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“The Evolution we believe in ... is not Darwin’s”: Evolution, Science, and Latter-day Saint Education, 1875-1911

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Introduction

My project was designed to answer one question and ended up answering several others. The original question was: Why has so little been written on Latter-day Saint responses to evolution prior to 1909? Darwin’s Origin of Species was published way back in 1859, a full fifty years prior. Surely somebody had said something important during that time, but if so, the secondary literature passed over it in almost total silence. Although my project has undergone several shifts in emphasis since I began it, resulting in two distinct papers, both already presented, one slated for publication in the near future, this topical focus underlay them all. In my journey to fill this lacuna, I not only learned about nineteenth-century Mormon ideas on evolution and science, but about the many different ways present(ist) concerns can limit on both the questions we ask of the past as well as the range of sources (and therefore voices) we consider relevant to answering them.

Methodology, Results, Discussion

I began the project by compiling an index of articles in contemporary Church magazines that touched in any way on evolution, beginning with the Contributor, the magazine of the Church’s youth organization from 1879 to 1896. When I became bogged down in the sheer volume of relevant articles—over a dozen—in the 1890s alone, I realized I had set an impossible task for myself: a comprehensive overview of nineteenth-century LDS views on evolution would be impossible. In the meantime, I learned a proposal I had submitted to the Mormon History Association Conference had been accepted. I took the invitation, trusting that I would come up with something by the time of the conference. (I used funds from my ORCA grant to pay for transportation and registration to the conference, which was held in Boise from June 7-9, 2018.)

In the end, pressed on time, I resorted to a qualitative analysis of three Contributor articles from the 1890s, setting them in the context of what scholars refer to as “the Eclipse of Darwinism,” when growing evidentiary gaps (eventually filled by, among other things, the discovery of Mendelian genetics and, later, DNA) led to a decline in acceptance of natural selection among scientists. Some were relieved that Darwin’s insistence on random, non-progressive evolution could be respectably abandoned, paving the way for more purpose-driven, and therefore religiously acceptable, theories. Others discarded evolution entirely, wrongly assuming it was on the path to losing credibility. Both responses, with various shades of nuance and sprinklings of uniquely Mormon doctrine and scripture, were to be found in the articles analyzed. The paper also touched on the biographical background of the authors as stake academy teachers and the institutional ambiguity (although often bordering on outright negativity) toward evolution expressed in the Church Education system at this time.

At this point, Dr. Cope and I both thought the logical next direction would be to bridge the gap between the uncertainty of the 1890s environment and the 1911 evolution controversy at BYU, where two professors
were fired for teaching Darwin’s theory (along with other modernist ideas seen as hostile to faith). The 1911 controversy, unlike the period I studied, has received extensive historiographical coverage, but, as it is often taken as the starting point of real/“official” engagement with evolution, the background has before now never been adequately explained.

These plans, however, were soon disrupted by my participation in the Summer Seminar in Mormon Culture at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. Having been accepted to that program, whose 2018 theme was “Mormonism and Science,” I was able to immerse myself, in conversation with other scholars and students, at much more length and chronological depth in Mormon sources about “science” (as a whole and its different disciplines—medicine, astronomy, geology, etc.). What struck me as I pursued my research there was that the reaction to Darwin’s theory among Latter-day Saints could not be treated in isolation from broader Mormon attitudes toward science, the scientific method, the age of the earth, progress, truth, knowledge, education, and scripture.

With this mind, I eventually came up with a new framework to deal with the vast quantity of sources I now had. Inspired by Julie A. Reuben’s work in The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1996), I was able to more firmly place the rhetoric of Church magazine articles about evolution in the context of the nascent Church education system (which was my intention all along), especially the Brigham Young Academy in Provo, and its commitment to holding all truth together under the banner of Mormonism. I hypothesized that this attitude toward the inseparability of knowledge rendered Mormon acceptance of evolution more fraught than a modern audience might assume: not only would it have to be accepted on its own, still-sketchy evidentiary terms, but it would have to be reconciled into an entire theological and scriptural framework that could not well accommodate so intrusive a disruption—to its cosmogony, its view of the ancient world, etc. etc.

I presented this paper—an entirely different product than that presented at MHA—at the concluding Symposium of the Seminar on August 9, 2018. The symposium, held on BYU campus, was open to the public. Shortly afterward, I received an email from Jessie L. Embry, the editor of the Journal of Mormon History, saying that her journal would potentially be “very interested” in publishing my paper. As of the time of writing, she is reviewing my draft manuscript to determine its suitability and offer suggestions for revision and expansion.

Conclusion

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to explore this topic in depth that started with receiving an ORCA grant. The mentored research environment provided a forum for me to discuss and work out thorny methodological problems in conversation. I was able to come into my own as an aspiring historian and feel, for the first time, that I got a handle on a historiographical problem through original research and came up with a truly original solution to a gaping void in the story of Mormonism and American intellectual development more broadly

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