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## The evolution of LDS views on Darwinism

### The West Under Cover

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#### Mormonism and Evolution

William E. Evenson and Duane E. Jeffery, Greg Kofford Books, \$15.95

Does the LDS Church believe Darwinian evolution is wrong? William Evenson and Duane Jeffery, the authors of *Mormonism and Evolution*, never explicitly ask that question.

But for nearly a century, church leaders have struggled with opposing beliefs: The Bible, Book of Mormon and other writings accepted by the church as divinely inspired must be accepted literally, not metaphorically. Second, there is nothing anti-science in church teachings.

The book consists of four official statements from the church and 12 others made by high-ranking church officials. The official statements are collectively known as the BYU Packet because in 1992 they were collected into a single publication to provide students and faculty at Brigham Young University with an official church position on evolution.

The first document is a 1909 letter signed by church president Joseph F. Smith and two other members of the First Presidency. It argues that since the Bible and Book of Mormon say Adam was the first man and that he was created in the image of God, he could not have evolved.

The second document appeared in the *Deseret Evening News* in 1910 and says the church is not hostile to science but if there is a conflict between the two, "divine revelation" trumps science.

The third document appeared in *Improvement Era*, a church publication, in 1925, months after the Scopes trial in Tennessee, in which a high school teacher was found guilty of violating state law by teaching evolution. It is largely a short version of the 1909 statement.

The fourth document is the 1992 article on evolution in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Essentially it says science should be left to scientists and the church is concerned with salvation.

The other 12 documents do not reflect official church position but concern attempts to fine-tune it.

The most thorough are a 1931 statement from the First Presidency largely about an effort by B.H. Roberts, a leading church proponent of finding intellectual accommodations with science, to get the church to openly accept evolution as scientifically sound and not inconsistent with scripture, and a 1931 speech by James Talmage, a high-ranking church official and a scientist, in support of Roberts' position.

The key argument in favor of accepting evolution as valid, according to Talmage, is a belief that creatures somewhat like humans existed before Adam. That would explain the scientific evidence supporting evolution while still allowing someone to believe Adam was the first man.

Although there's nothing in *Mormonism and Evolution* to suggest any high church official agrees with that accommodation, the next to last document in the book, a quote from current church president Gordon B. Hinckley, is revealing. He told a reporter in 2002 he had studied evolution. "Studied all about it," he said. "Didn't bother me then. Doesn't bother me now."

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*Martin Naparstek reviews books from and about the West for The Salt Lake Tribune.*