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J.S. 1931

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

OFFICE OF THE EUROPEAN MISSION

295 EDGE LANE LIVERPOOL

London

September 9, 1931.

President Rudger Clawson
and members of the Council of Twelve,
47 East South Temple Street,
Salt Lake City, Utah,
U. S. A.

Dear Brethren:

A letter enclosing Brother Talmage's sermon The Earth and Man, and requesting me to comment on the address for your next quarterly meeting, followed me to London where I am for the moment engaged in a variety of duties. In obedience to this request, I am sending on the following hurried notes.

I have read Brother Talmage's address twice and with care. The subjects therein treated, delicately yet forcefully, are of high importance to our youth who in the midst of modern-day knowledge are seeking to anchor their faith. And, I suspect that many of the older people are "at sea" on the same subjects. I am pleased, indeed, that the address was delivered publicly and hope that it may soon be published. It will guide, also, our missionaries, who, without a published pronouncement, fall into many errors in their private discussions, and often are placed at a disadvantage, especially in street meetings where open comment is allowed, and where the heckler is ever present.

It is exceedingly difficult to present such a subject in a sermon, where the limitations of time make full declarations and explanations of meaning impossible. However, Brother Talmage has so well condensed his statements in this address, that those who disagree with him, will find it difficult to misquote or misinterpret him.

The theses which he defends represent Gospel truths as I understand the Gospel. I shall not suggest any changes in the text. Were Brother Talmage to enlarge the address, I would suggest certain amplifications, and the inclusion of more quotations from very recent writers (to meet possible objections), but the theses themselves I would recommend to be left unchanged.

I am especially pleased that attention is called to the fact, admitted by all profound workers in religion or science, that our knowledge is secure only to a certain point. The unknown is vast, and will require eternity for its exploration.

I am equally happy that the address calls attention to the nature of a scientific inference. The confusion of facts and inferences lies at the bottom of many of the differences among mankind.

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True, the written or spoken word always suggests ideas, and requires some inferences; but such inferences should not be set up as final truth. We speak guardedly, as we should, of a scientific theory; but a theory in religion has no claim for greater respect than a theory in science. The fact of the matter is that during my life in the Church I have heard as many theories concerning religious matters, as I have heard in my professional life concerning scientific matters. A theory is a theory, whether in science or religion, and should not overawe us. Whenever I have kept that simple rule in mind, I have never found a conflict between science and religion. But, it is granted that such an attitude places many current ideas in the group of unknowns.

Perhaps, my personal views in this important field, may in part be expressed by my reaction to three questions asked in a letter received almost coincidentally with the receipt of Brother Talmage's sermon. The writer, a recently released missionary, is a thorough latter-day saint, son of a well-known, devoted latter-day saint family. He is now studying in a European university. His missionary career was such as to entitle him to a super-honorable release, were such a thing possible. He asks three questions which among others have been asked me at least one hundred times while I have served in the European missions, and hundreds of times before, and which are answered in the Talmage address.

1. Did the creation of the earth occupy more than six days?
2. Was man the last of God's creations to come upon the earth?
3. How did man come upon the earth?

He quotes from our sacred scriptures to explain the cause of his confusion, and requests a reconciliation between scriptural statements and scientific findings. He also points out a lack of agreement among several scripture texts, pertaining to these subjects.

This brother, as many others, has fallen into the error of reading isolated texts instead of the full meaning of the messages of inspired men, and of accepting such texts without going back to their original meaning. Christendom has split time and again over texts. It is a truism to say that anything may be proved by the Bible--that is by the use of texts. The Lord inspires men with truth; they express the divine message as best they can. Prophets are instruments. Just as Brother Talmage has sought to set forth a few divine truths in a short sermon, so the prophets have ever attempted to express to the world the truths revealed to them. The Book of Mormon is a true record, translated by the gift and power of God, yet in it Nephi, Lehi, Alma, Moroni and the others speak with human imperfections in form and style. Moroni's plea for merciful

criticism is one of the most beautifully pathetic passages in the world's literature. The scriptures bear only one message when read properly. A whole false theology might be built upon Brother Talmage's statement on page 8 that "the body is no more truly the man himself than is the coat the body". But, the context and later passages make the meaning fully plain and reasonable. The concern of the scriptures is to teach principles of faith and conduct. Details of fact are used to promote righteousness and human happiness, not to furnish information which man should dig out for himself.

Was the earth made in more than six days? The controversy has raged about the word "day", used in varying senses in the scriptures. When the day of twenty four hours seemed insufficient; the day of a thousand years was hit upon with equally dismal results. If my correspondent had read the fifth chapter of the Book of Abraham, and Alma's statement that "all is one day with God, and time only is measured unto men", he might have realized that the creative "days" were creative periods.

Was man the last of God's creations to come upon the earth? My correspondent quotes the Book of Moses, 3:7, as the disturbing text. A full reading of chapters 2 and 3 would show that chapter 3 deals with the spiritual creation of man, and that verse 7, when the advent of man is recounted, "a living soul, the first flesh upon the earth, the first man also"--terms in apposition --merely declares, though with tremendous meaning, that Adam was the first of the pre-existent children of the Lord to take upon himself an earth-body. *

How did man come upon the earth? The young missionary has not learned the difference between an inference and a fact, and that the coming of man under the law of evolution has not risen, even in the minds of its most earnest, really scientific, advocates, above the position of an inference, subject to replacement as newer knowledge comes. He quotes Lehi's words that were it not for the transgression of Adam "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," and asks how that may be squared with man's knowledge of fossil remains. Yet, the splendid and luminous statement of the fact that Adam's progress on earth and hereafter, and that of his children, in accordance with a great plan, demanded that he use his will in choosing his course of action, and that in the transgression in Eden he chose to taste the bitter, that he might know the greater good. If Adam had not done this, the plan would have failed, all things "must have remained forever, and had no end." That is, the plan of progress for all things would have been defeated. And, it may be suggested that the transgression of Adam probably began in the eternities when he accepted the earthly commission, the consummation of which occurred in Eden. With respect to the question of man's origin, my correspondent is also troubled by the finds of what appears to be prehistoric men or man-like beings. I answered by suggesting, as has Brother Talmage,

that we are descended from a man, Adam, an historic personage. We do not know all that has happened upon the earth, during its long existence; the Lord has not revealed all of his works to us, as yet

So run my thoughts in this London hotel room. Brother Talmage has touched, intelligently and courageously, upon subjects which, really, are agitating the minds of young and old, many of whom dare not speak out for fear of ostracism. We are bound to have individual views, but they should not be pressed as certainties. Meanwhile, the subjects dealt with in the sermon in question seem to me to be beyond the field of inference; the word of revelation, full read, is clear concerning these questions.

I had no idea that I would write so long a letter. Perhaps I have been led along uncounsciously by the memory of the discussion concerning similar matters which occurred while I was home last spring when one of our council made clear and convincing argument regarding the pre-Adamite theory. Let him who may read this epistle to you, leave out most of it at his discretion. I trust, however, that I have made my thinking clear. If wrong, I am always ready to be corrected without hurt feelings. Of one thing I am certain, that over here, texts do not bring many into the Church, but hundreds are coming in annually, when they catch the great vision and full meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And of another thing I feel as certain, that our young people must be helped in their search for truth by clear, clarifying statements concerning the conceptions that trouble them most in this new day.

All is well with us here.

May the Lord bless you and yours. I wish I could sit in with you at your meeting.

Sincerely and affectionately your brother,

John A. Widtsoe

John A. Widtsoe.