



7-1-2001

Can Science Be Faith-Promoting? Sterling B. Talmage

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Recommended Citation

Owen, Noel L. (2001) "*Can Science Be Faith-Promoting?*" Sterling B. Talmage," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 40 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol40/iss3/9>

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STERLING B. TALMAGE. *Can Science Be Faith-Promoting?* Ed. Stan Larson. Salt Lake City: Blue Ribbon Books, 2001. lxiv; 253 pp. Bibliography, index. \$18.95.

Reviewed by Noel L. Owen

Interesting questions arise when science advances theories that conflict with traditional understandings of creation, the age of the Earth, and the first humans. Sterling B. Talmage (1889–1956), a faithful Latter-day Saint scientist and son of Apostle James E. Talmage, tackled these issues and others as he sought to bring opposing views into harmony. In 1934–36, he produced thirty-two short essays on various aspects of faith and science; he also wrote to and received replies from four Church leaders on these topics. *Can Science Be Faith-Promoting?* brings Talmage’s insights to light and adds information that makes the discussion relevant in our time.

The logical arguments presented in the book are generally clear and cogent, and they are made more readable by the inclusion of Sterling Talmage’s letters, stories, and personal observations. I especially enjoyed the story in essay 25, “The Principle of Evolution,” in which he describes the reaction of a mother hen who has successfully incubated a brood of duck eggs. His narrative begins when the hen and the ducklings come close to the bank of a pond:

The ducklings, expressing their satisfaction by tiny quacks, joyously entered the water, and the poor hen on the bank nearly took a fit. . . . She warned and threatened; she scolded and pleaded; she demanded and besought. . . . *She knew for a fact* that her offspring were endangering their lives by entering deep water. But the ducklings knew for a fact that they could progress in the water even better than on the land. (116, italics in original)

Talmage uses this incident to show that there was really no conflict in the “facts,” only in the points of view—and that “knowledge” based on instinct rather than on reason prevented either one from understanding the other.

Besides such colorful illustrations, the most intriguing section of this book may well be the twenty-seven letters written between Sterling Talmage and Elders James E. Talmage, John A. Widtsoe, Joseph Fielding Smith, and President Heber J. Grant. They illustrate some of the complex concerns faced by Church authorities from 1931 to 1935; Church leaders often struggled to comprehend all the nuances of science, and it was sometimes difficult to believe the main antagonists and proponents of theories. These letters also show Sterling Talmage’s regard not only for truth but also for Church leaders. For example, in a letter to Elder Joseph Fielding Smith, Talmage wrote a passionate treatise that, while vehemently disagreeing with many of Elder Smith’s statements, still clearly reflected the respect Talmage had for the position and authority of Elder Smith as an Apostle.

Seven of the letters were written to and from Sterling's father, Elder Talmage, and it is apparent that the latter respected his son's professional opinion on matters related to geology and geochemistry. These letters conclude the book; the main body consists of Sterling Talmage's essays. Modern essays that provide context for the current reader form the introduction.

The first essay, by David M. Bailey, masterfully reviews many of the conflicts that have emerged between the beliefs of some early Church leaders and scientific discoveries and theories. In addition to summarizing Talmage's essays, Bailey describes past, current, and future issues in religion and science that may interest Latter-day Saints. There is always danger in quoting General Authorities out of context, but the author has managed to be fair and objective.

In the second essay, William E. Evenson writes a well-balanced report about how the theory of evolution impinges on Church doctrine, and he gives an up-to-date account of how faithful Mormon scientists view the principle of evolution. This is followed by a shorter article by the late William Lee Stokes outlining the position on evolution expressed to him personally by President David O. McKay.

The introduction concludes with the editor's account of the Talmage essays set in a historical context, including some of the concerns that were being argued within the Church hierarchy during the mid 1900s. In my opinion, the editor has contributed greatly to the success of this book. Besides giving the historical context, he describes the dissension between the main protagonists on topics such as the age of the Earth and pre-Adamic beings, and he explains how some Apostles chose a moderate stance. He has also inserted numerous footnotes to Talmage's essays, clarifying what the author originally wrote vis-à-vis how they appeared in the *Deseret News* and commenting constructively when Talmage's facts do not tally with modern discoveries. Some of the footnotes include statements by General Authorities given at recent general conferences of the Church.

After this introduction, Talmage's essays are presented in four sections. The first nineteen essays are short, easy-to-read articles, each titled by a question, such as "What Is Creation?", "What Is Science?", "What Is an Evolutionist?", "What Says Astronomy?", "What Says Chemistry?", "What Says Physics?", "What Says Paleontology?", and so on. Throughout these writings, Talmage never lost sight of his overall goal, namely, to give a satisfactory answer to the central question: can science be faith-promoting? He writes extremely well, with clear and cogent arguments, and takes pains to define terms carefully. Inevitably, some of the essays are better than others, and occasionally his strong bias toward geological and paleontological evidences emerges in his writing.

Essays 20–24 come from an article in the *Deseret News* in 1934 in which Talmage refutes clearly and passionately the arguments of Major Howard S. Bennion, whose article “Is the Earth Millions of Years Old?” had appeared previously in the same paper. Talmage’s analysis of the problems he encountered in Bennion’s treatise serves as an excellent example to today’s young scientists of a carefully written, logical, and factual dismantling of an article that attempts the impossible task of determining the age of the Earth solely from the scriptures.

In essays 25–29 Talmage tackles the question, “Is evolution a faith-promoting principle?” He draws a clear distinction between the “principle” and the “theories” of evolution. The *principle* of evolution is the fact that species change over time. Talmage explains the evidences of biology and paleontology in some detail, concluding that he felt compelled to accept the principle of evolution by the paleontological evidences found in the rocks. The *theories* of evolution, on the other hand, are conclusions drawn from the facts, including conclusions about the origin of the human species.

With regard to human creation, Talmage makes the point that we err in assuming that man’s body is the only aspect of man that has to be considered:

In speaking of the origin of man, we generally have reference to the creation of man’s body; and, of all the mistakes that man has made concerning himself, one of the greatest and gravest is that of mistaking the body for the man. The body is no more truly the whole man than is the coat the body.¹

Talmage’s own theory marries scientific evidence with scriptural evidence to produce the idea that true human creation occurred only when God first placed a human spirit in a human body; the body was created according to natural law by God’s design. Because the crucial scriptures for this theory are found in the Pearl of Great Price, Talmage believes that Latter-day Saints will find it easier to accept further evidences of evolution than any other faith.

Talmage also believes that the scriptures do not preclude the principle of evolution precisely because the scriptures do not discuss evolution at all. In support of this position, he stresses the difference between the terms *unscriptural* (meaning “against the scriptures”) and *nonscriptural* (meaning “not found in the scriptures”). The principle of evolution is supported by thousands of nonscriptural facts, and for him these facts support faith as well as science:

I find my faith strengthened by the demonstration that God has operated through countless ages according to a “secondary cause” that I am beginning to understand, which seems controlled at every point by an eternal and immutable law, which law is included as a part of the principle of evolution.

I find such a concept far more faith-promoting than the old idea that every organic species simply came into existence by divine fiat. (129–30)

These essays on the origin of the human race includes selected quotes from his father's semi-authoritative pamphlet *The Earth and Man*; the pamphlet is also quoted elsewhere in the book several times. One of the intriguing issues the book explores is the question of whether this pamphlet was ever authorized by the Church and sanctioned by the First Presidency. The editor's introduction outlines the details pertaining to this issue, and the correspondence section includes letters involving the First Presidency and relating to this pamphlet.

In the final essay section (numbers 30–32), Talmage discusses the concept of pre-Adamic men and the question of “time” as applied to the age of the Earth and to mankind's duration on the Earth. In the end, he admits that as he wrote it he gained an insight that almost made him discard his previous chapter on the Earth's time. Having a strong belief in the antiquity of the Earth, Talmage states that he found it difficult to correlate his views with the words of Doctrine and Covenants 77:6:

Q. What are we to understand by the book which John saw, which was sealed on the back with seven seals?

A. We are to understand that it contains the revealed will, mysteries, and works of God; the hidden things of his economy concerning this earth during the seven thousand years of its continuance, or its temporal existence.

His epiphany revolved around the two phrases “God's economy” and “the Earth's continuance.” After pondering these verses, Talmage concluded that they refer to God's management and dealings with men on the Earth rather than the age of the Earth itself, and that the word “continuance” implies that there was an undefined time associated with the Earth before God's dealings with man.

Each of the three main sections (the introduction, the Talmage essays, and the correspondence) makes excellent reading for any member of the Church interested in science and religion. Even though “S. B. Talmage's scientific arguments are dated,” as Larson recognizes (lxiii), taken together these materials generate a riveting book.

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1. James E. Talmage, “The Earth and Man,” an address delivered in the Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, August 9, 1931, reprinted in James Harris, ed., *The Essential James E. Talmage* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 241–55.