

“WE CAN SEE NO ADVANTAGE TO A CONTINUATION OF THE DISCUSSION:” THE ROBERTS/SMITH/TALMAGE AFFAIR

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IN THE MID-1920s B. H. Roberts, General Authority and President of the Eastern States Mission, began preliminary work on a book-length manuscript. By this time Roberts had already written extensively on church history and somewhat less on church doctrine, the latter consisting largely of essays and books explaining or expounding the works of Joseph Smith. This new book was a departure for Roberts, destined to become the most controversial element of his turbulent career as a church leader.

After his return to Salt Lake in 1927, Roberts developed his notes into an imposing manuscript. Intended originally as a study course for Seventies throughout the Church, it almost immediately became a storm center of controversy.¹ As a result, the book, viewed by Roberts as his most important contribution to the Church, remains unpublished to this day.²

The scope of *The Truth, The Way, The Life* is more sweeping than anything from a previous Mormon hand, with the possible exception of the works of Orson Pratt. Roberts did not just expound one or several gospel principles or ideas from Joseph Smith; rather, he undertook nothing less than a comprehensive, coherent account of the whole cosmic context of human existence—from the intelligence of God, through the organization of the universe, the creation of man and the development of life on earth, to the role of Christ.

In this process he was sometimes pedantically recitative of simple gospel principles. More often than not, however, he was boldly speculative in an attempt to put the known pieces of the puzzle together into a unified account.

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This speculative boldness is the work's chief merit; it was also the basis of extremely hostile reactions from some of Roberts' fellow General Authorities.

Roberts' manuscript did not appear in a vacuum, nor were his efforts without precedent in the Church. Beginning with Orson Pratt's writings in the 1850s, a number of Mormons had attempted to reconcile science and religion.³ But there had also been those who rejected all such efforts as a compromise of revealed truth in deference to the mere "theories of men." In fact Roberts discoursed on a number of subjects that had already been treated extensively within the Church and on which some Authorities had taken firm stands.⁴

The hottest issue was evolution. Given his aims Roberts had to address this subject as well as related subjects, such as the age of the earth. But evolution was hardly a new topic for the Church. The first Mormon reaction to Darwin's theories came in 1861, just two years after publication of *The Origin of Species*, and subsequent treatments of the subject appeared regularly in the decades that followed.⁵ At the turn of the century it was still a matter of particular interest among Mormon intellectuals, scientists and General Authorities.⁶

At the time Roberts wrote and shortly after, several Mormon scientists openly declared agreement between current scientific theory and the scriptures. The *Improvement Era* ran several articles from such men, each taking a different route to the same end: the facts of geology didn't conflict with the gospel.⁷ Three important books treating this theme appeared with church support. Nels Nelson's *Scientific Aspects of Mormonism* was an openly evolutionary work published with the financial and moral support of the First Presidency.⁸ John A. Widtsoe's *Joseph Smith as Scientist*, published first as a serial in the *Era*, offered a somewhat less expansive view but still had an apologetic aim. Widtsoe's Joseph had discovered Herbert Spencer before Spencer and without his erudition—ergo, Smith was inspired.⁹ And Frederick Pack, successor to James Talmage as Deseret Professor of Geology at the University of Utah, came out with *Science and Belief in God*, a strong defense of evolutionary thought, and this from Deseret News Press just five years before the controversy over Roberts' manuscript erupted.¹⁰

Nonetheless, the topic was very controversial. Three faculty members were dismissed from BYU about this same time, in part for failing to discontinue teaching evolutionary theories when warned to do so.¹¹ Two times the First Presidency had spoken guardedly on the issue.¹² Other General Authorities were less circumspect and had condemned evolution in very harsh terms.¹³ Such circumstances might have intimidated another man, but Roberts' determination to unite science and religion was sincere.

Roberts' assertion that the earth was very old, much older than the few thousand years some felt the scriptures indicated, was hardly remarkable. This troubled few persons, in or out of the Church; many of his contemporary General Authorities seemed willing to accept it, even when they disputed evolution per se.¹⁴ But his assertion that, long before the biblical chronology would allow, there had lived and died countless plants and animals, includ-

ing human groups,¹⁵ was very controversial. To Roberts the evidence for this was overwhelming. The problem was to account for this in terms of a scriptural framework that seemed to say that Adam was the first man and that only with his fall did death enter into the world.¹⁶

At this point Roberts clearly faced a dilemma. To him the evidence for the antiquity of life forms pre-dated the point allotted in scripture by so far that one could not simply move back the date of Adam by a few thousand years, evoking a mistranslation-of-the-Bible theory. But neither could he do away with a literal Adam in favor of a more symbolic interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. Roberts was never prepared to go that far. Adam was a real person with a special divine mission. He was not, however, the earliest man on this planet. Adam represented the beginning of the Adamic Dispensation, but before him, a whole race of human beings had lived and died on earth. These "pre-adamites" were simply destroyed in a great cataclysm that "cleansed" the earth before Adam, leaving only fossilized remains as the meager evidence of their presence.¹⁷

Why did Roberts adopt so speculative a theory? Perhaps the most fundamental reason was that he could see no alternative short of the most radical revision of accepted ideas about the first chapter of Genesis. To him the evidence for the antiquity of life, including man, was incontrovertible. To deny it would place the Church in opposition to science and result in the apostasy of many educated members, members whose talents were of inestimable value to the Church. His theory offered the needed reconciliation between science and the scriptures.¹⁸

Roberts thought his solution was implied in the scriptures. Mormon thought had long held that there were two creations; the popular interpretation of the first two chapters of Genesis was that the first chapter represented the spiritual creation and the second the temporal. However, Genesis 1 implied some orderly progression of the development of life forms while Genesis 2 implies that Adam arrived on a "lone and dreary" world. Roberts suggested that this implied the occurrence of a cataclysmic event destroying all life before Adam. Thus the Adamic Dispensation was ushered in by partially "wiping the slate clean," leaving only the paleontological evidence found by modern science.¹⁹

Roberts took another scriptural argument from Orson Hyde who had first promulgated the notion of pre-Adamites in an 1856 speech. This argument was simply that God had commanded Adam to "multiply and replenish the earth." Did this not imply that the earth had once been "filled up" with human beings? Here Roberts found both a scriptural argument and prior Apostolic authority.²⁰

It was this notion of pre-Adamites that generated the most acrimony in the discussions surrounding Roberts' manuscript, but it was not the only controversial aspect of his evolutionary thought. Roberts also undertook a vaguely worded and somewhat contradictory account of the evolutionary development of life forms on earth—the so called "transmutation" of species at the heart of post-Darwinian evolutionary biology.

At the outset of this discussion, Roberts clearly was impressed with the evidence for evolutionary development—that different species evolved from common ancestors. But he did not forget the scriptural injunction that plants and animals reproduce only “after their own kind.” A crucial question, of course, was what the scriptures meant when they spoke of “kind.” The widely held view was that it referred to what we mean by “species,” such as dogs, cats, horses, etc., and that these species did not all evolve from some common, mammalian ancestor.

In both Mormon and non-Mormon contexts, speciation had been the crucial issue in the long debate over evolution. An anti-evolutionary argument based on the absence of evidence for speciation appeared in the earliest Mormon criticism of Darwin: Since no one had ever seen a plant or animal reproduce anything but its own kind, evolution stood discredited and the “biblical view” vindicated.²¹

Roberts could not reconcile scientific theory and the scriptures in the face of a biblical interpretation equating kind and species. He did, however, try to develop a position he called “the development view,” but his statement of it appears to have been intentionally ambiguous. Consider the following passage:

The development theory starts with the eternity of life—the life force and the eternity of some life forms, and the possibilities for these forms—perhaps in embryonic status, or in their simplest forms (same as to man) are transplanted to newly created worlds there to be developed each to its highest possibilities, by propagation, and yet within and under the great law of life of Genesis 1 *viz.*, each “after its own kind.”²²

The obvious question is, what are these primeval forms out of which other forms develop? If Roberts made them too remote, he would give up any semblance of connection with the popular argument against evolution noted above. But Roberts seems to have been suggesting that these forms were more remote than our “species.” If so, then why not simply go all the way and adopt the total evolutionary perspective of descent with modifications? Roberts seemed unwilling to go that far, but as he tried to explain the origin of these forms, he came close:

And from a few other forms of life transported to the earth there could be development of varied kinds of life yet adhering closely to the great law of creation so constantly repeated—“each after its own kind”. Not necessarily rigidly limited to stereotyped individual forms, but developing the kinds from the subdivisions of vegetable and animal kingdoms into various species through development from primeval forms.²³

Once this position is taken, however, there is nothing in the logic of the case to prevent this primitive form from being itself descended from a much more primitive ancestor. In his effort to take account of science, Roberts virtually adopted the evolutionary position.²⁴

With so many concessions to science it is not surprising that Roberts' manuscript received unfavorable criticism. What is surprising is how narrowly focused this criticism was at first. The manuscript was first reviewed by a reading committee of the Council of the Twelve who drew up a "list of points of doctrine in question." There were thirty-seven items on the list, almost all minor. The Committee felt, for example, that Roberts overstated the evidence in saying the tree from which Adam and Eve had eaten contained the seeds of life and death. The scriptures referred only to the seeds of death. Other similarly minor issues were raised.²⁵

The real sticking point was the theory of pre-adamites. The section on the transmutation of species may have been vague enough to avoid dispute, but neither the age of the earth nor the antiquity of life and death were explicitly mentioned. In a covering letter to the Council, the reading committee noted that there were

objectionable doctrines advanced which are of a speculative nature and appear to be out of harmony with the revelations of the Lord and the fundamental teachings of the Church. Among the outstanding doctrines to which objection is made are: The doctrine that Adam was a translated being who came to this earth subject to death, and therefore did not bring death upon himself and his posterity through the fall; that Adam was placed on the earth when the earth was in a desolate condition and before any other life, belonging to the "dispensation of Adam" was on the earth; that all life preceeding Adam was swept off, even to the fishes of the sea, by some great cataclysm so that a new start had to be made; that God the father is still discovering hidden laws and truth which he does not know but which are eternal.²⁶

The committee further reported that they had met several times with Roberts in attempts to get him to delete the offending chapters. He had refused and, rather, added material referring to recent finds of pre-historic men in China. At one point he threatened to publish the book on his own if he could not get church approval.

After the report of the reading committee, the full Council reviewed the matter and reached virtually the same conclusions in its own report to the First Presidency. The Council report, however, also stressed a more basic theme:

It is the duty of the General Authorities of the Church to safeguard and protect the membership of the Church from the introduction of controversial subjects and false doctrines which tend to create factions and otherwise disturb the faith of the Latter-Day Saints. There is so much of vital importance revealed and which we can present with clear and convincing presentation and which the world does not possess that we, the committee see no reason for the introduction of questions which are speculative to say the least: more especially so when such teachings appear to be in conflict with the revelations of the Lord.²⁷

Even as this letter was being sent, Roberts' position was attacked publicly by a member of the Council (and of the reading committee). In an address to

the April 1930 Genealogical Conference, Joseph Fielding Smith went considerably beyond the questioning of the Council. In his mind the issue was clear: Roberts was teaching false doctrine. While this is debatable, Roberts certainly was directly repudiating positions staked out earlier by Smith himself.²⁸ In his speech Smith was characteristically blunt:

Even in the Church there are a scattered few who are now advocating and contending that the earth was peopled with a race—perhaps many races—long before the days of Adam. These men desire, of course, to square the teachings in the Bible with the teachings of modern science and philosophy with regard to the age of the earth and life on it. If you hear anyone talking this way you may answer them by saying that the doctrine of pre-adamites is not a doctrine of the Church and is not advocated or countenanced in the Church. There is no warrant for it in scripture, not an authentic word to sustain it.²⁹

Moreover, Smith asserted that there had most certainly been no death in the world before the fall of Adam.

When this address was printed in the October issue of the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, Roberts could not remain silent. In December he appealed directly to President Heber J. Grant. In a strongly worded letter he objected to the "strictly dogmatical and pronounced finality of the discussion." If Elder Smith had been speaking for the Church, this fact should have been stated clearly. In the likely event he was speaking only for himself, Roberts was blunt:

If Elder Smith is merely putting forth his own position I call in question his competency to utter such dogmatism either as scholar or as an apostle. I am sure he is not competent to speak in such a manner from general learning or special research work on the subject; nor as an Apostle as in that case he would be in conflict with the plain implication of the scriptures, both ancient and modern and with the teaching of a more experienced and learned and earlier apostle, and a contemporary of the prophet Joseph Smith—whose public discourse on the subject appears in the *Journal of Discourses* and was publicly endorsed by president Brigham Young, all of which would have more weight in setting forth doctrine than this last dictum of Elder Smith.

My question is important as affecting finally the faith and status of a very large portion of the priesthood and educated membership of the Church. I am sure and I trust this matter will receive early attention.³⁰

After receiving this letter, President Grant referred the matter to the Council for a discussion of the issues. The Council resolved to hear both men in separate sessions. On January 7, 1931, Roberts made his presentation to the assembled Apostles.³¹ While a copy of the lengthy paper has not been located, it is not difficult to reconstruct his argument from his letters and his manuscript. Briefly stated, he apparently repeated the arguments from science, scriptural authority and apostolic teaching (Orson Hyde) that he also used in the manuscript itself. Two weeks later, Elder Smith appeared with his own lengthy paper. His was a defense of an extreme scriptural literalism: "The Latter-day Saints are not bound to receive the theories of men when

they do not accord with the word of the Lord to them." What Roberts was preaching was not just erroneous, it was a compromise with forces that were satanic in their origin:

The doctrine of organic evolution which pervades the modern day sciences proclaiming the edict that man has evolved from the lower forms of life through the Java skull, the Heidelberg jaw, the Piltdown man, the Neanderthal skull and last but not least the Peiping man who lived millions of years ago is as false as their author who lives in hell.³²

While this is not exactly what Roberts claimed about human origins, he had in fact accepted much of the data on which scientists based this conclusion. Roberts' whole discussion of this matter could be seen as an attempt to avoid the evolutionary conclusion to which he seemed to be driven by the evidence. By contrast Elder Smith flatly refused to accept the evidence; it had been created by Satan to lead men astray. On this point the gap between Smith and Roberts was unbridgeable. To Roberts the evidence of geology and paleontology was established "by the researches of scientists of highest character, of profoundest learning and world wide research."³³ Smith had earlier characterized these men as "narrow" and "contemptible," and his reference here to the work of Satan does not seem to alter his estimation of them.³⁴

Elder Smith's position was not new. Various religious opponents of evolutionary thought had been using it for years. As noted earlier, he had expressed most of it in the *Liahona* in 1918 and again in the *Era* in 1920.³⁵ The title of the first article captures the spirit of his position: "The Word of the Lord Superior to the Theories of Men." Stated in this fashion any church member might well agree. Smith, however, took this view to the extreme. He argued that the gospel stood or fell on the literal existence of Adam and a literal fall exactly as they are recorded in Genesis. Quoting one of his favorite sources, fundamentalist geologist George McReady Price, he once noted: "No Adam, no fall; no fall, no atonement; no atonement, no savior." In short, the whole theological structure of the Gospel was at stake.³⁶

To Smith, Roberts' view was dangerous because he indicated that the literal text of the first chapter of Genesis was not sacrosanct and because he was willing to depart from the most literal reading of the text. Elder Smith viewed this as the most insidious threat of all. Once started on this process, he argued, you cannot stop, for there is no reason to stop short of a wholesale departure from the gospel. Lacking either a warrant from the text of the scriptures or from one of the prophets, those who followed this course were bound to wander in a desert of their own creation, ultimately forsaking the historic faith of the Church for their own theories.³⁷

After hearing both men, the Council non-committally referred the matter back to the First Presidency, noting only that they regarded Roberts' language as "very offensive" and as "failing to show the deference due from one brother to another brother of higher rank in the priesthood."³⁸

Roberts continued to press his case. In early February he wrote directly to President Grant saying he would like an opportunity to point out the "weaknesses and inconsistencies" in Smith's paper, Smith's view he characterized as "sleighter than a house of cards," and he offered to destroy it if given a chance. He also made pointed reference to his now overshadowed manuscript:

It was . . . such pablum as this that suspended the publication of my book—now in manuscript—*The Truth, The Way, The Life*. This book from my judgement of it is the most important work that I have yet contributed to the Church, the six volumned comprehensive history of the Church not omitted. Life at my years and with an incurable ailment is very precarious and I should dislike very much to pass on without completing and publishing this work . . . If the position he has taken can be met successfully, then I think that the principle cause suspending the publication of my work will be removed.³⁹

Roberts did not get his chance. Two months later, in April, the First Presidency replied in a memorandum circulated to all of the General Authorities. They made several important points. First, they called attention to the care which must be exercised by any of the Authorities when they speak publicly on controversial topics:

We call attention to the fact that when one of the General Authorities of the Church makes a definite statement in regard to any doctrine, particularly when the statement is made in a dogmatic declaration of finality, whether he expresses it as his opinion or not he is regarded as voicing the Church and his statements are accepted as the approved doctrines of the Church, which they should be.⁴⁰

Secondly, they noted that both Smith and Roberts had produced scientific evidence, scriptural texts and quotations from previous General Authorities to bolster their respective arguments. So far as the First Presidency was concerned, however, neither side was able to carry the day. In this crucial section they wrote:

The statement made by Elder Smith that the existence of pre-adamites is not a doctrine of the Church is true. It is just as true that the statement "there were not pre-adamites upon the earth" is not a doctrine of the church. Neither side of the controversy has been accepted as a doctrine at all.⁴¹

Given this conclusion on the doctrinal issues the instruction to the General Authorities was obvious: cease public discussion of controversial topics. Concern yourselves instead with the simple truths of the gospel:

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."⁴²

In response, Apostle James Talmage wrote in his journal for this date, April 7, 1931:

As to whether pre-Adamite 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 pre-Adamite 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 on the premises. This is one of the many things upon which we cannot speak with assurance and dogmatic assertions on either side are likely to do harm rather than good.

Three days after the issuance of the decision Council President Ruder Clawson wrote to George Albert Smith, chairman of the first reading committee, asking him to "make an earnest effort to compose matters" with Roberts and get him to drop the affected material from his manuscript so that "an excellent work may not go unpublished and be lost to the Church." If Roberts refused, he was to be told that the book definitely would not be published without the needed changes.⁴³ The committee did not succeed in this mission, for better than a year later Roberts was still trying to have the book published "as is." His last letter on the subject reveals a sadness and a bitterness over the fate of what to him was the culmination of his ministry on behalf of the Church:

It had been my hope that the volume still in manuscript, unpublished, which would make a work of about 700 pages—*The Truth, The Way, The Life* would be the climax in the doctrinal department of my work . . . the matter of this book grew up during more than fifty years of my ministry crystallizing practically all my thought, research and studies in the doctrinal line of the Church. It was not the hasty product of the paltry six months at the close of my eastern states mission administration—as some have supposed . . . that manuscript may not likely be printed in my lifetime, comment of course will not be necessary.⁴⁴

It might have been expected that the April decision would have firmly ended all discussion on this topic. Yet six months later the issue again surfaced even more acrimoniously. The key figure this time was Apostle James Talmage, a much more difficult protagonist for several reasons. Roberts had been a controversial figure for years before submitting his manuscript and was already suspect in some quarters. While Roberts was not an Apostle, Talmage was, and his works *Jesus the Christ* and *The Articles of Faith* were even then standards in the Church, revered almost as much as the scriptures themselves. His reputation was only enhanced by the fact that for most of the latter part of the 1920s he was the regular "Church" speaker on the Sunday evening radio broadcasts on KSL. Combined with his unimpeachable reputation for orthodoxy was the fact that Talmage was a trained geologist. While Roberts would inevitably have to be content to quote other authorities whose methods he could not fully explain, Talmage knew first hand how they arrived at the conclusions they so confidently expressed. While Elder Smith may have felt that the evidence for pre-Adamites was authored in hell, it would be a difficult matter to maintain that belief when a senior Apostle of Talmage's stature and geological training was expressing it.⁴⁵

Talmage touched off this second phase of the controversy with a carefully worded talk in the Tabernacle on August 9, 1931. Entitled "The Earth and Man," the address was more of a summary statement on a number of issues relating to evolutionary thought, the coming of man and related topics. In it he argued tentatively for much of what Roberts had already defended. The earth was very old, and for "countless generations" there had been life and death of plants and animals.⁴⁶ These were important concessions. But what about Adam and the pre-Adamites? Here Talmage tentatively opened up the possibility of such beings, but he did not commit himself in the manner that Roberts had done:

Geologists and anthropologists say that if the beginning of Adamic history dates back but 6,000 years or less there must have been races of human sort upon the earth long before that time—without denying however, that Adamic history may be correct if it be regarded solely as the history of the Adamic race. . . . I do not regard Adam as related to—certainly not descended from—the Neanderthal, the Cro-Magnon, the Peking or the Piltdown man. Adam came as divinely directed, empowered and created and stands as the patriarchal head of his posterity.⁴⁷

In direct contradiction to Elder Smith, Talmage asserted that the evidence of geology was God's record, not Satan's deception. Despite this receptivity to modern science, Talmage was more emphatically negative on the question of evolution *per se* than Roberts. He flatly denied that there had been any transmutation of species: species did not evolve. Plants and animals reproduced only "after their own kind." Evolutionary theory was merely an "unproved hypothesis." And certainly, "the Holy Scriptures should not be discredited by the theories of men."

While Talmage displayed an openness to scientific research, he never forsook the idea of "special creation" in favor of the evolutionary hypothesis of descent with modification. He was willing to accept some modification of Biblical literalism in the face of science, but on the most crucial issue of the evolutionary hypothesis he retreated. The wonderful adaptation of structure to function in the natural world implied a definite plan and a series of special creations, but it did not imply the ruthless mechanisms of evolutionary theory.

Talmage's speech was scheduled for publication but realizing that he had contradicted the views of Elder Smith, he stopped publication so that the First Presidency and the Council could consider the matter.⁴⁸ There were apparently several Council meetings on the issue and private consultations between Talmage and the First Presidency. A copy of the speech was sent to John A. Widtsoe, then in England presiding over the European missions. He replied on September 9 that he thought the speech was excellent and should be published just as it was.⁴⁹ On September 29 a crucial, seven-hour meeting was held on the matter during which Talmage reported that there was "revealed a very strong feeling on the part of a minority of the Brethren against giving public sanction to the views of geologists as set forth in the address." He further related some surprise at the strength of this feeling:

The insistence on the part of three of our brethren—really to the effect that all geologists and all geology are wrong in matters relating to the sequence of life on earth—has been surprising. The author of the genealogical society address holds tenaciously to his view that prior to the fall of Adam there was no death of plants and animals upon the earth.⁵⁰

At least one further meeting of the Council was devoted to the matter as well as discussions between Talmage and the First Presidency. On November 17 Talmage met privately with the First Presidency and they went over the speech carefully. At that time they informed him of their decision to proceed with publication.⁵¹ It was published on November 21 in the *Church News* and shortly thereafter appeared as a separate pamphlet.

In view of the predictable controversy that followed his address, one wonders what prompted him in the first place? His journals are revealing on this question. He wrote that when he spoke, he was mindful of the injunction of the First Presidency to refrain from such discussion. But, he writes, he also remembered being present at a consultation where the First Presidency expressed a desire that "sometime, somewhere, something should be said by one or more of us to make plain that the Church does not refuse to recognize the discoveries and demonstrations of science, especially in relation to the subject at issue."⁵² With Widtsoe away in England, who better to speak for the side of science? This concern seems to have been foremost in his mind at the time he gave the address. He further wrote that President Anthony Ivins

and Apostles Richard Lyman, George Richards and Joseph Fielding Smith were present when it was given and that all except Smith expressed approval of it.

While this is undoubtedly a major part of the explanation, there seem to have been other factors as well. Talmage clearly understood that a major problem with Roberts' manuscript was the finality with which it discussed the problem of pre-Adamites.⁵³ It seems Talmage felt he could stake out a middle ground on this basis: affirm life and death before Adam, but equivocate on the question of pre-adamites. In combining this with a firm conviction of the truthfulness of the Biblical record of Adam's progeny, he supported orthodoxy where it mattered and innovated on issues that concerned the educated minority in the Church.

In addition, Talmage was clearly dismayed to find that quite apart from the specific question of pre-adamites, some of his brethren felt that "all geologists and all geology" were wrong when it came to such questions as the age of the earth and the progression of life forms upon it. To say this was to attack Talmage's own discipline, one which he had worked hard to master and whose practitioners he knew personally as honorable men. Furthermore, such an attitude questioned one of the basic premises of his career: the unity of science and revealed truth. If all geologists were wrong on these issues, then their very method of study must be wrong; grant this and the value of scientific inquiry disappears. So Talmage struck back with the faithful, tentative style which he felt would offer some hope to both sides. That the Church did print his address suggests that the First Presidency too did not wish to close the door on scientific inquiry. That there were still clear limits on how far the Church was willing to go, however, is evidenced by the failure of Roberts to secure permission to publish his book even after the appearance of Talmage's speech.

With the death of Roberts and Talmage in 1933, the controversy over the manuscript and the subject of evolution in general subsided. The depression directed the energies of the leadership elsewhere. At the end of the decade Widtsoe wrote a widely read series in the *Era* in which he dealt partially with evolutionary theory. Here he argued that the earth was very, very old and that the "day" of Genesis 1 was simply a creative period of indefinite length. But in the section on evolution he pointed out that the idea of organic evolution was only a theory deduced from a given body of facts; as a theory it was not necessarily the only available interpretation of the facts and so could be revised. He did not commit himself on the subject, but the absence of dogmatic hostility left the door open to the scientific community.⁵⁴

After World War II evolutionary theory became well entrenched in Mormon academic circles. Twenty years after Roberts asserted the existence of pre-adamites Widtsoe admitted the existence of "human like beings before the coming of Adam" in the *Era*. He further confessed himself unable to explain either the existence of these "beings" or the coming of Adam: "The mystery of the creation of Adam and Eve has not yet been revealed."⁵⁵ By the time of Widtsoe's death in 1952 many Mormon scientists, while remaining

committed to the Church, openly embraced evolution, and such remains the case today.⁵⁶

The anti-scientific position, however, was never completely abandoned. As in the original B.H. Roberts controversy, Joseph Fielding Smith remained the champion of this cause. At the suggestion of other literalist Authorities, he published the strongly anti-evolutionary *Man: His Origin and Destiny* in 1954. While this work was disavowed by President McKay as "unauthorized" and no statement of church doctrine, Smith's basic assertions have attained considerable stature. This has been in part through their emphatic and unqualified presentation in the unofficial but highly regarded and widely used compendium by Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*. That the final chapter in this controversy has yet to be written is evidenced by the recent publication of distinctly anti-evolutionary concepts in officially sanctioned works. While no official change has taken place in the position of the First Presidency since the Roberts/Smith/Talmage encounter, one finds, for example, that the "Bible dictionary" in the new, Mormon edition of the King James Version of the Bible asserts without qualification that "Latter-day revelation teaches that there was no death on this earth for any forms of life before the fall of Adam" (see the entry on "death," citing 2 Nephi 2:22 and Moses 6:48). Similarly, the 1979–80 Gospel Doctrine text, *My Kingdom Shall Roll Forth* (1979), approvingly quotes Joseph Fielding Smith's assertion that "death for all life came by the fall" (p. 126) and elsewhere asks students to address the question, "What evidence is there in the scriptures that man did not descend from lower forms of life?" (p. 84). Indeed the current Melchizedek priesthood manual, *Choose You This Day*, is if anything even more pointed. In addition to commending for study a particularly outspoken compilation of Joseph Fielding Smith's anti-evolutionary views, students are asked to discuss a Smith assertion that "men who have had faith in God, when they have become converted to that theory [of evolution] forsake him."⁵⁷

The extended debate generated by Roberts' manuscript ended inconclusively. At another level, however, we can see in this episode something of the essence of Mormonism. However else Mormonism may be similar to other religious groups, it differs from virtually all in having neither a mechanism for nor people competent to engage in authoritative debate on the abstract issues of metaphysics and theology at the heart of the Smith/Roberts/Talmage encounter. As a result, Mormonism lacks theological "orthodoxy" in the usual sense. We have few, if any, creedal statements to define our convictions with precise language. What usually passes for "orthodoxy" is simply a widely held opinion.

While the Church does excommunicate people for preaching "false doctrine," these cases have usually dealt with questions of religious authority and revelation, i.e., denying the authority of the prophet or of the Book of Mormon. By contrast, the specifically "theological" disagreements in the past and present life of the Church simply would not have been tolerated within a single denomination in historic Christianity. If we have an orthodoxy, it is more one of authority and structure than of theology and doctrine.

The debate between Smith and Roberts ended, therefore, not because either man was able to carry the day, but because church leaders did not want to encourage the theological speculation which it would have engendered. That in the long run the goals of the Presidency were not necessarily realized is evident from the succeeding history. Ironically, this was in large measure a result of the absence of a credal "orthodoxy" in the Church—an inevitable corollary, some would say, of our antipathy to authoritative debate or speculative discussion.

NOTES

¹The plans for the work are outlined by Roberts in a letter to Rudger Clawson, president of the Council of the Twelve, Sept. 17, 1928, Roberts Paper, Church Historian's Office (hereinafter referred to as CHO).

²The manuscript has recently been made available to researchers by the First Presidency.

³The earliest attempt at this in book form seems to be J. H. Ward, *Gospel Philosophy: Showing the Absurdities of Infidelity and the Harmony of the Gospel with Science and History* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor, 1884). It has been a popular theme of Mormon writers. Aside from the works of Pratt, Nelson and Pack referred to below see also Joseph Keeler, *Foundation Stones of the Earth* (Provo, 1891); James Talmage, *The Theory of Evolution* (Provo: Utah County Teachers Association, 1890) O. F. Ursonbach, *Why I am a Mormon* (Salt Lake City, 1910).

⁴Joseph Fielding Smith, "The Word of the Lord Superior to the Theories of Men" *Liahona* 15 (April 1918) pp. 641-644; Joseph Fielding Smith, "The Origin and Destiny of Man," *Improvement Era* 23 (March, 1920) pp. 376-393; Anthony Ivins, "A Study of Evolution," *Improvement Era* 21 (December, 1917) pp. 161-166.

⁵Editorial, *Millennial Star* 23 (Oct. 12, 1861) pp. 651-654; cf. *Millennial Star*, 33 (June 13, 1871) pp. 374-375; "Man and His Varieties," *Juvenile Instructor* (Aug 15, 1868) pp. 24-25; Orson Whitney, "Man's Origin and Destiny," *The Contributor* 3 (June, 1882) pp. 268-270.

⁶For comprehensive surveys of the literature see Duane Jeffery, "Seers, Savants and Evolution: The Uncomfortable Interface," *Dialogue* 7 (1973) pp. 41-75; Richard Sherlock, "A Turbulent Spectrum: Mormon Reactions to the Darwinist Legacy," *Journal of Mormon History* 5 (1978) pp. 33-59.

⁷Frederick Pack, "The Creation of the Earth," *Improvement Era* 13 (Sept. 1910) pp. 1023-1027; 13 (October 1910) pp. 1121-1127; 14 (January, 1911) pp. 220-230; J. C. Hogenson, "Natural Development," *Improvement Era* 14 (November, 1910) pp. 28-31; John Thorgeirson, "A Spiritual Evolution," *Liahona* 5 (May, 1908) pp. 1254-1255.

⁸Nels Nelson, *Scientific Aspects of Mormonism* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1904).

⁹John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith as Scientist* (Salt Lake City: General Board of the YMMIA, 1908). This was first published serially in the *Era* in 1904-1905.

¹⁰Frederick Pack, *Science and Belief in God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1924). After publication of this work Pack was still appointed to the General Board of the Sunday School.

¹¹I have treated this episode in more detail in "Campus in Crisis: BYU 1911," *Sunstone* 4 (Jan-Feb., 1979) pp. 10-16.

¹²"The Origin of Man," *Improvement Era* 13 (November, 1909) pp. 75-81; "Mormon view of Evolution," *Improvement Era* 28 (Sept., 1925) pp. 1090-1091. The first statement was issued under Joseph F. Smith and the second, which consists of excerpts from the first, was issued under Heber J. Grant, Jeffery, op. cit., offers a useful interpretation of both statements.

¹³In addition to the articles by Anthony Ivins and Joseph Fielding Smith cited in note 4 above see also Charles Penrose, *Conference Reports* (April, 1911); Orson Whitney, *Conference Reports* (October, 1925). Others seem to have expressed hostile views in private such as George Richards in his *Journal*, Feb. 21, 1911 (CHO).

¹⁴*The Truth, The Way, The Life* (TWL) Chap. 24. Many Church leaders otherwise hostile to evolution, such as Charles Penrose, were prepared to admit that the earth was very old. American religious leaders in general had been doing it since the 1830s. cf. Charles Penrose, "The Age and Destiny of the Earth," *Improvement Era* 12 (May, 1909) pp. 506-509; also see Conrad Wrought, "The Religion of Geology," *New England Quarterly* 14(1941) pp. 335-358.

¹⁵TWL Chap. 31 *passim*.

¹⁶In his initial discussion of this manuscript, Truman Madsen argued that the treatment of these issues was not central and could have been dropped without damage to the integrity of the whole. However, Roberts himself did not feel this way. One of the most important reasons behind his whole effort was to provide some accommodation between Mormon thought and modern science, without which Roberts feared for the educated members of the Church. Given the fact that the most important issue in his day was the question of evolution, Roberts could not have ignored it. Cf. Truman Madsen, "The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Analysis of B. H. Roberts' Unpublished Master Work," *BYU Studies* 15(1975) pp. 259-292.

¹⁷TWL Chap. 32 pp. 1-2. The idea of pre-adamite races goes back to the seventeenth century. It had its most complete statement in Isaac de la Peyrere's two works, *Men before Adam* (1656) and *Præ-Adamitæ* (1655); on this see especially, Richard Popkin, "The Pre-Adamite Theory in the Renaissance," in *Philosophy and Humanism*, ed. E. P. Mahoney, (Leiden:Brill, 1976) pp. 50-69; and his more encyclopedic treatment of the question in his *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). While the theory was not new, Roberts was the first, so far as I can tell, to place it in a dispensationalist framework.

¹⁸cf. Roberts to Rudger Clawson, Dec. 31, 1930, Roberts Papers, CHO.

¹⁹TWL Chap. 30 pp. 24-25; Chap. 31 pp. 28-29.

²⁰Orson Hyde, *Journal of Discourses* Vol. II pp. 79-87.

²¹*Millennial Star* 23 (Oct. 12, 1961) pp. 651-654.

²²TWL Chap. 25 pp. 5-6.

²³*Ibid.* pp. 10-11.

²⁴I have discussed Roberts' treatment of these issues in more detail in "A Turbulent Spectrum. . ." *op. cit.*

²⁵George Albert Smith, chairman of the reading committee, to Rudger Clawson, Council President, Oct. 10, 1929. Clawson Papers, CHO. The other members of the committee were Joseph Fielding Smith, Melvin Ballard, Stephen L. Richards and David O. McKay.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Council of the Twelve to Heber J. Grant, May 15, 1930. Clawson Papers, CHO

²⁸See articles cited in note 4 above.

²⁹Joseph Fielding Smith, "Faith leads to a Fullness of Truth and Righteousness," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 21 (Oct. 1930) pp. 145-158.

³⁰Roberts to Heber J. Grant, Dec. 15, 1930, Roberts Papers; Roberts to Rudger Clawson, Dec. 31, 1930, Roberts Papers, CHO.

³¹Roberts met with the council on January 2 at which time he outlined orally the charges he was making. James Talmage, *Journal* Vol. 29 p. 9 (Jan. 2, 1931).

³²Manuscript on file at CHO pp. 2-3.

³³Roberts to Rudger Clawson *op. cit.*

³⁴The phrases are in "The Word of the Lord . . ." *op. cit.*

³⁵Smith articles cited in note 4 above.

³⁶This argument pervaded the fundamentalist literature of the 1920s. For examples see Willard Gatewood ed., *Controversy in the Twenties: Fundamentalism, Modernism and Evolution* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969).

³⁷This outlook pervades the manuscript presented to the Council. I have discussed another example of it in "Faith and History: The Snell Controversy," *Dialogue* 12(1979) pp. 27-41.

³⁸Council of the Twelve to the First Presidency, January 21, 1931, Clawson Papers, CHO.

³⁹Roberts to Heber J. Grant, Feb. 9, 1931. Roberts Papers, CHO. Talmage indicates in his journal that he was called in for a private conference with the First Presidency on these matters on January 14. This was after Roberts had made his presentation but before Smith had made his, indicating that even then they were preparing to make a final decision by getting some geological advice from a trustworthy source.

⁴⁰Copy is in my possession. The quotation is from p. 7.

⁴¹*Ibid.* p. 6.

⁴²*Ibid.* p. 7.

⁴³Rudger Clawson to George Albert Smith, April 10, 1931, Clawson Papers, CHO.

⁴⁴Roberts to Heber J. Grant, August 30, 1932; also see Roberts to E. H. Lund, Roberts Papers, CHO.

⁴⁵On Talmage's thought on these matters see "A Turbulent Spectrum . . ." op. cit.

⁴⁶Talmage, "The Earth and Man."

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸Talmage to John A. Widtsoe, August 27, 1931, Talmage Papers, CHO.

⁴⁹Widtsoe to Clawson, September 9, 1931. Widtsoe may have misinterpreted the speech as dealing only with the age of the earth and the patriarchal status of Adam. cf. Widtsoe to Susa Young Gates, Oct. 30, 1931, Widtsoe Papers, Utah State Historical Society.

⁵⁰Talmage to Widtsoe, November 18, 1931, Talmage Papers, CHO.

⁵¹Talmage, *Journal*, Nov. 17, 1931; also Talmage to Reed Smoot, Nov. 20, 1931.

⁵²Talmage, *Journal*, Nov. 21, 1931.

⁵³Talmage, *Journal*, April 7, 1931.

⁵⁴The series was entitled "Evidences and Reconciliations" and was later edited in book form by Widtsoe's son-in-law, G. Homer Durham, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960). For our purposes the most important articles were "How Old is the Earth," *Improvement Era* 41 (December, 1938); "How did the Earth come into Being" *Improvement Era* 42 (February, 1939); "What is the Origin of Life on Earth," *Improvement Era* 42 (March, 1939); "To what Extent should the Doctrine of Evolution be Accepted," *Improvement Era* 42 (July, 1939). Widtsoe himself was out of the country at the time the controversy over the manuscript surfaced but he had hoped that the First Presidency would have publicly decided the matter: "I have been afflicted with these questions for a generation of time. It does seem high time that the Church answer them definitively or declare that it does not know, so that more important questions may engage the minds of young and old." Widtsoe to Susa Young Gates, Oct. 30, 1931, Widtsoe Papers, USHS. This letter also reveals a strong fondness for Joseph Fielding Smith and definite support for his efforts to defend conservative orthodoxy in the Church.

⁵⁵John A. Widtsoe, "Were there Pre-Adamites?" *Improvement Era* 51 (May, 1948) p. 205. This selection was the only one omitted from the more accessible book collection.

⁵⁶On this whole matter see Jeffery op. cit. and William Lee Stokes, "An Official Position," *Dialogue* 12 (Winter 1979), pp. 90-92.

⁵⁷*Choose You This Day* (Salt Lake City, 1979), p. 39. Commended was the chapter on evolution in *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City, 1954), a compilation by Bruce McConkie of Joseph Fielding Smith's writings and sermons. The tenor of this discussion is well reflected in such subtitles as "Evolution and Religion Cannot Be Harmonized," "Theory of Evolution Denies Christ," and "If Evolution is True, the Church is False." Even more recently McConkie, in a 14-Stake Fireside at BYU, termed the belief "that revealed religion and organic evolution can be harmonized" one of the "seven deadly heresies" in the Church. Jeff Hurd, "Apostle Warns of Heresies," *The Daily Universe*, June 3, 1980, p. 2.