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## No definitive LDS stance on evolution, study finds

By [Carrie A. Moore](#)

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OREM — Despite characterizations by some Latter-day Saints that their theology eschews the theory of evolution, two LDS scientists say their church has no definitive position on whether humans evolved from earlier life forms.

William Evenson and Duane Jeffery told dozens of people gathered at Utah Valley State College on Tuesday that what definitely has evolved over time is the position taken by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on the issue.

They came to that conclusion after dissecting the history of statements made by past LDS leaders at the request of former Brigham Young University president Rex Lee. In 1991, Lee asked Evenson — then dean of physical and mathematical sciences at BYU — to draft a document that could be given to students who routinely queried him on the church's position.

"There was a committee organized to put together a packet of materials. . . . The idea was to assemble those things that had some authority to represent the position of the LDS Church," Evenson said.

He and Jeffery collaborated, along with deans from other BYU departments, gathering and sifting through statements by church presidents, the LDS First Presidency and members of the church's Quorum of the Twelve.

The documents contained some statements that inferred there was no basis for the scientific theory of evolution, and others that took no position on the science itself but merely emphasized that man was created in the image of God.

In the end, they included four different statements as part of the BYU packet:

- A 1909 First Presidency statement on "The Origin of Man," published the centennial year of Charles Darwin's birth and the 50th anniversary of his publication of "On the Origin of Species."
- A 1910 First Presidency Christmas message that addressed the issue.
- A 1925 statement, released during the highly publicized Scopes trial regarding the teaching of evolution in public schools, called "Mormon View of Evolution."
- And a 1992 entry from the Encyclopedia of Mormonism, which includes an excerpt of minutes from a 1931 meeting of the First Presidency on the issue.

As Evenson and Jeffery examined the history, it became obvious there was vast disagreement among some former church leaders about whether evolution played a role in the origin of man, Jeffery said.

"The goal was not to achieve some kind of 'balance' among the views that have been expressed but to give students the full range of officials' views," so they could evaluate the material for themselves

when they came upon material from different LDS sources that didn't jibe, Evenson said. The other goal of the "BYU Evolution Packet" — distributed to faculty as well as teachers within the LDS Church Education System — was to provide only materials that could be clearly said to represent the official position of the church, so they could be juxtaposed with a "fair sampling of diverse viewpoints among LDS Church leaders."

In doing so, the two learned that a 1909 statement — signed by President Joseph F. Smith and his counselors — contained a couple of paragraphs that were "quite anti-evolutionary, yet they don't come right out and say it's false, but it doesn't take much to say that's what the intent was," Jeffery said. "It has been published ever since by anti-science writers in the church ever since as the official position."

But what is less well-known "is what has happened since then," Jeffery said. Letters began arriving at the office of the First Presidency after the 1909 statement, and in December 1910 another message was released, saying in part, "Our religion is not hostile to real science. That which is demonstrated, we accept with joy . . ."

Jeffery, a biology professor at BYU for 37 years, said that statement was quoted by members for the ensuing 20 years, "and I would suggest it's still a good idea."

In the following years, LDS apostles, including B.H. Roberts and James E. Talmage, wrote about the issue and presented their findings to the First Presidency with a leaning toward scientific theory, while junior apostle Joseph Fielding Smith vehemently opposed their views in his own writings and presentations to the First Presidency, Jeffery said. Much of their disagreement came over whether "pre-Adamites" walked the Earth before God created Adam, and whether death of any species had occurred prior to Adam. The debate became so heated that on April 7, 1931, the First Presidency called all the general authorities together and distributed a seven-page memo that "said straight out the church has no position on pre-Adamites or death before the fall of Adam, Jeffery said.

"They basically said, 'leave the subject alone.'" But the competition between Talmage and Smith continued, as Talmage gave an address at the Salt Lake Tabernacle in August 1931 which was later published under the direction of the First Presidency over Smith's objections, Jeffery said.

Tuesday's lecture was given one day after Utah legislators rejected a bill that would have required the State Board of Education to establish curriculum requirements stressing that the scientific theory about the origin of species and evolution is not empirically proven.

The two scientists have recently published their own book, "Mormonism and Evolution: the Authoritative LDS Statements," that includes the "BYU packet" along with a variety of other "authoritative statements."

One is by current LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley, quoted in a book by Larry A. Witham, "Where Darwin Meets the Bible: Creationists and Evolutionists in America."

"What the church requires is only belief 'that Adam was the first man of what we would call the human race.'" President Hinckley added that scientists can speculate on the rest, and recalled his own study of anthropology and geology, saying, "Studied all about it. Didn't worry me then. Doesn't worry me now."

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