

Exchange on man as animal and the 1910 Priesthood Quorum's table comment as a reflection of Joseph F. Smith's thinking on evolution

The following is a transcript of the exchange I had, writing as Sicut Erat in Principio ("Sicut" below), with R. Gary Shapiro ("R. Gary" below) on LDS doctrine about Adam and evolution between July 31, 2014 and August 24, 2014. I've taken the liberty to correct a couple of very minor mistakes in the text.

How to mix LDS theology and human evolution [original post by R. Gary]

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that man is a dual being, with a body and a spirit, and that man is a child of God. None of this is based on science, in fact it contradicts science.

Boyd K. Packer: "Secular doctrine holds that man is not a child of God, but basically an animal, his behavior inescapably controlled by natural impulse, exempt from moral judgments and unaccountable for moral conduct." (Ensign Nov. 1986.)

Boyd K. Packer: "No idea has been more destructive of happiness, no philosophy has produced more sorrow, more heartbreak and mischief; no idea has done more to destroy the family than the idea that we are not the offspring of God, only advanced animals, compelled to yield to every carnal urge." (Ensign, May 1992; see also Ensign, Jan 2005.)

These ideas, that man is basically an animal and that humans are only advanced animals, are both scientifically correct. But these ideas deny that "there is a spirit in man" (Job 32:8) and that "we are the children of God" (Romans 8:16).

In order to harmonize evolutionary science with LDS theology, some people claim knowledge that is superior to science and superior to religion. In other words, their harmony is achieved by modifying both science and theology. Consider the reasoning of BYU Biologist Steven L. Peck:

"Since Homo sapiens appeared about 200,000 years ago, the first spirit child of God must have been placed in one of these human bodies long after the bodies appearance on the Earth. The first man was the first time a spirit child of God was placed in one of these bodies."

This is not science and it is definitely not LDS theology.

So how do you mix LDS theology and human evolution? Simply modify them both until they comfortably merge. Unfortunately, after that happens you no longer have either LDS theology or science.

Bruce R. McConkie said it this way: "There is no harmony between the [unmodified] truths of revealed religion and the [unmodified] theories of organic evolution."

[Sicut]

Thank you for sharing your thoughts.

These ideas, that man is basically an animal and that humans are only advanced animals, are both scientifically correct.

Your statement (not Elder Packer's statements) over-reaches the science and thereby creates tension where there is none. Allow me to explain. *Science* states that humans *are* animals. To quote from wikipedia: "an animal is a multi-cellular, eukaryotic organism of the kingdom Animalia... All animals must ingest other organisms or their products for sustenance". That we *are* animals is indisputable and strongly resonates with every piece of scientific evidence that has been gathered on the subject. Do you have reproducible data to suggest an alternative classification?

What Elder Packer is referring to is a "secular doctrine" and "philosophy", namely that we are *only* animals. His word choice is important. He's not talking about science in these quotes, but a metaphysical/supernatural idea—the idea that we are not children of God. Our spiritual heritage is, at least to my knowledge, a truth that lies beyond the purview of science. Yes, D&C 93:7 says that "there is no such thing as immaterial matter" and that "all spirit is matter" but it also says that it can "only be discerned by purer eyes" which arguably puts spirit in a realm whereby it cannot be physically detected. And, even if you *could* detect spirit, it is an even more difficult proposition to scientifically decide if our Spirit came from God the Father (i.e., that we are spirit children of God). If you can come up with some tests whereby we could potentially falsify the idea that we are Spirit children of God, then I am happy to re-classify the proposition as a scientific and not a spiritual/supernatural/metaphysical one.

What we have established then, is that the proposition that "we are children of God" is not a scientific proposition at all! Science *does not* say that we are not children of God, and neither does it say that we are children of God. The statement lies outside the domain of science as we know it! At least in these quotes Elder Packer has issues with "secular doctrine", not science.

This is not science

As discussed above, you are absolutely right that Peck is not talking science—he's talking about an event that lies outside the bounds of traditional science. It's not testable/falsifiable (at least I can't think of how).

and it is definitely not LDS theology.

Peck invokes a spirit/body duality that is very much in harmony with LDS theology and scripture (e.g. Jesus, "into thy hands I commend my spirit". Gen 2:7 "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.", D&C 93:15 "And the spirit and the body are the soul of man".)

Your post provides no evidence that it is not in harmony with LDS theology. The

1909 First Presidency statement says only that Adam is the primal parent of our *race*. The statement declines to use scientific terminology (like species), so there is ambiguity in how we map Adam onto our ancestry. The idea of Adam's body having been created is supported by lots of scripture and fits nicely within LDS theology. Many simply choose to ignore the evidence supporting this reconciliation because a few brethren had/have strong opinions on the matter, not because it isn't a good fit.

The editor of the 1910 Improvement Era, Joseph F. Smith, saw fit to publish this response to the question "In just what manner did the mortal bodies of Adam and Eve come into existence on this earth?"

"...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 generations, 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."

Hence, it would appear that Joseph F. Smith did not rule out the possibility for evolutionary origins of Adam's body (although he clearly had a strong opinion about how it happened).

The underlying implication of this post (and the few vocal anti-evolutionists in the church) is that Adam's body could not have been created through evolutionary means because, they believe, that Adam is the *physical* offspring of God the Father (I'll call it the "Adam begotten" theory).

The irony is that *this* (that God is the physical father of Adam) is really terrible LDS theology!! Here are just a few of the issues:

- 1.) Jesus is "the only begotten Son": The scriptures are replete with the phrase "Only Begotten Son" referring to Jesus Christ (dozens if not more instances). Those who embrace the Adam begotten theory invented a new phrase to refer to Jesus Christ, calling him, "the only begotten in the Flesh". That way, Adam could be begotten in a Spiritual creation. There's a big problem with this, though: The phrase "only begotten [of the Father] in the Flesh" is not found in the scriptures at all!
- 2.) Mosiah 26:23: "For it is I that taketh upon me the sins of the world; for it is I that hath created them; and it is I that granteth unto him that believeth unto the end a place at my right hand." It cannot be made any more clear that Jesus is speaking. He distinctly claims to be the creator of mankind. If God the Father is the father of our spirits, then Jesus *must* have participated in the creation of Adam's body ("formed of the dust"). This scripture makes no sense whatsoever with the Adam begotten theory.
- 3.) Luke 3:38 originally said: "Which was the son of Enos, which was the son of Seth, which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God." Joseph Smith rewrote this in the Inspired Version to read: "And of Enos, and of Seth, and of Adam, who was formed of God, and the first man upon the earth." Here, Joseph Smith explicitly

changes the phrase “which was the son of God” into “formed of God”. If the Adam begotten theory is true, why did God inspire Joseph to change this verse?

4.) Abraham 5:7 “And the Gods formed man from the dust of the ground, and took his spirit (that is, the man’s spirit), and put it into him; and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.” The Gods (plural) responsible for creating the earth are the same ones responsible for creating mankind. Also, note that there is a distinct phase of creation detailed here (creating man from the dust and then, in a separate step, taking and putting his spirit into it). Finally, the temple ceremony backs up this interpretation (“Is man found upon the earth?... Jehovah, Michael, then let *us* go down and form man in our own likeness and in our own image... and put into them their spirit...” Again, the Adam begotten theory basically has to throw this verse and the temple ceremony in the trash can!

To conclude, I will note that Peck’s reconciliation is quite harmonious with all four of the above scriptures/concepts. Your (implied) position is in direct contradiction with all of them. I will leave it to the readers of this blog as to which position is “definitely not LDS theology”.

[R. Gary]

Sicut: Your comment has been published ([click here](#)). I have just two thoughts at this time.

1. Eight years ago, there was lengthy discussion on this blog about the April 1910 Improvement Era comment you cite ([click here](#)). There is no evidence that the 1910 comment was published with Joseph F. Smith’s approval and there is substantial evidence that it was not. Apparently, Joseph F. Smith’s thinking on the subject is (to you) irrelevant.
2. Nine years ago, there was a lengthy discussion on the Mormons and Evolution blog about Jesus being the only begotten in the flesh ([click here](#)). Your comment sidesteps the fact that today’s prophets and apostles are authorized to interpret and expand on what is in the standard works.

Thank you for taking time to share your thoughts.

[Sicut]

Gary, thank you for pointing me back to these relevant posts. I appreciate your research and perspective.

Eight years ago, there was lengthy discussion on this blog about the April 1910 Improvement Era comment you cite ([click here](#)). There is no evidence that the 1910 comment was published with Joseph F. Smith’s approval and there is substantial evidence that it was not.

I remember reading that bit some time ago. I remember it being fairly convincing at the time, but I decided to go back and re-evaluate each source document again. What I found was quite striking to me.

The 1912 “statement” was a private letter to Samuel O. Bennion made in response to confusion about the Adam-God teachings of Brigham Young that Bennion apparently held. The words you quote (“our father Adam – that is, our ... but begotten by his Father in Heaven”) are the 1st presidency *paraphrasing* Brigham Young, and the emphasis is in trying to clear up the Adam-God theory. When presenting the doctrine themselves, we get a much milder version—the accepted standard doctrine: “Adam is called in the Bible ‘the son of God’ (Luke 3:38). It was our Father in Heaven who begat the spirit of him who was ‘the Firstborn’ of all the spirits that come to this earth...”. Carefully read in context, the First Presidency in the 1912 private letter neither confirms nor denies Brigham Young’s belief! Rather, they are merely trying to use Brigham Young’s preaching to contradict the elements of the Adam-God theory in Young’s preaching, but they were very careful stick to standard doctrine themselves. Whether or not you agree with this reading of the 1912 letter, the 1912 statement was a *private letter* to one individual, not a public statement.

With the 1912 letter placed in proper context, we can then appreciate words President Smith delivered in Mesa, Arizona. To requote, he said, “Adam, our earthly parent, was also born of woman into this world, the same as Jesus and you and I.” President Smith stops short of declaring that Adam was begotten in the flesh by the Father.

Now, if you go back and re-read the April 1910 Priesthood Quorum’s table comment, you will find that none of the options given there for the creation of Adam’s body contradicts the 1913 statement. The Apr 1910 statement conspicuously omits the idea that Adam was fashioned “poof-style”—Adam was born of a mother and this is inconsistent with the Adam-made-from-adobe creation model (which, ironically, is probably the creation model accepted implicitly by the majority of LDS). The *alignment* of the Apr 1910 statement and the 1913 statement is evidence (clearly of an inferential nature) that Joseph F. Smith had some oversight in the 1910 statement’s publication.

So, while granting that the 1910 statement wasn’t signed, it stretches credulity to think that President Smith was not consulted on the matter before its publication given its proximity in time to the 1909 statement and the fact that it was in response to a question from several High Priests’ quorums. The fact that the options articulated in the 1910 statement align with another of President Smith’s public statements on the matter supports this inference. What is a matter of fact is that President Smith never publicly contradicted the 1910 instruction, and in light of a careful reading of the 1912 and 1913 statements, I think it reasonable to conclude that it was because he countenanced the response.

Hence, as far as I can tell, there is no record whatsoever of Joseph F. Smith ever teaching the Adam-begotten-of-God-in-flesh doctrine.

Apparently, Joseph F. Smith’s thinking on the subject is (to you) irrelevant.

Of course I care about what he thinks, but—like you—I’m far more interested in what he taught publicly as part of his prophetic station.

I hope to respond to the second point when I get a chance. Best regards.

[R. Gary]

Sicut: Your comment has been published ([click here](#)). But note that, in a formal 1909 statement, Joseph F. Smith's First Presidency did, in point of fact, rule out the possibility for evolutionary origins of Adam's body, and among the apostles and prophets since then, there has been vocal support for that interpretation of the 1909 statement.

Furthermore, no Church President and no apostle is on record in official LDS media questioning or clarifying Joseph F. Smith's 1909 First Presidency statement regarding the "Origin of Man." As a matter of fact, that same 1909 statement has been republished by the Church twice in this century.

[Sicut]

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The 1909 statement clearly allows for an evolutionary origin for man's body. The key phrase:

"...whether we take this to mean the spirit or the body, or both..."

It is difficult to imagine that the author of the April 1910 statement did not consult the 1909 statement when composing their response (since the 1909 statement was undoubtedly the *very reason* the several Quorums were seeking clarification). Furthermore, if the 1909 statement clearly precluded the possibility for an evolutionary origin for Adam's body, then it is equally difficult to imagine that the First Presidency would not have sought to correct the "mis-interpretation" of the April 1910 statement.

[R. Gary]

Sicut: Your current comment has been appended to your comment from four days ago.

1. God says: "Hearken to the words of my servants the prophets." (Jer. 26;5.)

Unfortunately, I have not been able to find the verse which says: "Hearken to the words of letters to the editor and anonymous comments if they appear in Church magazines, even if they disagree with what the prophets teach."

2. Years ago a reader wrote to the Ensign as follows: "I saw the letter in the December Ensign on chocolate. No doubt some well-intentioned Saints will now feel that the Church is against chocolate since the letter appeared in the Ensign."

The Ensign responded: "The information was relayed so that the readership could make of it whatever their individual consciences desired."

3. Similarly, Joseph F. Smith, as editor of the Improvement Era wrote: “It may be well to remind our readers that the Era is not responsible for the individual views or opinions expressed by contributors to its columns.” (Editor’s Table, Dec. 1915.) The April 1910 anonymous comment appeared in just such a column.
4. Meanwhile, at BYU in April 1910, three instructors were teaching “theories on evolution as applied to the origin of man” along the lines of the April 1910 Priesthood Quorums’ Table statement that “the mortal bodies of man [may have] evolved in natural processes to present perfection.”

Upon investigation, it was discovered that whenever such ideas were found to be in conflict with scripture, “it required the modification of the latter to come into harmony with the former.” When the investigation concluded, President Joseph F. Smith announced in the Improvement Era that it had been decided such ideas would no longer be taught at BYU by these instructors because: “Teachers in a Church school ... could not be given opportunity to inculcate theories that were out of harmony with the recognized doctrines of the Church, and hence that they be required to refrain from so doing.”

These events strongly support the conclusion that the April 1910 anonymous comment does not represent the thinking of Joseph F. Smith.