“Recently a young mother complained to me that a non-Mormon family member had given her children the They Might Be Giants album *Here Comes Science,* which contains a song about evolution called “My Brother the Ape”... She was uncomfortable with the lyrics because she felt they were incompatible with Mormonism, the Bible, America, and apple pie. Probably baseball too… [I told] Phil about the album and we joyfully went out and bought it that same week. We’re delighted to have fun, clever music to help our daughter learn about evolution.” – Jana Riess[[1]](#footnote-1)

“The Religion that is afraid of science dishonours God and commits suicide. It acknowledges that it is not equal to the whole of truth, that it legislates, tyrannizes over a village of God’s empires but is not the immutable universal law. Every influx of atheism, of skepticism is thus made useful as a mercury pill assaulting and removing a diseased religion and making way for truth.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson[[2]](#footnote-2)

## **Introduction**

For over a century, notwithstanding derisive charges of being “just a theory”, organic evolution has been one of the most well-established principles in science. Biologist Stephen Jay Gould proclaimed, “Well, evolution *is* a theory. It is also a fact. And facts and theories are different things, not rungs in a hierarchy of increasing certainty. Facts are the world’s data. Theories are structures of ideas that explain and interpret facts. Facts do not go away when scientists debate rival theories to explain them. Einstein’s theory of gravitation replaced Newton’s, but apples did not suspend themselves in mid-air, pending the outcome. And humans evolved from apelike ancestors whether they did so by Darwin's proposed mechanism or by some other, yet to be discovered.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

A few years earlier fellow scientist Theodosius Dobzhansky had declared, “Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution,”[[4]](#footnote-4) an assessment few biologists would disagree with. This unifying principle has both made possible and been confirmed by further discoveries in many fields of science. Yet in this secularized age it has also become one of the greatest stumbling blocks to religious belief. Atheists hone it into a poison-tipped sword against which many Christians, viewing it as antithetical to their doctrines, attempt to erect a shield of faith. Atheists charge; Christians fall, or stagger around the battlefield wounded and delirious.

Many are sick of this battle and want it to end. Rachel Held Evans spoke for many when she wrote, “What we are searching for is a community of faith in which it is safe to ask tough questions, to think critically, and to be honest with ourselves. Unfortunately, a lot of young evangelicals grew up with the assumption that Christianity and evolution cannot mix, that we have to choose between our faith in Jesus and accepted science. I’ve watched in growing frustration as this false dichotomy has convinced my friends to leave the faith altogether when they examine the science and find it incompatible with a 6,000-year-old earth. Sensing that Christianity required abandoning their intellectual integrity, some of the best and brightest of the next generation made a choice they didn’t have to make.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Can the battle be ended? Should it be? What about for Latter-day Saints, who are obligated to stick by certain biblical truth claims that other faiths can more easily reduce to the realm of metaphor or even myth? The first two answers are yes, respectively, for as Apostle John A. Widtsoe explained, “Scientific truth cannot be theological lie. To the sane mind, theology and philosophy must harmonize. They have the common ground of truth on which to meet.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Many other General Authorities have expressed similar notions. The latter question, however, cannot be answered definitively without further revelation on temporal as well as spiritual matters, revelation that is unlikely to be forthcoming any time soon. We can only draw our best conclusions.

Except where noted as such, the views set forth here do not represent official positions of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Even many General Authority quotes represent personal opinions. In the spirit of Joseph Smith’s teaching that “We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true ‘Mormons”,[[7]](#footnote-7) I have also drawn on the wisdom of people from other faith traditions or none at all. General Authorities do this same thing whenever they quote non-members in General Conference. The LDS Church is a very small one with its hands full, and it should come as a surprise to no one that God works through others of His children as well, especially on matters that are only peripheral to the core issues of salvation.

I have used common sense and my personal understanding of the gospel to determine which I believe to be good and true principles, and to assemble them into a workable framework. Of course I’ve tried to follow the Spirit as well, but I can make no claims of a divine stamp of approval with its attending implication that everyone should accept my views because God says so. I accept sole and full responsibility for them. That said, I obviously hope people will find them persuasive anyway.

# **Part I: Reflections on History**

## **Genesis Evaluated**

The King James Version of the Book of Genesis tells us, “And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so. And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good. And the evening and the morning were the third day… And [on the fifth day] God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven. And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth. And the evening and the morning were the fifth day.

“And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so. And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good. And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own [image](https://www.lds.org/scriptures/ot/gen/1?lang=eng), in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

From these verses we learn that the abundance of plant and animal life we see is by divine design, and that humans occupy a special role among them. Yet even if the entire process were constrained to six literal twenty-four hour periods, they still offer only the briefest of summaries, and can hardly be assumed to convey everything about the creation. St. Augustine recognized this when he wrote, “In matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such cases, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Thus, while many Christians accepted Genesis as a scientifically accurate account, many were open to more nuanced interpretations. They were able to accept without too much difficulty the emerging notion that the Earth was much older than previously supposed, and that it had been home to species that no longer existed. Even the concept of evolution, when it emerged in the decades preceding Charles Darwin, sparked little controversy. The baseless notion of “immutability of species” arose not from Christianity but from Greek philosophy, the major source of alteration in Christian doctrines that Latter-day Saints regard as the Great Apostasy.[[10]](#footnote-10) Many if not most scientists were believers, and simply assumed God had guided evolution to produce humans as the supreme creation.

But notwithstanding their open-mindedness, Christians had not taken Augustine’s warning seriously enough. Over the years they had pointed to gaps in scientific knowledge as evidence for God’s Hand at work, and as those gaps had shrunk so had their God. So it was that Charles Darwin’s treatise on naturalistic causes for species diversification not only pushed evolution to the forefront of scientific thought but also ignited a ferocious backlash. *On The Origin of Species* seemed to push the Creator entirely out of the question; in many passages it explicitly rejected the simplistic concept of His direct intervention by postulating a natural explanation. Darwin himself was perhaps more shaken than anyone. He wrote to his friend, the botanist Asa Gray:

“With respect to the theological view of the question; this is always painful to me. I am bewildered. I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I sh[ould] wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidæ with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. Not believing this, I see no necessity in the belief that the eye was expressly designed. On the other hand I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe & especially the nature of man, & to conclude that everything is the result of brute force. I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance. Not that this notion *at all* satisfies me. I feel most deeply that the whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton. Let each man hope & believe what he can.

“Certainly I agree with you that my views are not at all necessarily atheistical. The lightning kills a man, whether a good one or bad one, owing to the excessively complex action of natural laws, a child (who may turn out an idiot) is born by action of even more complex laws, and I can see no reason, why a man, or other animal, may not have been aboriginally produced by other laws; & that all these laws may have been expressly designed by an omniscient Creator, who foresaw every future event & consequence. But the more I think the more bewildered I become; as indeed I have probably shown by this letter.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

In this letter, one sees the poignant stress and agony of a sincere man wrestling with the schism between his faith and his intellect. The solution he hit upon was in harmony with the thinking of other scientists, but it apparently failed to satisfy him. The theological problem (for non-Greeks) had never been with species change to begin with. It was the apparent randomness of the process and, perhaps even more so, the suffering entailed therein. It was, in other words, a fresh angle on the same problem of evil that has plagued philosophers and theologians for millennia. For modern readers, militant atheist Richard Dawkins drives home the point:

“The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. It must be so. If there ever is a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in the population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored. In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

## **The Christians Strike Back**

The Latter-day Saints in their isolated Western communities had more pressing matters to worry about than the Darwinian controversy, but Brigham Young did complain about the associated materialism that was creeping even into their midst. He wrote, “We have enough and to spare, at present in these mountains, of schools where young infidels are made because the teachers are so tender-footed that they dare not mention the principles of the gospel to their pupils, but have no hesitancy in introducing into the classroom the theories of Huxley, of Darwin, or of Miall, and the false political economy which contends against co-operation and the United Order. This course I am resolutely and uncompromisingly opposed to, and I hope to see the day when the doctrines of the gospel will be taught in all our schools…”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The early twentieth century saw the controversy intensify, and by 1909 – the fiftieth anniversary of Darwin’s seminal work – the First Presidency of the Church felt a need to issue an official statement reiterating their doctrinal position on man’s divine origin and destiny. Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, and Anthon H. Lund wrote in part: “Adam, our first progenitor, ‘the first man,’ was, like Christ, a preexistent spirit, and like Christ he took upon him an appropriate body, the body of a man, and so became a ‘living soul.’ The doctrine of the preexistence – revealed so plainly, particularly in latter days – pours a wonderful flood of light upon the otherwise mysterious problem of man’s origin. It shows that man, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal body to undergo an experience in mortality. It teaches that all men existed in the spirit before any man existed in the flesh and that all who have inhabited the earth since Adam have taken bodies and become souls in like manner.

“It is held by some that Adam was not the first man upon this earth and that the original human being was a development from lower orders of the animal creation. These, however, are the theories of men. The word of the Lord declared that Adam was ‘the first man of all men’ (Moses 1:34), and we are therefore in duty bound to regard him as the primal parent of our race. It was shown to the brother of Jared that all men were created in the beginning after the image of God; whether we take this to mean the spirit or the body, or both, it commits us to the same conclusion: Man began life as a human being, in the likeness of our Heavenly Father.

“True it is that the body of man enters upon its career as a tiny germ embryo, which becomes an infant, quickened at a certain stage by the spirit whose tabernacle it is, and the child, after being born, develops into a man. There is nothing in this, however, to indicate that the original man, the first of our race, began life as anything less than a man, or less than the human germ or embryo that becomes a man. Man, by searching, cannot find out God. Never, unaided, will he discover the truth about the beginning of human life. The Lord must reveal Himself or remain unrevealed; and the same is true of the facts relating to the origin of Adam’s race – God alone can reveal them. Some of these facts, however, are already known, and what has been made known it is our duty to receive and retain.

“The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, basing its belief on divine revelation, ancient and modern, proclaims man to be the direct and lineal offspring of Deity. God Himself is an exalted man, perfected, enthroned, and supreme. By His almighty power He organized the earth and all that it contains, from spirit and element, which exist coeternally with Himself. He formed every plant that grows and every animal that breathes, each after its own kind, spiritually and temporally – ‘that which is spiritual being in the likeness of that which is temporal, and that which is temporal in the likeness of that which is spiritual.’ He made the tadpole and the ape, the lion and the elephant, but He did not make them in His own image, nor endow them with godlike reason and intelligence. Nevertheless, the whole animal creation will be perfected and perpetuated in the Hereafter, each class in its ‘distinct order or sphere,’ and will enjoy ‘eternal felicity.’ That fact has been made plain in this dispensation (see D&C 77:3).

“Man is the child of God, formed in the divine image and endowed with divine attributes, and even as the infant son of an earthly father and mother is capable in due time of becoming a man, so the undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage is capable, by experience through ages and aeons, of evolving into a God.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

This statement may have created more confusion than it resolved. Though clearly anti-evolution in tone, it stopped short of denouncing the theory altogether, for it seemed to be comparing apples to oranges. Evolutionary change does not occur within individuals, and no scientist had claimed that Adam or anyone else “began life as anything less than a man, or less than the human germ or embryo that becomes a man”. In the First Presidency’s Christmas message the next year they attempted to address the continued confusion: “Diversity of opinion does not necessitate intolerance of spirit… Our religion is not hostile to real science. That which is demonstrated, we accept with joy; but vain philosophy, human theory and mere speculations of men, we do not accept nor do we adopt anything contrary to divine revelation or to good common sense.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Church members who were still confused, and particularly those who embraced the scientific explanations for man’s origin, may have found comfort in an *Improvement Era* editorial by President Smith also published that year: “Whether the mortal bodies of man evolved in natural processes to present perfection, through the direction and power of God; whether the first parents of our generation, Adam and Eve, were transplanted from another sphere, with immortal tabernacles, which became corrupted through sin and the partaking of natural foods, in the process of time... whether they were born here in mortality, as other mortals have been, are questions not fully answered in the revealed word of God.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Some other Christians were less conciliatory. Famously, Tennessee outlawed the teaching of evolution in its public schools, and science teacher John Scopes brought international publicity to the small town of Dayton when he deliberately incriminated himself for breaking this law. He lost the case (though the verdict was overturned on a technicality), but the emerging schism between science and religion had been widened. Religious antipathy toward science was clearly manifest in the law to begin with, while the reverse was evinced by the attitude of Scopes’ lawyer Clarence Darrow, who told prosecutor William Jennings Bryan, “You insult every man of science and learning in the world because he does not believe in your fool religion.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Ironically, Bryan and others like him were apparently no longer concerned with the proposed mechanisms of evolution so much as the process itself. The Greek notion of “immutability of species” had taken hold, and they insisted that the Bible had to be interpreted literally. Evolution was not mentioned in the creation story and so it was not only invalid but a competitor with the Word of God. By contrast, the First Presidency’s concern had been in emphasizing that man, regardless of his origins, was the spirit offspring of God and created in His image. Thus the Scopes Trial provided an opportunity to re-release the statement, now drastically shortened and lacking ambiguous references to “theories of men” and “[beginning] life as anything less than a man.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The anti-evolution tone was gone altogether.

## **The Rise of Creationism**

During the Scopes Trial, Bryan had heavily utilized the arguments of a little-known self-taught geologist named George McCready Price. Darrow had retorted, “You mentioned Price because he is the only human being in the world so far as you know that signs his name as a geologist that believes like you do... every scientist in this country knows [he] is a mountebank and a pretender and not a geologist at all.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Sterling Talmage, an LDS geologist and son of Apostle James E. Talmage, was even less flattering in his assessment. Regarding Price’s book *The New Geology*, he wrote to his father, “All of Price’s arguments, in principle at least, were advanced and refuted from fifty to a hundred years ago. They are not ‘new.’ His ideas certainly are not ‘Geology.’ With these two corrections, the title remains the best part of the book.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Who was George McCready Price? Simply put, he was the forefather of modern creation “science”. His ideas built on those of Seventh Day Adventist founder Ellen G. White and in turn became the basis of *The Genesis Flood* by Henry M. Morris and John Whitcomb, who founded the Institute for Creation Research and inspired Ken Ham, who founded Answers in Genesis and the Creation Museum. All of this transpired after his death. During his lifetime, however, he had a profound influence on Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith, who embraced *The New Geology* wholeheartedly. In the beginning of the 1930s he found himself in heated debate with Elder B. H. Roberts of the Seventy over whether pre-Adamites had ever lived and died on the Earth. Smith said no, Roberts said yes.

The First Presidency ended this debate by writing to all General Authorities, in part: “Both parties make the scripture and the statements of men who have been prominent in the affairs of the Church the basis of their contention; neither has produced definite proof in support of his views... Upon the fundamental doctrines of the Church we are all agreed. Our mission is to bear the message of the restored Gospel to the people of the world. Leave geology, biology, archaeology and anthropology, no one of which has to do with the salvation of the souls of mankind, to scientific research, while we magnify our calling in the realm of the Church. We can see no advantage to be gained by a continuation of the discussion to which reference is here made, but on the contrary are certain that it would lead to confusion, division and misunderstanding if carried further. Upon one thing we should all be able to agree, namely, that presidents Joseph F. Smith, John Winder and Anthon Lund were right when they said: ‘Adam is the primal parent of our race.’”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Elder Talmage wrote in his journal, “As to whether Preadamite races existed upon the earth there has been much discussion among some of our people of late. The decision reached by the First Presidency, and announced to this morning's assembly, was in answer to a specific question that obviously the doctrine of the existence of races of human beings upon the earth prior to the fall of Adam was not a doctrine of the Church; and, further, that the conception embodied in the belief of many to the effect that there were no such Preadamite races, and that there was no death upon the earth prior to Adam's fall is likewise declared to be no doctrine of the Church. I think the decision of the First Presidency is a wise one in the premises. This is one of the many things upon which we cannot preach with assurance and dogmatic assertions on either side are likely to do harm rather than good.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

However, Elder Smith had promoted his views very publicly while Elder Roberts’ had been confined behind the scenes, and there was some concern that they would be taken as the Church’s official position. To deal with this problem Elder Talmage was allowed to present a differing viewpoint in a speech called “The Earth and Man”. He spoke of the Earth’s great antiquity and the richness of the fossil record, and cautioned, echoing St. Augustine: “Let us not try to wrest the scriptures in an attempt to explain away what we can not explain. The opening chapters of Genesis, and scriptures related thereto, were never intended as a text-book of geology, archaeology, earth-science or man-science... We do not show reverence for the scriptures when we misapply them through faulty interpretation.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

After the deaths of Elder Talmage, Elder Roberts, and other more scientifically-minded General Authorities – and especially after becoming President of the Quorum of the Twelve – Elder Smith’s views continued to be promoted throughout the Church. He devoted an entire book to the subject called *Man, His Origin and Destiny*. Many of his unofficial articles and speeches were also compiled by his son-in-law Bruce R. McConkie into a three-volume work entitled *Doctrines of Salvation*, and Elder McConkie, then a Seventy, borrowed heavily from him in his own ten-page attack on evolution in his book *Mormon Doctrine*. Behind the scenes, other prominent men in the Church hastened to run damage control.

LDS scientist Henry Eyring recalled, “When President Joseph Fielding Smith's book *Man, His Origin and Destiny* was published, someone urged it as an institute course. One of the institute teachers came to me and said, ‘If we have to follow it exactly, we will lose some of the young people.’ I said, ‘I don't think you need to worry.’ I thought it was a good idea to get this problem out in public, so the next time I went to Sunday School General Board meeting, I got up and bore my testimony that the evidence was strongly in the direction that the world was four or five billion years old. That week, President Smith called and asked me to come see him. We talked for about an hour, and he explained his views to me. I said, ‘Brother Smith, I have read your books and know your point of view, and I understand that is how it looks to you. It just looks a little different to me.’ He said as we ended, ‘Well, Brother Eyring, I would like to have you come in and let me talk with you sometime when you are not quite so excited.’ As far as I could see, we parted on the best of terms.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

In response to inquiries, President David O. McKay wrote letters along these lines: “On the subject of organic evolution the Church has officially taken no position. The book ‘Man, His Origin and Destiny’ was not published by the Church, and is not approved by the Church. The book contains expressions of the author’s views for which he alone is responsible.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Permission was granted for the recipients to circulate these letters. A week after President Smith visited BYU to promote his book, President J. Reuben Clark, Jr. of the First Presidency was sent to give a widely-reprinted discourse entitled, “When are the Writings and Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture?” He concluded that individuals must discern that for themselves through the Holy Ghost.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Regarding *Mormon Doctrine*, President McKay recorded, “The First Presidency… decided that Bruce R. McConkie’s book, ‘Mormon Doctrine’ recently published by Bookcraft Company, must not be re-published, as it is full of errors and misstatements, and it is most unfortunate that it has received such wide circulation.”[[27]](#footnote-27) President Marion G. Romney, in his official report, listed “Evolution and Evolutionists” as one of the topics that “might have been omitted [or] modified” if the book had “been authoritatively supervised”.[[28]](#footnote-28) Alas, when the book eventually was republished with some corrections, these passages remained.

## **An Era of Reconciliation**

In a private meeting with Sterling McMurrin, President McKay expressed his own views more freely than in public and found some common ground with the unorthodox Latter-day Saint. Some of the Apostles had wanted McMurrin and his ilk to be excommunicated for heresy. But President McKay sympathetically mused, “I would like to know just what it is that a man must be required to believe to be a member of this Church. Or, what it is that he is not permitted to believe, and remain a member of this Church. I would like to know just what that is. Is it evolution? I hope not, because I believe in evolution.”[[29]](#footnote-29) This was in 1954. Widespread change in church culture on this matter wouldn’t happen during his lifetime, but it would happen.

In 1980 when Elder Bruce R. McConkie gave a speech at BYU entitled “The Seven Deadly Heresies”, he was uncharacteristically mellow in his approach to organic evolution. His opinion had clearly not changed but this time he delineated it as exactly that – an opinion. He said, “There are those who believe that the theory of organic evolution runs counter to the plain and explicit principles set forth in the holy scriptures as these have been interpreted and taught by Joseph Smith and his associates. There are others who think that evolution is the system used by the Lord to form plant and animal life and to place man on earth… These are questions to which all of us should find answers. Every person must choose for himself what he will believe. I recommend that all of you study and ponder and pray and seek light and knowledge in these and in all fields.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

In 1987, Elder Russell M. Nelson had said at a BYU devotional, “Through the ages, some without scriptural understanding have tried to explain our existence by pretentious words such as ex nihilo (out of nothing). Others have deduced that, because of certain similarities between different forms of life, there has been a natural selection of the species, or organic evolution from one form to another. Still others have concluded that man came as a consequence of a ‘big bang’ that resulted in the creation of our planet and life upon it. To me, such theories are unbelievable! Could an explosion in a printing shop produce a dictionary? It’s unthinkable! But it could be argued to be within a remote realm of possibility. Even if that could happen, such a dictionary could certainly not heal its own torn pages, or renew its own worn corners, or reproduce its own subsequent editions!”[[31]](#footnote-31)

In a General Conference talk twenty-five years later (arguably a more official forum), he reused this analogy but omitted the explicit reference to evolution: “Anyone who studies the workings of the human body has surely “seen God moving in his majesty and power.’Because the body is governed by divine law, any healing comes by obedience to the law upon which that blessing is predicated. Yet some people erroneously think that these marvelous physical attributes happened by chance or resulted from a big bang somewhere. Ask yourself, ‘Could an explosion in a printing shop produce a dictionary?’ The likelihood is *most* remote. But if so, it could never heal its own torn pages or reproduce its own newer editions!”[[32]](#footnote-32)

In 1992, an entry in the semi-official *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, which had involved at least six General Authorities in its writing, stated: “The position of the Church on the origin of man was published by the First Presidency in 1909 and stated again by a different First Presidency in 1925: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, basing its belief on divine revelation, ancient and modern, declares man to be the direct and lineal offspring of Deity…. Man is the child of God, formed in the divine image and endowed with divine attributes (see Appendix, "Doctrinal Expositions of the First Presidency"). The scriptures tell why man was created, but they do not tell how, though the Lord has promised that he will tell that when he comes again (D&C 101:32-33).”[[33]](#footnote-33) Also included, with permission from President Gordon B. Hinckley, were the 1931 First Presidency minutes detailing the end of the Smith/Roberts debate.

Perhaps most significant in the long term will be changes made to the Bible Dictionary. The Dictionary’s preface cautions, “Many of the entries draw on the work of Bible scholars and are subject to reevaluation as new research or revelation comes to light. This dictionary is provided to help your study of the scriptures and is not intended as an official statement of Church doctrine or an endorsement of the historical and cultural views set forth.” Yet it is regarded as such by many members, and in any case may shape their understanding by the interpretations it imposes on the scriptures, wittingly or not.

The 1981 edition had read, “Latter-day revelation teaches that there was no death on this earth for any forms of life before the fall of Adam.” The 2013 edition omitted the phrase “for any forms of life.” The 1981 edition had read, “Before the fall, Adam and Eve had physical bodies but no blood. There was no sin, no death, and no children among any of the earthly creations. With the eating of the ‘forbidden fruit,’ Adam and Eve became mortal, sin entered, blood formed in their bodies, and death became a part of life. Adam became the ‘first flesh’ upon the earth (Moses 3: 7), meaning that he and Eve were the first to become mortal. After Adam fell, the whole creation fell and became mortal.” The 2013 edition omitted the phrases “physical bodies but no blood”, “among any of the earthly creations”, and “blood entered their bodies”.

Thus we see that, despite a continued misconception among many within and without the Church that it has a doctrinal stance against organic evolution, the history demonstrates otherwise. It would be fair to say that such beliefs have been the rule rather than the exception, but that doesn’t make them authoritative. Yet, though science and religion cover different aspects of existence, anyone embracing both must either compartmentalize them and risk cognitive dissonance, or attempt some degree of harmony between them. And in so doing we must, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks cautioned, “guard against the significant risk that efforts to end the separation… will only promote a substandard level of performance, where religion and science dilute one another instead of strengthening both.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

# **Part II: Reflections on Theology**

## **Man’s Divine Origin**

Latter-day Saints differ from many other Christians in that they cannot compromise on the historicity of Adam and Eve as literal people, or the creation of man in the image of God. Some have dealt with this conundrum by presuming that *other* animals may have evolved, but humans were a special and distinct creation event. This solution is logically untenable because much of the same evidence for evolution in general applies with equal force to our species. The mere fact that our bodies have many apparent design flaws indicates a long and colorful history; appealing to their “perfect design” as evidence against evolution is sure to get a laugh out of any biologist.

Elder Talmage was himself wary about accepting evolution (though this apparently owed more to his own lack of biological expertise than any theological objections) but happened to point out a common fallacy of many of its detractors. “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 the 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. The man, as an individual intelligence, existed before his earthly body was framed and shall exist after that body has suffered dissolution.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

The development of man’s corporeal self through evolution says nothing about his spiritual self. Hence claiming that man must be either an evolved being *or* the offspring of God is a false dichotomy, and hence the confusion inherent in the 1909 First Presidency statement’s implication of such a dichotomy. In any case, such a link with “lower” animals in no way demotes or demeans him. Those who take offense at such a concept should stop and consider whether it’s any more ennobling for the first man to have been sculpted out of dirt. LDS scientist Henry Eyring wrote, “Some people object to the slightest hint of being related to the rest of the animal kingdom, particularly the hairy apes. The idea is right next to the three ‘*s*’s’ – spiders, snakes, and sharks – on their list of things beyond the pale. I’ve never had that particular aversion. In fact, I’ve kind of enjoyed what little I've seen of them.

“[One time at the London Zoo] I was attracted by a crowd watching the great apes. One fellow in particular was getting a lot of attention as he sat close to the front of the cage on a tree platform. As the zoo visitors moved closer, he suddenly spewed them with water he had in his mouth… The ape got down and went over to his water trough to reload. He then went about the cage awhile and finally repositioned himself on the platform. He waited – patiently. Finally a new group of humanoids, not aware of the danger, moved into range. Spray! Splat! Bullseye! The fellow practically chortled out loud as he made his trip to the trough. I spent the entire afternoon enjoying his enjoyment. Theoretically, he was there for our amusement, but quite clearly, he didn't understand that. He thought we were there for his. I have to admit I kind of admired the fellow. Animals seem pretty wonderful to me. I’d be content to discover that I share a common heritage with them, so long as God is at the controls.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

Scholar Hugh Nibley lamented, “Right down to the present day we have been the spectators of a foolish contest between equally vain and bigoted rivals, in which it is a moot question which side heaps the most contempt on God’s creatures. For the fundamentalist, to associate man too closely with God's other creatures was the supreme insult to God and man. Man, say the Christian theologians, faithfully following Aristotle, *is the* rational animal, the *only* rational animal. All other beings in nature are soulless, speechless, thoughtless automata.... The evolutionists took the doctors at their word and had a very easy time showing that man shares so many visible qualities and traits with other animals that if animals are mere ‘things’ then so is man.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

But what, then, of Adam’s progenitors? Nibley had some thoughts on them as well. “Do not begrudge existence to creatures that looked like men long, long ago, nor deny them a place in God's affection or even a right to exaltation, for our scriptures allow them such. Nor am I overly concerned as to just when they might have lived, for their world is not our world. They have all gone away long before our people ever appeared. God assigned them their proper times and functions, as he has given me mine, a full-time job that admonishes me to remember his words to the overly eager Moses: ‘For mine own purpose have I made these things. Here is wisdom and it remaineth in me.’ (Moses 1:31.) It is Adam as my own parent who concerns me. When he walks onto the stage, then and only then the play begins.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Still, a major conundrum remains. Evolution is so gradual that it’s impossible to draw a generational line between where one species ends and another begins, and it seems clear that *homo sapiens* has existed for hundreds of thousands of years. Adam’s parents would have been, for all intents and purposes, the same as him. Why was a line drawn between them? What will become of them, if they aren’t doctrinally considered a part of our race? Going back further still, Adam’s ancestry would include amino acids in a primordial soup. It was probably along this line of reasoning that Elder Boyd K. Packer said (in a book explicitly labeled as his personal views) that the sealing power would preclude any shared lineage of man and beast.[[39]](#footnote-39)

This dilemma is puzzling, but not damning. One could answer it with another – what about the other end of the lineage? Brigham Young taught that during the Millennium “man will be sealed to man until the chain is made perfect back to Adam, so that there will be a perfect chain of Priesthood from Adam to the winding-up scene.”[[40]](#footnote-40) How will we arrive at such a “winding-up scene”, given that human population growth is exponential? How will God draw the line between the race of this Earth and the children that its members will presumably continue to have through the eternities? Every religion has unanswered questions, and any of these are less troublesome than those raised by rejecting evolution.

## **Death before the Fall**

There are three interdependent pillars in LDS doctrine – the Creation, the Fall, and the Atonement. The Creation brought man into the world, the Fall made him a mortal and sinful creature, and the Atonement redeemed him from this fallen state. Conventional wisdom, then, has held that there was no death before the Fall occurred. 2 Nephi 2:22 is the most commonly quoted scripture in this regard: “And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Elder Joseph Fielding Smith wrote, “And here is another truth stated by another great thinker, Robert Blatchford. He says: ‘But – no Adam, no Fall: no Fall, no Atonement; no Atonement, no Savior. Accepting Evolution, how can we believe in a Fall? When did man fall; was it before he ceased to be a monkey, or after? Was it when he was a tree man, or later? Was it in the Stone Age, or the Bronze Age, or in the Age of Iron?... And if there never was a Fall, why should there be any Atonement?’ Those are pertinent questions that Mr. Blatchford asks. ‘No Adam, no Fall; no Fall, no Atonement.’ That is just as true as it is that we are here. If death was always here, then Adam did not bring it, and he could not be punished for it. If Adam did not fall, there was no Christ, because the atonement of Jesus Christ is based on the fall of Adam. And so we face these problems.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

But the problems don’t end there, for this isn’t only a spiritual matter. As Elder B. H. Roberts had observed years earlier, “On the other hand, to limit and insist upon the whole of life and death to this side of Adam's advent to the earth , some six or eight thousand years ago, as proposed by some, is to fly in the face of the facts so indisputably brought to light by the researcher of science in modern times, and this as set forth by men of the highest type in the intellectual and moral world... To pay attention to and give reasonable credence to their research and findings is to link the church of God with the highest increase of human thought and effort.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

Many solutions have been proposed for the apparent discrepancy. Some have speculated that “no death” applied only to humans and/or only within the Garden of Eden, which are both possibilities left open by the vagueness of the relevant scriptures and the 2013 revisions to the Bible Dictionary. BYU biologist Steven E. Jones, citing several scriptures, suggested that prior to the Fall organisms lived and died *biologically* but not *spiritually*, as they did not yet have spirits.[[44]](#footnote-44) His conclusions are logical but would seem to deny resurrection to the dinosaurs; a horrendous tragedy. In any case, while these are all possibilities, I favor another solution altogether. I believe the scriptures have been somewhat misinterpreted all along.

Going back to 2 Nephi 2:22 we see that the word “death” isn’t even mentioned. Inferring it is a logical interpretation but nonetheless exactly that, an interpretation, and at least one other is possible. First, what is meant by “all things”? Does it refer to each individual thing in creation, or is it speaking in a broader sense – rocks, plants, animals, the natural world overall? And what is meant by “the same state”? With no Fall and no Atonement, the Earth would never “be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory.”[[45]](#footnote-45) One could argue that in this scenario, the natural world would simply keep going through the natural cycle of living, dying, and reproducing, with no potential to move forward and become something more. Life would continue to evolve, but contrary to popular misconception, this would not constitute “progress”, just change. And this kind of change may not be what “the same state” is an antithesis to.

Moses 6:48 is more explicit: “And he said unto them: Because that Adam fell, we are; and by his fall came death; and we are made partakers of misery and woe.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Is this referring to physical death, spiritual death, or both? A few verses earlier, reference is made to physical death; but all the succeeding verses are clearly referring to spiritual death. They speak of baptism and repentance, the cure for spiritual death; but make no mention whatsoever of resurrection, the cure for physical death. It’s worth considering. But even if the verse refers to physical death, or to both types, it encompasses only Adam and his descendants. No mention is made of his progenitors or of other life forms.

Thus, I believe that physical death has been in the world for as long as life, independent of anything man has done; at the very least, all will agree that every person is ultimately subject to it regardless of his or her choices in life. Hence the Atonement automatically extends resurrection and immortality to even the most wicked and vile of human beings, as it does to all creatures. Spiritual death, on the other hand, is a state of being brought about by the Fall, a shift from the Earth’s previous state caused by one person that must be rectified by another. And though no one is capable of never sinning, each sin nonetheless represents a conscious choice (if the person is too young or mentally impaired to grasp his or her actions, then it is not a sin). Hence the redemption from sin, and further blessings like exaltation, are mostly free yet also conditional upon “obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

I believe human beings evolved in Africa and dispersed from there, as science tells us. The scriptures do not say Adam was created in the Garden of Eden – they say he was *brought* there.[[48]](#footnote-48) And in the Garden, Adam and Eve could not have children and presumably would live forever. On this note LDS blogger Tom Wheeler points out, “We sometimes overlook the fact, and yet it is well documented in our scriptures, that there were in fact two trees in the garden of Eden. The trees were set up to work in opposition to each other. Consider this verse: ‘And to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man, after he had created our first parents, and the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, and in fine, all things which are created, it must needs be that there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter. (2 Nephi 2:15)’

“We don’t know very much about this original tree of life, but there is great evidence to indicate that it was certainly important. We can surmise that partaking of it’s fruit granted to the individual the quality of life – that is: health, strength, even of immortality. But was one bite enough to grant immortality? Or did one need to continually have access to it’s fruit to live forever? We know that Adam and Eve were allowed to eat of this tree while in the garden, for the Lord said: ‘...Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Genesis 2:16-17) If Adam and Eve were created originally in an immortal condition, then why did God even provide the tree of life? They would have no need for it if they were already immortal, and they never partook of it after the fall, for we know of the important teachings of Alma regarding the Lord placing cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the way of the tree of life after they were driven from the garden (Alma 12:21-27 and Alma 42:2-6).

“They are simply banished, driven from the garden and access to the tree of life is strictly prohibited. If they were created originally with normal mortal bodies, and were receiving their immortality from this tree of life, that’s all it would take to allow mortality to enter. Banishment from the tree of life would be a death sentence (although not an immediate one). This could also help to explain why Adam and the early patriarchs lived for so long. Perhaps the effects of the tree of life took a long time to wear off. Perhaps these effects were even hereditary and were passed along for several generations?”[[49]](#footnote-49)

## **Divinity in “Randomness”**

Evolutionists, despite their frequent refusal to do so, are actually better equipped to see the Hand of God in nature than traditional creationists. The latter, in clinging to a fundamentalist interpretation of the scriptures, defend themselves by attempting to poke holes and expose anomalies in the prevailing body of evidence for evolution. Yet they cannot put forward an alternative explanation for said evidence that does not require significant mental gymnastics, let alone one that makes it compatible with the scriptural account. Why does the evidence exist in the first place? Theodosius Dobzhansky, himself a believer, pointed out that “the blunder leads to blasphemy: the Creator is accused of systematic deceitfulness.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

Evangelist Henry Drummond, one of the first theologians to embrace Darwin’s theory, observed: “There are reverent minds who ceaselessly scan the fields of Nature and the books of Science in search of gaps – gaps which they will fill up with God. As if God lived in gaps? What view of Nature or of Truth is theirs whose interest in Science is not in what it can explain but in what it cannot, whose quest is ignorance not knowledge, whose daily dread is that the cloud may lift, and who, as darkness lifts from this field or from that, begin to tremble for the place of His abode? What needs altering in such finely jealous souls is at once their view of Nature and of God. Nature is God’s writing, and can only tell the truth; God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.”[[51]](#footnote-51)

As we have seen, this fallacious viewpoint is what allowed the concept of natural selection to shake up Christianity so badly in the first place, and it is clearly the antithesis of the Latter-day Saint obligation to “seek learning by study and also by faith”.[[52]](#footnote-52) Hence, to preserve not only our own intellectual integrity but the logical tenability of our religion, we should accept – not as a doctrine of the Church but as a straightforward conclusion based on the available facts – that evolution is God’s method of creating the multitude of life-forms we see around us, including ourselves. It is consistent with our common view that God works mainly or exclusively through natural processes.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Yet there are a few difficulties to be resolved. Mutation – which provides the genetic variation for natural selection to act on – is generally a random process, and if the Earth’s history were to start over it would probably produce an entirely different range of species. How, then, could all things have been created spiritually before they were created physically? The foreknowledge of God blows such a “problem” out of the water; as Darwin noted in his letter to Asa Gray, “all these laws may have been expressly designed by an omniscient Creator, who foresaw every future event & consequence”.[[54]](#footnote-54) Yet God’s children live on many worlds and the probability of these laws achieving the same results with regard to all of them is astronomically low. How, then, could man have been created in the image of God?

First, an analogy. Few Latter-day Saints would suggest that such things as weather patterns or birth defects are produced by recurring instances of God’s direct intervention as opposed to following laws of nature. And virtually all must accept the core doctrine that mankind is given freedom to choose whatever he wants to do, regardless of whether God wants him to do it. Even the most minute occurrence or choice has an unpredictable (to us) ripple effect through individuals and civilizations for the rest of human history. Few would deny this. Yet we also know that somehow, in ways we don’t understand, this history will unfold such that everything that needs to happen will happen, and God’s plan is in no jeopardy of being thwarted.

It’s also worth noting that scientists who claim there is no divine guiding principle behind the process of evolution are overreaching. What they should say is that there *appears* to be no divine guiding principle, because science by definition cannot probe or test such things. Yet the prophet Alma testified that “all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it”.[[55]](#footnote-55) Alma was cognizant of a spiritual dimension inextricably linked to the physical world, one which ­­(according to his own teachings just two chapters later) could only be discerned by experiments of faith and personal revelation.­ Korihor, to whom he was preaching, pretended not to be. Today, many follow Korihor’s example, neglecting the spiritual dimension and failing to recognize God’s involvement.

I propose that God is not merely the Creator of natural laws, or the force behind them, but actually a *part* of them, and vice-versa. Thus we read in the Doctrine and Covenants: “He comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him; and he is above all things, and in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things; and all things are by him, and of him, even God, forever and ever. And again, verily I say unto you, he hath given a law unto all things, by which they move in their times and their seasons…”[[56]](#footnote-56) The next few verses deal primarily with the workings of stars and planets, but surely no one would think to limit God’s power only to these.

Even when taken at its most literal reading, this concept by no means diminishes the reality of a corporeal, anthropomorphic God. To borrow a metaphor from Henry Eyring: ““[A]ny story of [Robert E.] Lee as a general would tell about his influence permeating the whole sphere of his activities and very little about Lee the man. In this sense Lee is two people, the man, like anyone else, and the far-flung intelligence system that governed the motion of him and his army much as a wave is spread out in space and governs the motion of a photon or a material particle. In an analogous manner, we may think of God as the all-wise arbiter of the universe, with his infinite wisdom having an influence that permeates the most remote recesses of space, and yet being himself an exalted being with personality and deep concern for struggling humanity.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

Thus, according to my understanding, things in nature happen the way God wants them to not because He has to order it around or tool with it like an engineer, but because He is already a part of it. It just happens, if you will excuse the pun, naturally. To me this understanding reconciles the apparent self-sufficiency of natural laws with Alma’s condemnation of scientism. Of course, I have no further idea how this would actually work in practice. Like all of God’s power it is beyond my comprehension and I will never pretend otherwise. Darwin was correct to write, “A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

## **The Problems of Evil**

For many creationists, something more than the alleged inerrancy of the Bible is at stake. The very fabric of human morality is in jeopardy. How, they ask, can conceptions of right and wrong have any claim on human beings, if we are merely animals developed from other animals? The more adamant among them have blamed the teaching of evolution for everything from pornography to school shootings. These extremes are rather ridiculous – for starters, other animals don’t generally use pornography or go on killing sprees for no discernable reason – but it is true that science is used by many to rationalize away morality. One professor recently wrote, for example, “that the ‘monogamous heterosexual relationship’ is a largely unattainable (and undesirable) myth. Sexual unions between humans are not meant to be permanent. As we evolve, so does our understanding of these truths.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

This was in a letter written to conservative blogger Matt Walsh, who has referred to evolution as “atheistic, nihilistic, materialistic, [and] mindless”.[[60]](#footnote-60) This is merely a microcosm of the debate that has raged for decades, and one of the prime motives for Elders Smith and McConkie to denounce evolution so forcefully. In this battle of the evolution war, both atheistic aggressors and Christian defenders are reaching beyond the bounds of science. Species adaptation and change is nothing more or less than a matter-of-fact observation about the way things are. Its implications – what it says about spirituality, morality, the purpose of existence, etcetera – are not. Scientists are welcome to their opinions on any of these matters but should not present them as scientific.

To begin with, it would be unwise to assume that morality has zero biological basis. Research suggests that, survival of the fittest notwithstanding, pure selfishness is not evolutionarily sustainable,[[61]](#footnote-61) and God’s laws usually brings about our own benefit and happiness anyway. I think intelligence has a lot to do with it too. Consider dogs. Dogs, notwithstanding their lack of qualifications to speculate on the mind of Newton, are very intelligent. Though oblivious to the laws of morality, they are able to recognize a human as their master and understand that they should obey the master’s commands. Sometimes they choose not to. This may be comparable to the obedience of a child before the age of accountability – which adults are supposed to emulate – or to the obedience of Adam and Eve before the Fall.

I think it reasonable that Adam and Eve’s progenitors could have attained this level of understanding. They could have come to recognize the existence of a Supreme Being, notwithstanding He was not their Father in the same sense that He is ours, and wanted to please Him. Thus there is no need to panic at the evidence of burial rituals, symbolism, or other religious practices hundreds of thousands of years before Adam and Eve. There is no need to worry about the development of religion coinciding with changes in hominid brain size and structure. How arrogant it would be to insist that only we, among all of God’s creations, have the right to worship Him!

Evolution and the scriptures seem to be in agreement regarding human nature. King Benjamin taught, “For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.”[[62]](#footnote-62) By implication, then, the natural state of a human being is to have the opposite of all the good qualities listed, which is what one would probably expect if his species arose through survival of the fittest.

Yet this natural man did not become “an enemy to God” until after “the fall of Adam”. Humans did not degenerate until “the devil… didbeguile our first parents, which was the cause of their fall; which was the cause of all mankind becoming carnal, sensual, devilish, knowing evil from good, subjecting themselves to the devil.”[[63]](#footnote-63) The scriptures make quite clear that until this point Adam and Eve did not know good from evil. I believe that the moment they partook of the forbidden fruit was the moment they became spirit children of God, separated forever from the rest of the animal creation. At this point, in addition to their intelligence, they also received the Light of Christ in their souls and the capacity to “yield to the enticings of the Holy Spirit”. Now they could be subject to morality, because now they understood it.

Despite Matt Walsh’s misconceptions about evolution, his response to the aforementioned professor bears repeating: “If I wanted to be natural, I could live in a hole like a rodent, eat insects, and scamper from one mate to the next, until, after a life of nothingness, I die alone in the cold darkness, decomposing into the dirt without anyone ever noticing. That would be natural... So it is fortunate that I am a human being and I am given the chance to transcend the existence of a rat or a lizard. I have the opportunity to experience supernatural things like love, and sacrifice, and commitment… Do you go about your day and, before deciding on any particular course of action, ask yourself if it is something you are ‘biologically fitted’ to do? I would say we are biologically fitted to be rational beings. And, as rational beings, we are capable of attaining higher things.”[[64]](#footnote-64)

So much for the problem of human morality. But what about God’s morality? Remember that the suffering in the natural world was a major factor in Darwin’s crisis of faith. Christians and atheists alike balk at God’s use of such suffering as His creative medium; yet regardless of whether it is the primary mechanism behind evolution, it remains a plainly observable fact. Dawkins spoke for the unbelievers when he wrote “The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Yet Alma’s words, preserved and brought forth for our day, remain timeless; “all things denote there is a God.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

As mentioned, the issue at hand is the same problem of evil that has always been recognized.[[67]](#footnote-67) It has never been Christianity’s undoing, and the LDS Church has its own solution, as explained by Elder Orson F. Whitney: “No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God... and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire and which will make us more like our Father and Mother in heaven.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin further promised in his final General Conference address, “The Lord compensates the faithful for every loss. That which is taken away from those who love the Lord will be added unto them in His own way. While it may not come at the time we desire, the faithful will know that every tear today will eventually be returned a hundredfold with tears of rejoicing and gratitude.”[[69]](#footnote-69) We do not understand now why God allows the things He does, but when we keep the proper perspective that this life is merely part two of a three-act play we can trust in Him that everything He does is for our ultimate benefit.

Animals, too, existed as spirits and will be perfected and resurrected. “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’ den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”[[70]](#footnote-70) They shall enjoy, as written in the scriptures and quoted by the First Presidency, “eternal felicity”.[[71]](#footnote-71) In a very real sense they will be compensated for their suffering just as we will be.

If God must allow His own children to suffer in order to create exalted beings, then why not allow the lesser creations to suffer to create a functioning ecosystem? Obviously non-humans have no need to be “purified” in a similar manner, but the same principle may operate in terms of creating fit and healthy species. Lehi’s teaching that “it must needs be… an opposition in all things”[[72]](#footnote-72) seems to indicate that the necessity of suffering and “bad” things is a universal principle. And in viewing the parallel between species development and human potential, we can see indeed that “all things denote there is a God”.[[73]](#footnote-73) Then-Elder David O. McKay, speaking at a funeral in 1946, said:

“Among the generalizations of science, evolution holds foremost place. It claims: ‘Man is a creature of development; that he has come up through uncounted ages from an origin that is lowly.’ Why this vast expenditure of time and pain and blood? Why should he come so far if he is destined to go no farther? A creature which has traveled such distances, and fought such battles and won such victories deserves, one is compelled to say, to conquer death and rob the grave of its victory. Darwin said... ‘Believing as I do that man in the distant future will be a far more perfect creature than he now is, it is an intolerable thought that he and all other sentient beings are doomed to complete annihilation after such long-continued, slow progress. To those who fully admit the immortality of the human soul, the destruction of our world will not appear so dreadful.’”[[74]](#footnote-74)

## **Conclusion**

Much of the Church, and much of Christianity, still needs to move into the twentieth century on this issue. (We can worry about the twenty-first once that’s taken care of.) I’m well aware that science is not infallible. It changes as more discoveries are made and more experiments are performed. That said, people who believe it is only a matter of time before evolution is disproven are deluding themselves. The controversy is a Christian fabrication. With that being the case, the only way to end this war between science and religion is for religion to accept science. Science may not return the favor, but atheists will be deprived of one of their greatest weapons – a weapon they never should have had in the first place; a weapon that believers fashioned and handed to them.

At first glance, Latter-day Saints appear to have a more difficult time reconciling the two than other Christians. I hope I have demonstrated that neither is the case, and that we have nothing to fear in embracing what God has revealed through science as well as what He has revealed through the scriptures. My anecdotal observations indicate that this common-sense approach has spread rapidly throughout the Church; certainly it is no longer rare or controversial as it was thirty years ago. Yet at the same time I encounter ex-Mormons who lost their testimonies in part because evolution’s perceived falsity was part of their foundations, and no less than four institute teachers have claimed or implied that it was against Church doctrine (while simultaneously manifesting an unwarranted derision toward and profound ignorance of it).

This is unacceptable. It’s changing, but it must change faster or the consequences will continue to multiply. Henry Eyring warned years ago, “In my opinion it would be a very sad mistake if a parent or teacher were to belittle scientists as being wicked charlatans or else fools having been duped by half-baked ideas that gloss over inconsistencies. That isn’t an accurate assessment of the situation, and our children or students will be able to see that when they begin their scientific studies.”[[75]](#footnote-75) What happens when they see that? Earlier, Rachel Held Evans spoke for those Christians struggling with their faith. Now, Jeri Lofland speaks for those who have lost theirs:

“Many, many followers of Jesus doubt Young Earth Creationism, and even St. Augustine considered the Creation account to be allegorical. But no one told me that. I swallowed the whole Ham sandwich: you couldn't have faith, or sin, or Jesus, or heaven, or God... without Adam, Eve, Eden, a global flood, and less than 10,000 years. The only problem was, when I could no longer believe in a young earth, the rest of the story disintegrated, too. Once upon a time, my meager tithe checks helped build Ken’s creation museum. Today I am one of his ‘atheist friends’, taking my kids to see dinosaur footprints and ancient rocks. Ham’s cartoons (the red ‘Abortion’ balloons flown from the castle founded on Evolution) and his jokes (‘God didn't make Adam and Steve’, ‘fossils don't come with labels!’) led directly to my atheism. My life is neither sad nor purposeless. But if it makes him feel better, Ham can thank his God that I'm finally wrong.”[[76]](#footnote-76)

1. Jana Reiss, “Why Mormons Should Embrace Evolution: BYU Biology Professor Steven Peck”, Flunking Sainthood (blog), September 20, 2010, <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/flunkingsainthood/2010/09/why-mormons-should-embrace-evolution-byu-biology-professor-steven-peck.html>. Note: My title is not actually based on this one, but was probably subconsciously influenced by it. I had read the post before but forgotten what it was called. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journal, March 4, 1831. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stephen Jay Gould, ‘Evolution as Fact and Theory,’ *Discover* 2, May 1981, pp. 34-37 He continued: “Moreover, ‘fact’ does not mean ‘absolute certainty.’ The final proofs of logic and mathematics flow deductively from stated premises and achieve certainty only because they are *not* about the empirical world. Evolutionists make no claim for perpetual truth, though creationists often do (and then attack us for a style of argument that they themselves favor). In science, ‘fact’ can only mean ‘confirmed to such a degree that it would be perverse to withhold provisional assent.’ I suppose that apples might start to rise tomorrow, but the possibility does not merit equal time in physics classrooms.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Theodosius Dobzhansky, “Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution”, *The American Biology Teacher* 35, pp. 125-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rachel Held Evans, “A Response to Ken Ham – Let’s Make Peace”, Rachel Held Evans (blog),

   http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ken-ham-response [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith as Scientist*, originally published in 1908 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. B. H. Roberts, *History of the Church* Volume 5 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1902), p. 517. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Genesis 1:11-13, 20-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, p. 41. Catholics don’t tend to have as much of a problem as other Christians accepting evolution. I admire them for that. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Steven Peck, “Immutable species – brought to you by the Great Apostasy”, The Organan (blog), April 26, 2009,

    <http://sciencebysteve.net/immutable-species-brought-to-you-by-the-great-apostasy/> I drew the connection myself before reading this post. Great minds think alike. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Charles Darwin, “Darwin Correspondence Project: Letter 2184”, May 22, 1860,

    http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/entry-2814 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp. 131-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Brigham Young, *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons*, p. 200. President Young, whatever his distaste for these men, recognized the fallacy of being anti-science: “I am not astonished that infidelity [unbelief] prevails to a great extent among the inhabitants of the earth, for the religious teachers of the people advance many ideas and notions for truth which are in opposition to and contradict facts demonstrated by science, and which are generally understood… In these respects we differ from the Christian world, for our religion will not clash with or contradict the facts of science in any particular. You may take geology, for instance, and it is a true science; not that I would say for a moment that all the conclusions and deductions of its professors are true, but its leading principles are; they are facts - they are eternal…” (Brigham Young, “Attending Meetings, etc.”, *Journal of Discourses* Volume 14, 14 May 1871, pp. 115-116). Today, of course, evolution is taught at Brigham Young University along with the doctrines of the gospel. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, and Anthon H. Lund, “The Origin of Man”, *Improvement Era* 13 (November 1909), pp. 61-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “Words in Season from the First Presidency”, *Deseret Evening News*, December 17, 1910, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Joseph F. Smith and E. H. Anderson, “Editorial”, *Improvement Era* 13 (November 1910), p. 570. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Jeffrey P. Moran, *The Scopes Trial: A Brief History with Documents* (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002), p. 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Heber J. Grant, Anthony W. Ivins, and Charles W. Nibley, “‘Mormon’ View of Evolution”, 1925. Sadly, creationists in the Church with an axe to grind usually quote from the first statement without even acknowledging the existence of this one. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Sterling Talmage to James Talmage, February 9, 1931, S. Talmage Papers; italics in original. See Jeffrey E. Keller, “Discussion Continued: The Sequel to the Talmage/Smith/Roberts Affair”, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15(81), 1982, pp. 79-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Henry Eyring, *Reflections of a Scientist*, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983, p. 53. Lest anyone get the wrong idea, he continued, “I would say that I sustained President Smith as my Church leader one hundred percent. I think he was a great man. He had a different background and training on this issue. Maybe he was right. I think he was right on most things, and if you followed him, he would get you into the celestial kingdom” (Ibid). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. David O. McKay, Letter to William Lee Stokes, February 15, 1957. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. J. Reuben Clark, Jr., “When are the Writings and Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture?”, Address to Seminary and Institute Personnel, July 7, 1954. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. David O. McKay, Diary, January 8, 1960. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Marion G. Romney, “Report on Mormon Doctrine”, January 28, 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), p. 46. McMurrin related the meeting years later in a letter to each of President McKay’s sons. Lewellyn McKay read the letter to his father, who confirmed that it was an accurate account. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Seven Deadly Heresies”, BYU devotional, June 1, 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Russell M. Nelson, “The Magnificence of Man”, BYU devotional, March 29, 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Russell M. Nelson, “Thanks Be to God”, April 2012, 182nd Annual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. William E. Evenson, “Evolution”, Encyclopedia of Mormonism (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1992), p. 478. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Dallin H. Oaks, *Life's Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 2011), p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Hugh W. Nibley, “Before Adam”, BYU devotional, April 1, 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Boyd K. Packer, “The Law and the Light,” in *The Book of Mormon:* *Jacob through Words of Mormon, To Learn with Joy*, eds. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr.,(Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990), 1–31. No exact quote is given because the talk may not be reproduced in whole or in part without permission. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Discourses of Brigham Young*, p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. 2 Nephi 2:22 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Steven E. Jones, “Was There Death Before Adam?”, http://www.tungate.com/Death\_Before\_Adam.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Articles of Faith 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Articles of Faith 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Wheelercreek, “Mormonism, Adam and Eve, and Human Evolution”, Wheelercreek Studio, Inc. (blog), January 28, 2014, http://wheelercreek.com/blog/mormonism-adam-and-eve-and-human-evolution [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Theodosius Dobzhansky, “Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution”, p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Henry Drummond, *The Lowell Lectures on the Ascent of Man* (New York: James Pott & Co., 1904), p. 333. He added: “Those who yield to the temptation to reserve a point here and there for divine interposition are apt to forget that this virtually excludes God from the rest of the process. If God appears periodically, he disappears periodically. If he comes upon the scene at special crises he is absent from the scene in the intervals. Whether is all-God or occasional-God the nobler theory? Positively, the idea of an immanent God, which is the God of Evolution, is infinitely grander than the occasional wonder-worker who is the God of the old theology. Negatively, the older view is not only the less worthy, but it is discredited by science” (Ibid, p. 334). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Doctrine and Covenants 88:118. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Brigham Young, for example, taught “Yet I will say with regard to miracles, there is no such thing save to the ignorant – that is, there never was a result wrought out by God or by any of His creatures without there being a cause for it. There may be results, the causes of which we do not see or understand, and what we call miracles are no more than this – they are the results or effects of causes hidden from our understandings” (Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 13, July 11, 1869, pp. 140-41). Elder James E. Talmage wrote, “Miracles are commonly regarded as occurrences in opposition to the laws of nature. Such a conception is plainly erroneous, for the laws of nature are inviolable. However, as human understanding of these laws is at best but imperfect, events strictly in accordance with natural law may appear contrary thereto. The entire constitution of nature is founded on system and order” (James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 1966, p. 220). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Charles Darwin, “Darwin Correspondence Project: Letter 2184”. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Alma 30:44. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Doctrine and Covenants 88:41-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Eyring, *Reflections of a Scientist,* p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Darwin, “Darwin Correspondence Project: Letter 2184”. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Matt Walsh, “Monogamy is unnatural”, Matt Walsh Blog, January 7, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Matt Walsh, “Christianity has done more for science than atheism ever could”, Matt Walsh Blog, September 13, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. “Evolution will punish you if you’re selfish and mean”, *MSU Today*, August 1, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Matt Walsh, “Monogamy is unnatural”. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, p. 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Alma 30:44. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. With regard to this human side of the equation (which is of course what most people think about) Daniel C. Peterson explained: “Most of the world’s population, historically and still today, does not live, well fed and well traveled, to a placid old age surrounded by creature comforts. Most of the world has been and is like the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, the slums of Cairo, the backward rural villages of India, the famine-ridden deserts of northeastern Africa, the war-ravaged towns of the southern Sudan and of Rwanda. If there is going to be a truly happy ending for the millions upon millions of those whose lives have been blighted by torture, starvation, disease, rape, and murder, that ending will have to come in a future life. And such a future life seems to require a God. Yes, the problem of evil is a huge one, but to give up on God is to give evil the final say. It is to admit that child rapists and murderers dictate the final chapters in the lives of their terrified and agonized victims; that Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot really did triumph, forever, over the millions they slaughtered; that, in the rotting corpses of Darfur and Iraqi Kurdistan, we see the final, definitive chapter of thousands of lives; that there *is*, really, no hope for those whose health is in irreversible decline; that every human relationship ends in death, if not before.” [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Joseph B. Wirthlin, “Come What May, and Love it”, 178th Semiannual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Isaiah 11:6-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, and Anthon H. Lund, “The Origin of Man”. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. 2 Nephi 2:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Alma 30:44, in case you didn’t catch it the first two times. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. David O. McKay, remarks at the Funeral of May Anderson, Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism*, p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Jeri Lofland, “Ken Ham: Evolution of a Bully”, Heresy in the Heartland (blog), October 16, 2013,

    <http://heresyintheheartland.blogspot.com/2013/10/ken-ham-evolution-of-bully.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)