

An Official Position

WILLIAM LEE STOKES

NOTHING HAS SO BAFFLED and frustrated man as the problem of his origin. It is doubly troublesome because both science and theology feel impelled to solve it by offering two totally opposed solutions. Believers in Judaeo-Christian scriptures find an answer in the first two chapters of Genesis which they interpret as requiring a divine supernatural origin for the human family. Science has discovered another possibility in the form of the theory of organic evolution. The ordinary citizen, caught between two certified sources of truth, has trouble deciding what he can safely believe.

Latter-day Saints are caught in the evolution anti-evolution conflict in much the sameway as other Bible-based religions but to an intensified degree. The gospel plan of eternal progression is peculiarly body-oriented. Before birth the spirit is said to be unembodied; it is embodied at birth, disembodied at death and reembodied in resurrection. That every worthy spirit should receive a proper human body is a fundamental necessity so important that the possibility of its coming by chance or by accident, without divine provision, is unthinkable.

In the minds of most church members, organic evolution leaves God out of the picture and reduces the body of man to the level of a lower animal. And yet, the arguments for evolution are so persuasive and voluminous that many waver in their opposition. In the face of conflicting evidence and in a state of painful indecision, many if not most members would welcome a decision from a credible authority wiser or better informed than they. Many, therefore, believe that such a decision actually exists and that it is set down in the statements of General Authorities. The impression is widespread that organic evolution has been officially condemned by the Church and that evolutionists are holding their views in opposition to duly constituted authority.

WILLIAM LEE STOKES is professor of Geology at the University of Utah. His textbooks in geology have been widely used for over twenty years.

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS
42 EAST SOUTH TEMPLE STREET
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

DAVID O. MCKAY, PRESIDENT

February 15, 1957

Professor William Lee Stokes
2970 South 15th East
Salt Lake City, Utah

Dear Brother Stokes:

Your letter of February 11, 1957, has been received.

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.

Sincerely your brother,


(President)

But is this so?

In 1957 as Head of the Department of Geology at the University of Utah, a position once held by Apostle James E. Talmage, I became aware of the need to know the position of the Church on organic evolution. This feeling was intensified by the publication in 1954 of the book *Man, His Origin and Destiny* by Joseph Fielding Smith, then President of the Twelve Apostles and later to become President of the Church. I decided to make inquiry of President David O. McKay not only for my own personal satisfaction but on behalf of thousands of college students who are entitled to correct information. My letter to President McKay need not be reproduced. In essence I asked him if the Church had taken a position and if President Joseph Fielding Smith's book had the weight of an official pronouncement. I believe President McKay answered with the intention that his statements would be used by me in connection with my official duties as a teacher in a public institution but he did not specifically grant me permission to publish the letter. Rightly or wrongly I have forwarded copies to those interested enough to ask for them

and these have been copied and recopied to give the letter fairly wide distribution. At no time did I personally broadcast the letter or give it wide publicity even though I think I would be justified in doing so.

Antievolution sentiment continued to grow in the 1950s and was strengthened by further publications by General Authorities such as *Doctrines of Salvation*, a compilation of President Smith's writings by his son-in-law, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, and by Elder McConkie's own book, *Mormon Doctrine*. In *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City, Bookcraft, Inc., 1958, p. 230) after quoting from President John Taylor (*Mediation and Atonement*, p. 160–161) Elder McConkie states: "This aptly expressed and plainly worded statement from President John Taylor summarizes the official doctrine of the Church as to the falsity of the theory of organic evolution."¹

In the face of what appeared to me as a contradiction of authorities, or at least a serious difference of opinion, I continued to feel a need to publish the McKay letter but was restrained by the idea that I had no clear permission to do so. However, I acted at last, and on 13 October 1968 I again wrote to President McKay and asked for permission to publish the essential statements from his 1957 letter. At this time he was so ill (he would die 18 January 1970) that I scarcely expected a reply. However, on 18 October 1968 I received a letter over the signature of Joseph Anderson, Secretary to the First Presidency, stating that he had been directed to tell me that there was no objection to my use of the quotation, "on the subject of organic evolution the Church has officially taken no position," in my book.

Not until now have I published the McKay letter as I have made it the cornerstone of a manuscript I have written titled, "Can Latter-day Saints accept evolution?" This book has been rejected by all local publishers and may never see the light of day. That is another story. The letter is still timely and appropriate. Today may be an even better time to make it public than when it was first written. I therefore submit it for facsimile reproduction with the foregoing paragraphs as an introduction.

In postscript let me say that I have been accused of forging this letter and of taking unfair advantage of President Smith. Let the readers judge. I am personally grateful that the Church has not been caught in the position of taking a stand that might very well prove to be wrong in the future. This has already happened to a number of fundamentalist churches among whose ranks I am happy not to be included. It is also faith promoting to me to know that God expects men and women to sift and study many subjects for the truth that is in them and that He does not solve all our problems by official pronouncements.

NOTE

¹The second edition of *Mormon Doctrine* (1966), p. 248, while dropping the term "official," conveys virtually the same message: "This aptly expressed and plainly worded statement from President John Taylor expresses the same views and perspective found in the writings and sermons of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Orson Pratt, Parley P. Pratt, Charles W. Penrose, and many of our early day inspired writers." Nowhere is it suggested that a view such as that expressed by President McKay might also be held by inspired leaders.—Ed.