a

²⁵ See [Abraham 4:5, 8, 13, 18, 23, 31](#). I argue elsewhere (not yet in print) that this likely reflects the influence of Joseph Smith's Hebrew teacher, Josiah Seixas. In general, see [Matthew J. Grey, "The Word of the Lord in the Original': Joseph Smith's Study of Hebrew in Kirtland," in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, \(BYU Religious Studies Center, 2015\), 249–302.](#)

²⁶ See Sessions and Oberg, bibliography.

²⁷ See ["What does the Church believe about dinosaurs?" *New Era* \(Feb 2016\).](#)

²⁸ The Bean Museum is currently running a pro-evolution exhibit.

²⁹ [Doctrine & Covenants 138:38](#) onwards details the presence of Adam and other OT patriarchs.

Church-published article in 1910 seemed to recognize that scriptural statements about Adam were compatible with several options. “[Such] are the authentic statements of the scriptures, ancient and modern, and it is best to rest with these, until the Lord shall see fit to give more light on the subject. Whether [1]the mortal bodies of man evolved in natural processes to present perfection, through the direction and power of God; [2] whether the first parents of our generations, Adam and Eve, were transplanted from another sphere, with immortal tabernacles, which became corrupted through sin and the partaking of natural foods, in the process of time; [3]whether they were born here in mortality, as other mortals have been, are questions not fully answered in the revealed word of God.”³⁰

Fall: Church-published materials have consistently assumed a distinct historical event for the Fall, viewed through the lens of the Book of Mormon in a teleologically positive way, akin to *felix culpa*.

No Death Before the Fall: For many, like Joseph Fielding Smith, 2 Nephi 2:22-25 served as a linchpin against evolution. In spite of some high-level disagreement in the early 20th century (e.g. Apostle James E. Talmage, a PhD in physical sciences), this has been the most commonly expressed view by LDS leaders. More recently, a Church-published magazine made the statement that “dinosaurs lived and died long before man came along” but offered no way to reconcile that pre-human death with scripture or other LDS statements.

Other: Other distinctive but secondary aspects (for purposes of this discussion) of LDS doctrine and scripture complicate simple adoption of Jewish or Christian reconciliations. These could include LDS rejection of *ex nihilo* creation of the earth, “original sin” (in the sense of Augustine’s understanding of Romans), the relationship between grace and nature, a different understanding of materialism vis-a-vis the human body, soul, and deity, and theosis/deification.

³⁰ This and others are reproduced in the Evenson/Jeffrey volume in the bibliography.

Introductory Bibliography

1) “The BYU Evolution Packet”

- This packet includes some official Church statements from 1909, 1910, and 1925, as well as the 1990 *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* article (<http://eom.byu.edu>). It was approved by high LDS leadership for official distribution at BYU in 1992 and contributed to a campus *détente* between Biology and Religious Education. Available a variety of places, including

https://nelsonlab.byu.edu/Portals/27/docs/BYU_Evolution_Packet_only.pdf

2) William E. Evenson and Duane Jeffrey, *Mormonism and Evolution: The Authoritative Statements* (Kofford Books, 2011)

- Evenson, the BYU professor who authored the “evolution” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* article and Jeffrey, the BYU biology professor who was one of the first to teach dedicated evolution classes in the early 1970s, attempt to gather and contextualize the various “authoritative” statements pertaining to evolution.

3) Gene A. Sessions and Craig J. Oberg, eds. *The Search for Harmony: Essays on Science and Mormonism* (Signature Books, 1993)

- A significant collection of historical and other essays on Mormonism, science, and evolution.

4) Michael R. Ash, “[The Mormon Myth of Evil Evolution,](#)” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35:4 (Winter 2002): 33–52

- Ash presents some LDS history to argue against the common LDS assumption that evolution is evil and incompatible with LDS teachings.

5) Thomas Simpson, *American Universities and the Birth of Modern Mormonism, 1867-1940* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016)

- While the entire book is relevant, chapter 3 focuses on “Evolution and its Discontents” during the early 20th century.

6) Gregory Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern*

Mormonism (University of Utah Press, 2005), 45-9.

- A history of the President of the Church from 1951-1970, with a section on evolution. During his time as President, McKay became favorable to evolutionary readings of Genesis.

7) Joseph Fielding Smith, *Man: His Origin and Destiny* (Deseret Book, 1954)

- By dint of his relationship to Joseph Smith, his authoritative tone, extensive writings, and Church positions— (Assistant) Church Historian (1906), Apostle (1910-51), President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (1951-70) and, President of the Church (1970-72)— Smith represents the single most influential anti-evolutionary voice in the LDS Church.

8) Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion*, updated ed. (Oxford Press, 2013)

- The published version of Barlow's Harvard dissertation, which traces LDS interpretive approaches and relationship to the Bible from the 1830s through the 1960s.

9) Stephen Peck, *Evolving Faith: Wanderings of a Mormon Biologist* (Maxwell Institute, 2015)

-Peck is one of the most visible BYU biologists advocating integration of evolution and faith.

Most Recent LDS Statements

“What does the Church believe about Dinosaurs?” *New Era* (Feb 2016)

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/new-era/2016/02/to-the-point/what-does-the-church-believe-about-dinosaurs?lang=eng>

“What does the Church believe about Evolution?” *New Era* (Nov 2016)

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2016/10/to-the-point/what-does-the-church-believe-about-evolution?lang=eng>

- Notably, the New Era is the Church-published magazine aimed at teenagers.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, “Where Justice, Love, and Mercy Meet” General Conference, April 2015. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/04/where-justice-love-and-mercy-meet?lang=eng>

- A former BYU Dean of Religious Education (1974-6), Commissioner of Church Education (1976-80), and BYU President (1980-9), Holland is a senior Apostle with a PhD from Yale (American Studies, 1973) and a son on faculty at Harvard Divinity School (David F. Holland). This discourse is significant for explicit views on Adam, Eve, and the Fall.