

## Latter-day Creationism

David H. Bailey

26 Oct 2008

Nowadays most college-educated LDS people learn the basic facts of science in the area of the creation. What's more, the inclusion of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* article on evolution into the "BYU packet" on evolution (and its endorsement by the First Presidency), surely makes clear the Church's view on evolution. Quoting from a 1931 First Presidency letter, this short article concludes, "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." What an enlightened response!

So recently I have been surprised to see material produced by LDS people that still claims that the LDS Church firmly rejects evolution, or which insists on a young earth, or which rejects well-established scientific results in the area of evolution.

For example, the author of the website <http://www.ndbf.net> holds that there was literally no death of any organism before the fall of Adam, which he presumes was roughly 4000 BC. Further, he dismisses the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* article on evolution, even though he has been advised that Gordon B. Hinckley personally provided the quote to the *Encyclopedia* editors and specified the outline of the article.

Another instance is the recently released DVD entitled "Creation and Evolution: A Witness of Prophets," which is available at the website <http://www.zionvision.com>. This material presents a very selective collection of quotes by LDS authorities on evolution. For instance, it quotes Joseph Fielding Smith (from his book *Man: His Origin and Destiny*) as declaring, "It has been truthfully said that organic evolution is Satan's chief weapon in this dispensation in his attempt to destroy the divine mission of Jesus Christ." But the site fails to mention a well-known letter from President McKay (dated 15 Feb 1957) that explains, "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." None of the many more positive quotes on science and religion by LDS authorities are mentioned here.

Other LDS writers, including some scientific-trained persons, accept the basic scientific outline of the creation, but still insist that certain key aspects of scientific evolution are fundamentally in error. A few have endorsed the writings of the "scientific creation" or "intelligent design" (ID) communities. One example here is the book *The Case for Divine Design*, by Frank Salisbury. He not only endorses ID, but he also features arguments, based on probability calculations, that certain biomolecules could not have arisen in the multi-billion year age of the earth.

Each of these persons is entitled to their views. But isn't there a better approach?

### Current Scientific Evidence

Once one could reasonably argue that there are uncertainties in geological dating, or that there are numerous key "missing links" in the fossil record, or that some fundamental mechanisms of evolution are not fully understood, or that arguments from probability or information theory question certain aspects of evolution. But things are different now. I will briefly sketch some of this evidence; full technical details are available in the references at the end (which in each case are written either by active Latter-day Saints or by other believing scientists).

With regards to the age of the earth, literally tens of thousands of precise dating measurements have been made, using many different techniques, and they all fit together. There is no way all of these dates could be wrong. With regards to “gaps” in the fossil record, important new fossil finds, including hominid fossils, are announced on almost a weekly basis. For example, recently several intermediate fossil species have been discovered in the transition between fish and four-legged creatures, and between land mammals and marine mammals, “gaps” that some creationist and ID critics of evolution have argued could never be bridged.

The recent explosion in DNA data has provided a large body of virtually incontestable evidence of evolution. Scientists no longer have to rely on vague similarities in appearance between different species – now the evolutionary distance between species can be objectively and quantitatively measured. For example, the 141-long alpha chain of human hemoglobin is identical in chimpanzees, differs in only one location in gorillas, yet differs in 25 locations in rabbits and in over 100 locations in fish. In a similar way, scientists have identified the precise mutations in our DNA that have deactivated our ability to produce ascorbic acid (vitamin C), and they have identified the precise spot in our DNA where two distinct ancient chromosomes were fused. These conclusions are backed up by many thousands of peer-reviewed studies.

As mentioned above, a small group of creationist and ID scholars question many of these conclusions, and numerous LDS are fans of their writings. The most sophisticated of these arguments are based on probability, as mentioned above, but these arguments are all fallacious, according to knowledgeable biologists and mathematicians who have examined them. A typical flaw in reasoning is to presume that a given biomolecule arose as a single all-at-once random shot, instead of by a step-by-step process over many millions of years. For instance, recent research indicates that hemoglobin arose in primitive bacteria for other purposes, and only later in animals was adopted for oxygen transport.

Similarly, some ID scholars claim that certain biosystems are “irreducibly complex,” meaning that if any component is removed it could not function, so that it must have arisen supernaturally. The bacterial flagellum and the human blood clotting machinery are often held up as examples. But scientists have studied these structures in detail, and have shown, for instance, that the bacterial flagellum is very close in genetic structure to a “needle” used by certain organisms to inject toxins, establishing that they had a common origin. Indeed, dozens of books and hundreds of articles have been written on the evolution of such structures.

Astronomer Carl Sagan once wrote, “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” The creationist and ID communities have not provided the requisite extraordinary evidence to back up their extraordinary claims.

God the Great Deceiver?

Why are so many LDS unwilling to accept the First Presidency’s simple recommendation to “Leave geology, biology, ... to scientific research”? Why do so many LDS feel we must “prove” God in a scientific laboratory? Is not faith necessary? There is certainly much to be lost in waging a quixotic “war” with science, not the least of which is the loss of thousands of youth and young adults who find that evolution is more than just a “theory.” Perhaps the reason for this belief is that many LDS presume we must defend the “miraculous” nature of the creation.

But this philosophy is much more in keeping with sectarian Christianity than it is with LDS theology. Parley P. Pratt, for instance, wrote, “Among the popular errors of modern times, an opinion prevails that miracles are events which transpire contrary to the laws of nature, that they are effects without a cause. If such is the fact, then, there never has been a miracle, and there never will be one.” Similarly, Brigham

Young declared, “Yet I will say with regard to miracles, there is no such thing save to the ignorant – that is, there never was a result wrought out by God or by any of His creatures without there being a cause for it.”

What’s more, underlying the creationist and ID literature are theological notions that most LDS would regard as downright repugnant. For instance, some creationists have suggested that God created the earth in an instant about 6,000 years ago, complete with an intricate system of fossil-laden, radiometrically dated rocks, mutation-laden DNA in living organisms (including humans), plus hundreds of other lines of evidence pointing to a very old evolutionary origin, all as a test of faith. I submit that “God the Great Deceiver” is utterly unworthy of our worship or obedience.

In a similar vein, insisting that God “designed” our world in meticulous detail presents insuperable theological problems. For instance, many persons suffer from back ailments, the result of a poor skeletal design (it is adapted from four-footed ancestors). Infections in the human appendix frequently caused death until recent medical advances (it is a vestige of our evolutionary past when it was necessary to ferment vegetable matter). Almost all animals generate their own vitamin C, but while we have virtually the same genetic machinery, it doesn’t work because a mutation has inactivated a key final step (evidently this mutation occurred after our primate ancestors adopted a diet rich in fruit). In human eyes, the optic nerves and blood vessels emerge from the front of the retina, and then travel to the back, resulting in a blind spot. Each of these examples makes sense from an evolutionary perspective, but to insist that God meticulously designed such features into our bodies leaves us with an Incompetent God, or, even worse, a Plagiarist God, because, for instance, the mutation that inactivated our ability to produce vitamin C is shared by three other primates.

## Conclusion

The LDS Church has a great scientific tradition, including notable, respected researchers in virtually every field of modern science. Indeed, our motto is “The glory of God is intelligence.” Why not just acknowledge that science and religion address two very different sets of questions, and that the methodology in one arena cannot settle controversies in the other?

Elder James E. Talmage expressed this well: “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.” [Elder James E. Talmage, “The Earth and Man,” LDS Church, 1931].

Elder B. H. Roberts sums up this discussion very effectively:

“On the other hand, to limit and insist upon the whole of life and death to this side of Adam’s advent to the earth, some six or eight thousand years ago, as proposed by some, is to fly in the face of the facts so indisputably brought to light by the researcher of science in modern times, and this as set forth by men of the highest type in the intellectual and moral world; not inferior men, or men of sensual and devilish temperament, but men who must be accounted as among the noblest and most self-sacrificing of the sons of men – of the type whence must come the noblest sons of God, since ‘the glory of God is intelligence’ (D&C 93:36); and that too the glory of man.

“These searchers after truth are of that class. To pay attention to and give reasonable credence to their research and findings is to link the church of God with the highest increase of human thought and effort. On that side lies development, on the other lies contraction. It is on the former side that research work is going on and will continue to go on, future investigation and discoveries will continue on that side, nothing will retard them, and nothing will develop on the other side. One leads to narrow sectarianism,

the other keeps the open spirit of a world movement with which our New Dispensation began. As between them which is to be our choice?" [Brigham H. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, 1930 (republished in 1994), pg. 363-364.]

#### References

Readers interested in additional details are referred to these books, written by prominent scientists. In this list, authors Evenson, Fairbanks, Jeffery, Stephens and Meldrum are active Latter-day Saints. Ayala is a Dominican Priest. Miller is a Roman Catholic. Prothero is Jewish.

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