

## partial draft 1

Review of

### **The Mormon Myth of Evil Evolution<sup>1</sup>**

by Michael R. Ash

an article published in *Dialogue*

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#### **Background**

As part of my personal project to understand evolution and its negative impact on the LDS religion, one of my goals has been to look for pro-evolution writings by Mormons and try to explain or counter them in some way. The book entitled *Converging Paths to Truth* published by BYU and Deseret Book in 2011 provided eight such articles by BYU professors. An article by BYU-Idaho professor Lynn Firestone entitled "A Delicate Balance: Teaching Biological Evolution at BYU-Idaho" was somewhat similar, and this article published in *Dialogue* provided another viewpoint.

#### **Introduction**

The author tells us in the first paragraph that

... I've found that there are a number of members who believe that evolution is a doctrine of the devil. It is apparent that many members are not familiar with the official position of the church on the topic of evolution, nor of the past history associated with this issue. The purpose of this paper is not to take a position on whether evolution is correct or is in error, but rather to demonstrate that the church's official stand on the subject is neutral and that many faithful Latter-day Saints, including LDS scientists, accept evolution as a currently valid scientific theory.

#### **Church neutrality**

As in the example we see here, much has been made by the advocates of teaching evolution in Church schools, and in other Church settings, of the supposed neutrality of the Church on the topic of evolution. They may cite the BYU packet on evolution and other such documents as proof for their cause. However, I think they are on very shaky ground when they cite the lack of an official scripture-level denunciation of evolution as proof of its accuracy and acceptability to the current Church leaders and members.

I believe the situation is far more complicated than they are willing to admit, and much less in their favor. To begin with, I believe in most cases the Church leadership operates on the principle of consensus, so that unless all 15 of the top leaders of the Church are fully in agreement at one time, on the basic issue and on the effects of making a definitive statement, they are not going to take action on any particular issue. I am only aware of two apostles and one president in the past who believed in the theory of evolution, but that would be enough to stop the denunciation process for many decades.

In other words, we would probably be more accurate in simply saying that we have never had 15 men simultaneously willing to condemn the practice of teaching evolution in Church schools. But that is a far different situation from the supposed "neutrality" which the pro-evolutionist voices would assert, which implies a lack of interest in the issue (perhaps thus labeling it harmless by implication) or perhaps even indicates a mild approval. I believe apostles James Talmage and John Widstoe and President David O. McKay were among those who had enough positive feelings toward the theory of evolution (or negative feelings about condemning it) to not seek to have it universally condemned by the Church leadership.

Someone who is claiming complete neutrality for the Church on evolution still has the problem that some of those 15 men at various times have had very strong feelings against the secular/atheist dogma of

evolution, probably much stronger feelings than those expressed in its defense. President Joseph Fielding Smith was famous for his vigorous stand against the concepts of organic evolution, and there were probably others who agreed with him. I read that Pres. Lee at some point in his Church leadership career approved the teaching of evolution at LDS universities, but it's not clear what his personal preferences would have been. If a Church member is interested in the topic and finds that a number of the top Church leadership would prefer that evolution was not taught in Church schools, but that subgroup does not have the option to condemn it officially, that does not necessarily let the Church member off completely free. He might still have a duty to study the topic in depth and decide for himself.

But even if the Church internal politics on the question are not clear, we need to observe that the Church is neutral on millions of topics, perhaps only because they don't have time to consider every conceivable issue, and their time is all taken up with the most basic administrative items. If they have not taken up an issue and spoken on it, does that mean it is not a worthy topic for study and decision by a Church member? If that particular issue is of importance to the Church member, then he or she has a duty to get to the bottom of it, whether the Church has spoken on it or not. For example, has the Church leadership published a consensus statement on whether any of the many wars in which our country has been involved were approved or disapproved by God or the Church? In the Book of Mormon, prophets were often consulted concerning potential wars, but that has not been a practice in our country.

The issue of the Word of Wisdom is an interesting example here. As I understand the history, it was first given as a recommendation to the Saints, and then early in the Utah period it was adopted by the Church as a binding commandment. How many topics in the world are so important that they need to become binding commandments, so that Church members cannot be considered to be in good standing if they are not in conformity with that particular rule? How far beyond the obvious and understandable Ten Commandments should the Church attempt to go in instructing and disciplining its members?

How would it sound if the Church decided to require all of its members to reject the concepts of organic evolution as a matter of Church doctrine? How many of them could even understand the issues involved so that they could speak wisely on the topic? As an extension to the Ten Commandments, it is not too difficult to understand the detrimental effects of alcohol and tobacco on the human body. We now even have some corroborating scientific studies on that topic, so perhaps it is not asking too much for the Saints to believe in and defend a principle which they understand.

With all the confusion on the topic of evolution today, it seems unlikely that even a majority of the Church members would ever understand it well enough to be able to explain their Church-required belief. On the other hand, if people are entering higher education and will become thought leaders in many aspects of society, maybe it is not too much to expect them to become well informed on the topic of organic evolution. And that would probably mean getting beyond the rote dogmas of the current version of organic evolution which has such a strong grip on our society. It might even mean "teaching the controversy," which would involve examining a wide range of opinions on the topic of the origins of life, including organic evolution, rather than merely blindly accepting the reigning or dominant secular/atheist version.

1. Michael R. Ash, "The Mormon Myth of Evil Evolution," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35 no. 4 (Winter 2002), 19–38.