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Abstract Review of *Mormonism and Evolution: The Authoritative LDS Statements* (2005), by William E. Evenson and Duane E. Jeffery.

THE CHURCH AND EVOLUTION: A BRIEF HISTORY OF OFFICIAL STATEMENTS

Frank B. Salisbury

The authors/compilers of this slim volume say that they had only one purpose in mind: to assemble under one cover all the *official* statements of the First Presidencies of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints regarding evolution and the origin of man, augmented by some other statements (those known to them) made by others but with First Presidency permission. They further state that they do not express their own opinions regarding these topics. The book does not strive for “balance” of views held by church members but is a sourcebook based on official statements only. Evenson and Jeffery achieve their stated purposes well.

After an introduction and a preface, the contents of a thirty-page packet assembled in 1992 to be given to students at Brigham Young University is reproduced. Different professors were handing out various materials relevant to evolution and the origin of man, so Evenson, who was then dean of the College of Physical and Mathematical Sciences and who had prepared the article on evolution for the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, was asked by University Provost Bruce C. Hafen to assemble a packet that could be handed out to students. If they desired,

Review of William E. Evenson and Duane E. Jeffery. *Mormonism and Evolution: The Authoritative LDS Statements*. Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2005. vi + 122 pp., with index. \$15.95.

professors could add their own materials to this packet. Evenson provided various documents, including some that Jeffery had already assembled for placement in the library. These materials were then submitted to the BYU Board of Trustees, including the First Presidency and seven apostles.

This packet of essays begins with a cover letter from the Board of Trustees, which is followed by three statements of First Presidencies (in 1909 and 1910 under Joseph F. Smith and in 1925 under Heber J. Grant). The entry “Evolution” from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* is the final document. It is included because it “had material input from the First Presidency” (p. 34). Each document is preceded by a brief introduction that provides its historical context.

Following the “BYU Evolution Packet” (pp. 9–38) is an appendix called “Other Authoritative Materials.” It consists of twelve documents that were sponsored or approved by the First Presidency or that were published over a president’s signature alone (pp. 39–114). Some of the documents in this book are very short, even less than a page, but three are rather extensive statements that are of considerable importance. The first is the statement of the First Presidency in 1909 (document 1 in the “BYU Evolution Packet”), which includes a review of scriptural statements on the origin and preexistence of man, the literal likeness of both preexistent spirits and their temporal bodies to our Father in Heaven and his Son Jesus Christ, and the reality of Adam as a real person and progenitor of the human race.

Some members then (as even now) used the statement to claim that the church rejects the theory of evolution. Hence, a year later, the First Presidency, in their regular column in the *Improvement Era*, “Priesthood Quorums’ Table,” stated the following: “Whether the mortal bodies of man evolved in natural processes to present perfection, through the direction and power of God; 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; whether they were born here in mortality, as other mortals have been, are questions not fully answered in the revealed word of God”

(pp. 43–44, document A, appendix). Clearly, if the 1909 statement is mentioned, the 1910 clarification should also be quoted. Subsequent statements agree with the ideas presented in these two documents.

The second extensive document (pp. 54–67, document C, appendix) is a memo from the First Presidency dated 5 April 1931 and addressed to the Council of the Twelve, the First Council of Seventy, and the Presiding Bishopric. It responds to a controversy that had erupted between the young apostle Joseph Fielding Smith, B. H. Roberts (the presiding president of the Seventy), and other members of the Twelve. The memo reviews the background of the controversy. Elder Smith had given a sermon to the Genealogical Society on 5 April 1930; the speech was published in the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* and also as a pamphlet. Elder Smith had proclaimed that evolution was a fraud, that the earth was very young, as implied in the Genesis account of creation, and that there was “no death upon the earth, either vegetable, insect or animal, prior to the fall of man, and that human life did not exist upon the earth prior to Adam” (p. 55). Although Evenson and Jeffery do not mention it, Elder Smith had become acquainted with the teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist creationist George McCready Price and had corresponded with him.¹

In response to Elder Smith’s sermon, B. H. Roberts had written a letter to the First Presidency taking strong issue with the ideas presented by Elder Smith, especially the concept of no death before the fall. (I have personally wondered what happens to “vegetables” when eaten by “insect, or animal.” Do they die? And if there is no death before the fall, then all coal, limestone, diatomaceous earth, and all the fossils are younger than Adam, perhaps trapped in the Noachian flood!) The matter was discussed at length in meetings of the Twelve, and Elder Roberts was asked to defend his viewpoint, which he did with a fifty-page manuscript. Elder Smith responded a few weeks later with his own fifty-eight-page manuscript. The memo from the First Presidency in 1931 requested that the Brethren set this argument aside

1. Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 309–10.

because it seemed to have no resolution and did not affect the basic teachings of the church.

Some of the Twelve noted that, because Elder Smith's sermon had been widely disseminated, while Elder Roberts's views had not been made public, members of the church might conclude that Elder Smith's sermon represented the official doctrine of the church. And many have concluded just that, based not only on the sermon but also on Elder Smith's book entitled *Man: His Origin and Destiny*.² It was concluded that James E. Talmage of the Twelve should give a sermon expressing his viewpoint and also encompassing that of others who sided with him and Elder Roberts. The Talmage speech was given in the Tabernacle in August 1931, and, after some resistance from Elder Smith but with the blessing of the First Presidency, it was published first in the *Church News* and then by the church as a pamphlet. In the speech, Elder Talmage (a geologist by training) strongly emphasized that countless organisms had lived and died for millions of years before the fall of Adam, some small portion of them becoming fossils. He also quoted scripture and expressed his conviction that Adam was indeed the first member of the human race, that we existed previously in heaven, and that we were created in the image of God (pp. 68–70).

Because the First Presidency had encouraged and supported Elder Talmage's talk, Evenson and Jeffery include it in their collection (pp. 71–94, document D, appendix). It is the third long document mentioned above, and it is a very valuable source. The other, shorter documents are also of interest, with statements by Presidents Heber J. Grant, David O. McKay, Spencer W. Kimball, and Gordon B. Hinckley. These brief statements reiterate the ideas put forth in the official statements of 1909 and 1910.

Reviewing all these documents and the history that goes with them, I was sorry that the compilers had set standards that eliminated inclusion of the sermon of Joseph Fielding Smith, the complete letter of B. H. Roberts, his manuscript to the Twelve, and Elder Smith's response. It would be useful to read these documents in the context of

2. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Man: His Origin and Destiny* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954).

the others, although several excerpts are included in the Presidency's memo of 1931. The compilation and comments of Evenson and Jeffery have provided a valuable source for those who are interested in the evolution controversy, and they also make highly interesting reading.

