

THE MYSTERY OF LIFE'S ORIGIN

THE CONTINUING CONTROVERSY

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FOREWORD

Robert Marks and John West

In 1984, three courageous scientists—Charles Thaxton, Walter Bradley, and Roger Olsen—published a rigorous reassessment of then-current scientific theories about the origin of life. Published by the Philosophical Library (the publisher of works by Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, Max Planck, and many other eminent scientists and thinkers), *The Mystery of Life's Origins* challenged the scientific orthodoxy of the time and provoked significant interest in the scientific community. Long-time NASA scientist Robert Jastrow hailed the book as “a very well thought-out and clearly written analysis,” while Robert Shapiro, Professor of Chemistry at New York University, lauded it as “an important contribution to the origin of life field.”

The book’s core message was startling: Current approaches to the origin of life were abysmal failures, and wholesale re-thinking was required. As the authors put it:

the difficulty is fundamental. It applies equally to discarded, present, and possible future models of chemical evolution. We believe the problem is analogous to that of the medieval alchemist who was commissioned to change copper into gold... You can't get gold out of copper, apples out of oranges, or information out of negative thermal entropy. There does not seem to be any physical basis for the widespread assumption implicit in the idea that an open system is a sufficient explanation for the complexity of life.

At the end of the book, the authors suggested that the origin of life might have required what philosopher Michael Polanyi called “a pro-

foundly informative intervention” or what they themselves called an “intelligent cause.” Most scientists of the time did not want to hear that revolutionary proposal; but the authors’ words inspired a new generation of scientists and scholars who were dedicated to seeking evidence of purpose and intelligent design throughout nature.

By republishing *The Mystery of Life's Origin* on the occasion of its 35th anniversary, we seek to recognize the signal accomplishment of its original authors, plus the hard work of Jon Buell of the Foundation for Thought and Ethics, who helped bring the book to reality. In the new introduction by David Klinghoffer, you will get to read the behind-the-scenes story of how the book came to be written—and the transformative impact it had on many. The original text has been lightly updated. The fact that only light updating was needed is a testament to the meticulous scholarship of the authors and to the enduring nature of the problem they identified in origin of life studies.

Although the text of the original *Mystery of Life's Origin* forms the first part of this volume, this book is much more than an historical appreciation. Its second half, “The State of the Debate,” includes new chapters assessing the state of origin of life research today by chemist James Tour of Rice University, physicist Brian Miller, astronomer Guillermo Gonzalez, biologist Jonathan Wells, and philosopher of science Stephen C. Meyer. Those who want to understand not only the history of science’s quest to understand the origin of life, but its current status, will find this book an invaluable guide.

We would like to thank the many people who made this new volume possible, including: Charles Garner of the University of Memphis, who reviewed the text of the original book for needed updates; Mike Perry of Inkling Books, who laid out and indexed the book; Brian Gage of Pipe & Tabor, who created the cover and produced the figures, tables, and equations; Iwan Sandjaja, who scanned the out-of-print original text and converted it into a digital format; Amanda Witt and others who copy-edited and proofed the volume; and of course, the original authors Charles Thaxton, Walter Bradley, and Roger Olsen, as well as the new

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