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<sup>4</sup>Martin Rudwick, "Lyell, Charles," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 34, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford University Press, 2004), 856.

<sup>5</sup>Darwin to William Graham, 3 July 1881, Darwin Correspondence Project, "Letter no. 13230," accessed 15 January 2025, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/?docId=letters/DCP-LETT-13230.xml>.

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**THE SACRED CHAIN: How Understanding Evolution Leads to Deeper Faith** by Jim Stump. HarperOne, 2024. 261 pages. Hardcover; \$29.99. ISBN: 9780063350946.

Jim Stump has served as the host of the *Language of God* podcast for BioLogos since 2019. Many ASA members, including myself, have been interviewed by Stump over the past half-decade. I have frequently interacted with Stump through our common work with BioLogos, both in his role as vice president of the organization and as host for its podcast.

In this book, Stump steps from behind his microphone and tells his own story. His voice sounds the same written as it does spoken. His methods are also the same: he continues to gather evidence through interviews. But in this book, Stump uses his feet as well as his voice, as he travels to about a dozen locations throughout America, Europe, and Africa, combining the data-driven experiences of research with those of a pilgrim searching for relics. These relics are ancient genes and bones, which tell a story of the transition from animal to human.

Stump's travelogue starts in a board room meeting years ago, which resulted in his departure from the Christian university where he had taught. He writes that his "crime" was believing that "human beings evolved over time" (p. 2). In the rest of the book, Stump speaks to us outside the board room, as he wrestles with the evidence for deep time and human evolution, all in the context of his personal philosophy in which science and faith do not only co-exist but also cooperate and co-inhere.

This is a book about a person of faith accepting science, not about a scientist becoming a person of faith (for those stories, turn to Francis Collins and Sy Garte). Stump's story is divided into five parts, with short chapters that read easily, interspersed with black-and-white illustrations by his daughter, Sloan Stump.

The first part is titled "Bible," although it might be titled "Church," because the first chapter focuses on interpretation rather than the Bible itself. Its centerpiece is not quotations, but social science data: for example, a large graph showing the increased acceptance of evolution over time (p. 20). Stump contrasts this data with a personal visit

to the Ark Encounter theme park, which is built around a young-earth interpretation of Genesis.

Stump concludes the first part by suggesting that there are ways to read Genesis other than with wooden literalism. To support this claim, he quotes C.S. Lewis on how the "human qualities of the raw materials show through" (p. 54) in scripture. Stump recalls standing over Lewis's grave as a sort of anticlimax: "Nothing mystical or magical happened. ... But a pilgrimage like ours to Oxford put flesh and blood on our idea of C.S. Lewis. He was a real guy" (p. 56). Likewise, Stump argues that scripture shines with God's truth despite its "human qualities."

The patience of the Creator is the subject of the next three sections: "Time," "Species," and "Soul." Stump uses vivid metaphors to illustrate the depths of time. One of these is "God's Weekly Planner for Creation," which shows the deep timespan of creation—if the billions of years of natural history were mapped to a seven-day week in a planner, then "all the events that interest us [humans] would be packed into the last hour of the week" (p. 67). A second metaphor is a stack of baseball cards as tall as the Washington Monument, which shows "there are 120,000 generations between us" and the first ancestors of genus *Homo* (p. 126).

In what becomes almost a running joke, his travel plans are repeatedly thwarted. Stump remains "philosophical," almost Stoic, as he retells these events. A vivid section in the middle of the book occurs when Stump finally reaches one of his destinations in France, seeing for himself cave paintings of mammoths in a cave where bears had scratched up the walls. "The difference between [the paintings] and what the hibernating bears left behind is shockingly obvious" (p. 135). The random bear-claw scratches are natural—but the graceful pigment-strokes left by human artists are something else entirely.

As a reader, I want to spend more time thinking about why the paintings look the way they do, and what it means that humans create beauty, while animals can embody it. As a scientist, I wonder what it means that the oldest such paintings were discovered in Indonesia, not Europe. But to address these questions, we are going to need a bigger book. As Stump says himself, the goals of his book must be more modest, because "the beauty and complexity of art and literature have to be experienced in their entirety. That experience can't be summed up in words without massive reduction in meaning" (p. 91).

Yet Stump has no choice but to sum up his reactions in words. Many of his reactions can be aligned with ancient philosophers: he reacts to his woes like Boethius did (who wrote philosophically about his unjust imprisonment) and Stump builds from a material, even chemical, view of the evolution of the universe like Lucretius and Epicurus did (although Stump builds to a Christian theology that

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neither of those Greek philosophers could adopt). Stump is a philosopher to the core of his being, integrating and balancing insights from across history, as he is a Christ-follower to the very same core.

As I was reading, I thought of Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth-century Cappadocian Father who also balanced ancient philosophy with the science of his day. To my delight, Gregory showed up later in the book. Stump devotes chapter 17, “Bones and Relics,” to Gregory’s bones (which are apparently in San Diego today) and to Gregory’s arguments about body and soul, which are “surprisingly modern-sounding” (p. 164). Gregory wrote his work, “On the Making of Man,” that Stump cites as a direct response to Plato’s *Timaeus* and Galen’s physiology, so that Gregory too was integrating insights from philosophy and science into the light of faith. Gregory’s inclusion in Stump’s narrative is apt, and it shows that Christians have been writing books like this for a very long time.

In the fifth and final part, “Pain,” Stump asks weighty questions about evil and suffering, which he ultimately addresses with scripture. This section has the most darkness and the most light, as it moves from the evil of eugenics to the hope of Romans 8. Stump states provocatively that “evolution is not random” (p. 213) and that cooperation points to a “clear directionality in how life has developed” (p. 214). He quotes Simon Conway Morris to the effect that life evolves with “an underlying melody” (p. 214), which happens to coincide with musical metaphors commonly used by Gregory of Nyssa. This is new and fascinating science, which is not merely compatible with, but can be driven by, a millennium-old faith. Stump doesn’t have room for much detail, but his book opens a door to a world of investigation. The reader might use these citations as a springboard to find out more about the positive contribution faith can make to the study of evolution.

This book is especially targeted at those who, like Stump, grew up in faith communities and feel dissatisfied with the status quo of skepticism, whether that of young-earth creationists skeptical of evolutionists or that of materialists skeptical of faith. In his account, Stump spends the most time on time itself (arguing that we live in a very old universe) and on human evolution (arguing that a material account of the origins of the body is not incompatible with the experienced reality of the human soul).

Most of Stump’s book argues a double negative—“not incompatible”—that allows a Christian to accept science but does not emphasize how science might be changed by faith. Near the end, Stump points to positive synergies between science and faith, and to other authors who have explored the same questions, from Gregory of Nyssa to Simon Conway Morris. These connect to a whole literary universe of other authors, each of whom has a slightly different answer to these big questions.

Stump’s questions penetrate to the heart of the matter, inviting the reader to participate. His summaries of philosophical debates are both balanced and crystal clear (such as why symbolic reasoning is “qualitatively different” [p. 121] from what came before). He demonstrates a posture of openness rather than of defensive skepticism.

God can work through this book. A Christian with a negative or conflicted view of evolution may be convinced by Stump’s patient and thoughtful narrative, especially if they are wrestling with questions of deep time and if they value direct experience in specific places. If they walk along with Stump, they too might end in a place of “sheer, unadulterated hope” (p. 247, quoting Bill Newsome).

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**PURPOSE: What Evolution and Human Nature Imply About the Meaning of Our Existence** by Samuel T. Wilkinson. Pegasus Books, 2024. 352 pages. Hardcover; \$29.95. ISBN: 9781639365173.

As a scientist and a theologian interested in the science-faith discourse, it was a privilege to think through issues regarding human meaning, purpose, and flourishing raised in Samuel Wilkinson’s book. Wilkinson received his MD from the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and is currently an associate professor of psychiatry at Yale University. Like many of us, Wilkinson has struggled with the question, “Is belief in a benevolent God weakened by the theory of evolution?” Fortunately for the readers of this excellent book, Wilkinson challenges familiar claims about the meaninglessness of human existence with a well-organized presentation of interdisciplinary evidence supporting the author’s thesis that the purpose of human existence is to choose between our competing natures: the good and the evil.

Wilkinson begins his work by pointing out two overarching dilemmas caused by the theory of evolution that must be addressed. The first is the “doctrine of randomness,” which claims that if evolution is a random and haphazard process, then human existence is merely a product of intricate molecular accidents and is consequentially meaningless. The second dilemma is related to the negative evolutionary characteristics associated with human nature, particularly genetic determinism, aggressiveness, and selfishness. These are frequently cited to show the unlikelihood that human beings were created by a loving, benevolent God.

In response, Wilkinson uses evidence from the fields of genetics, biology, ethology, sociology, psychology, and economics to paint a different view of evolutionary processes and human beings. By weaving insights from these varied sciences together, Wilkinson persuasively suggests that a Higher Power used evolution as the mechanism to