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Of Heaven and Earth: Reconciling Scientific Thought with LDS Theology David L. Clark

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Reviewed by Noel L. Owen

I joined the LDS Church about twenty-five years ago in a fairly rural part of Wales. As I was a new convert living in a remote area of the England Birmingham Mission, gaining access to authoritative Church books was as important to me as was going to church on Sunday. Such books were there to be “devoured.” In addition, as a scientist teaching at a university, I sought to correlate my scientific training and understanding with my newly acquired and burgeoning religious beliefs. When I obtained a copy of *The Faith of a Scientist* by Henry Eyring, father of the current Apostle Henry B. Eyring, I felt as excited as if I had discovered gold in the nearby hills. Had this new book, *Of Heaven and Earth*, been available then, I would have accepted and digested it eagerly. But now I am older in my Church membership and maybe a little more confident with the questions that commonly arise when science and religion are discussed. The result is that I am not quite as impressed as I probably would have been in the 1970s.

This edited text contains a remarkably heterogeneous collection of essays from a remarkably homogeneous group of authors (over half are, or have been, connected with Brigham Young University). The editor (and a contributor) is David L. Clark, a distinguished geologist at the University of Wisconsin. The other essay writers comprise six other geologists or Earth scientists, two physicists, one chemist, and one medical doctor. A more complete collection of authors might have included experts in several other scientific fields.

On the whole, the essays are well written and are not burdened with a plethora of scientific terminology and jargon or with an obvious personal bias. They contain some interesting facts and comparisons, and some represent very thoughtful presentations relating to science and religious belief. Fortunately, the classic contribution by Henry Eyring on the six worlds in which we live is included along with other more personal “how I overcame the difficulty of rationalizing my testimony with my science” types of contributions. The former introduces the reader to ideas and concepts that are exciting and mind stretching, whereas the main objective of the latter tends to be to comfort the reader with the knowledge that other scientists (some of them eminent in their fields) have struggled with serious doubts but have been able to overcome them and have developed strong testimonies of the restored gospel.
For example, Philip Low’s essay, “Perspectives on Science and Religion,” discusses the uncertainties that are an essential part of science and compares these with uncertainties that are inherent in the religious sphere. He also discusses the infinitesimally small probability of life originating from the accidental superposition of the appropriate small molecules, concluding that disciples of both science and religion require faith, experimentation, and tolerance.

Wilford Gardner’s article, “Science as a Way to God,” is partially a biographical account of the author’s search for compatibility between his religious beliefs and his scientific inclination and partially his philosophy on the differences and similarities between two methods for obtaining truth: the scientific approach and the religious search. He concludes that “belief and understanding go hand in hand, both in the religious and the secular spheres of knowledge” (85).

Bart Kowallis, in his essay “Things of the Earth,” describes some of the dating methods used by today’s geologists and how these are used in assessing the age of rocks. He explains how Latter-day Saints need not be concerned if scientific data suggests that Earth may be over 4.5 billion years old.

The chapter by Henry Eyring is excerpted from two books written in the 1960s. He uses the classic analogy of a ticking watch found far from human habitation, comparing it to the universe: one “would ask not only ‘Who made this watch?’ but ‘Who wound it up?’” (59). He describes the five different “worlds” of our physical existence ranging from the subatomic world to the world of the stars, but asserts that the sixth “world,” the spiritual world, is necessary to fully understand the other five.

William Stokes’s short essay, “If There Be Bounds,” questions whether we have discovered all the boundaries of our physical universe and considers the revelation given to Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail (D&C 121:30–32). He concludes that we have indeed discovered many of the “bounds” of the universe and that others will be discovered in “this dispensation of the fullness of times.” The most elusive of these is not necessarily discovering the limits of the universe but grasping with our finite minds that they may not exist at all. The confines of science itself may prevent explanation, and such answers may come only from divine revelation.

Geologist Raymond Ethington, in his article “Oh Say, What Is Truth,” uses the analogy of a newspaper photograph, which has to be viewed from a certain distance because on closer inspection the image is actually composed of black dots; if viewed from a vantage point that is too close, the picture is lost. Similarly, with the scriptures and geologic evidence, we see the same picture (only an image of the real event) from imperfect vantage points.

In his essay “Atoms, Stars, and Us,” Hollis Johnson provides a fascinating panorama ranging from the birth of the stars to the generation of the
elements that constitute matter as we know it. He concludes that despite the marvels of the universe, they pale when compared with the importance of improving our relationship with our Heavenly Father and learning the values that govern our lives.

In some ways the most unusual essay, Edwin Seegmiller’s “Expansion of Knowledge of Human Genetics: A Mormon Perspective” addresses the divinity within the human form. The author derives the discussion from his own extensive research as a physician on “gouty arthritis” and related maladies and concludes that our bodies are the result of our Father in Heaven’s creative genius. Although unlike the other essays in this volume because it is focused on a relatively narrow topic, this account of the discoveries that led to our present understanding of certain common ailments makes fascinating reading and is intelligible to nonmedical experts.

David Clark’s contribution concerns Earth and human history, and he asks if we would get the same result if we could “rewind” Earth’s history and record it again. He argues that evidence of progress in evolution strongly indicates the presence of a creator.

Kent Harrison’s essay, “Truth, the Sum of Existence,” discusses several topics such as the creation of the universe and the nature of time and space as well as matter and spirit. He points to the lack of common ground between religious and scientific truth and acknowledges that a full understanding of the universe may have to wait for the life beyond.

De Verle Harris’s essay refutes claims that mankind is a curse to the natural earth, depleting its resources. He concludes with optimistic confidence in Earth’s ability to sustain us, provided we realize we are its stewards.

What the authors in this volume have in common is a strong testimony of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and of the doctrine that all truth and knowledge, whether from scientific discovery or from spiritual revelation, will eventually be in total harmony. This is a book that those interested in science will enjoy, whether dipping in a chapter at a time or reading it entirely in a single contemplative sitting.

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