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Epiphanies and Reasonings: Compatibility between Evolutionary Biology and Divine Creation

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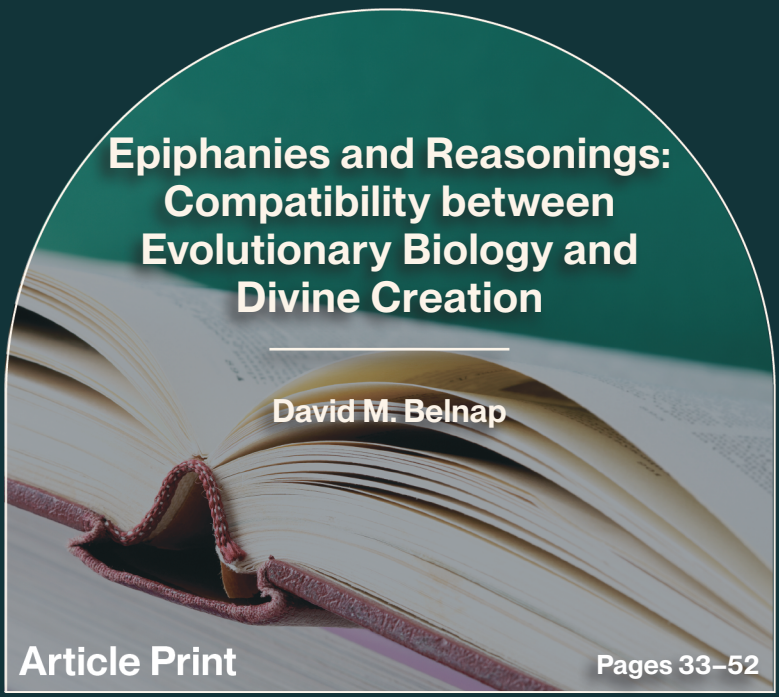

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David M. Belnap

Review of Samuel T. Wilkinson, Purpose: What Evolution and Human Nature Imply About the Meaning of Our Existence *(New York: Pegasus Books, 2024). 338 pages. $29.95 (hardback).*

Abstract: *Many believers in God are troubled by assertions that the theory of evolution means life on earth is accidental and has no purpose. Additionally, some people worry that the theory's implied selfishness and "survival of the fittest" mantra have terrible implications for human society. Samuel T. Wilkinson's book* Purpose *is a thoughtful addition to the literature corroborating compatibility between creation by God and the theory of evolution. Evolution has a random component, but the critical selection step is non-random. Moreover, the process is iterative. As evidence for non-randomness, Wilkinson cites convergent evolution (where similar traits emerged in divergent organisms). Numerous examples suggest that natural selection has limited choices, not infinite or random possibilities as was once thought. Wilkinson discusses how human behavior and evolution imply that life has purpose. These purposes are compatible with teachings embraced by diverse believers in God. Behavioral studies strongly suggest human beings evolved to have both good and evil natures and to have ultimate happiness in loving family relationships. Such relationships build good lives and societies. Facilitating all of this, natural selection appears to occur at individual, kin, and group levels. When combined with the observation that we can freely choose, our dual nature suggests that this life is a test. For Wilkinson and others,*

harmony between faith in God and evolutionary theory came through epiphanies and by reasoning. These experiences increased their faith in God. Amid difficulties, persisting with faith is rewarded.

Many believers in God worry that academic scholarship will degrade their faith. Many academics are not God-fearing, and examples abound of believers in God who became scholars and then turned from their faith. A preeminent issue is strife between the biological theory of evolution and the biblical account of Creation.[1]

Unhelpfully, the evolution-creation controversy, like so many other issues of our day, often becomes a contest between polarizing extremes. On one side, some assert that evolution means life is an accident, our lives have no divine purpose, and Genesis is a fable. On the other extreme, some insist that Genesis's ancient descriptions are literally true (as we understand those words today), that the earth and life thereon came to be in one week (as we measure time), and that humans and dinosaurs coinhabited the earth. Ironically, both sides argue that if evolution is true, faith in God cannot be, and if the scriptures are true, evolution and modern science cannot be.[2] The clamor of these strong convictions suggests one must choose between science and faith in God.[3]

Many in the middle both accept science and believe in God but struggle with the controversy. The record of nature and scientific reasonings are compelling. Likewise, scriptural records and spiritual impressions are credible. Samuel T. Wilkinson, a Yale School of Medicine psychiatrist and Latter-day Saint, struggled to harmonize a meaningless, selfish existence as advocated in some evolution circles and a divine creation and purpose as taught in scripture.

Wilkinson had an epiphany in which he found a way to reconcile his faith in God and the science he also found true. *Purpose: What Evolution and Human Nature Imply About the Meaning of Our*

1. The theory of evolution as first described by Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Robert Darwin, and the accounts of Creation as described in the books of Genesis, Moses, and Abraham.
2. My friend and colleague, Adam Zlotnick (Indiana University), was the first to point out to me that people, adherent to the extremes of the evolution-creation debate, ironically interpret scripture and scientific data in the same way.
3. On both extremes, people contort data to fit their views and take science or scripture beyond their bounds. Science is used to make theological conclusions, and scripture is employed as scientific documentation

Existence[4] is the result of his epiphany and of many years of thoughtful study.[5] The book makes a compelling case that considerable scientific evidence is consistent with the religious principle that our lives have a purpose — because that purpose was facilitated by evolution. Wilkinson's epiphany and subsequent work are particularly pertinent to believers in God who face questions or difficulties. His and others' experiences show that inspired answers have come.

A Good Book

I highly recommend *Purpose*. Points in the book are well-reasoned. Numerous studies are referenced, and footnotes and 61 pages of notes add additional helpful insights. The book is well-written and interesting. Points are clearly explained at an appropriate level for a general (non-scientist) audience. I was edified and uplifted.[6]

Wisely, Wilkinson does not delve into theology, but he does delve into science. He simply assumes believers in God share a few basic beliefs. These include belief in a higher power or being (God) who created us, is benevolent, loves everyone, and desires our happiness. Additional common beliefs are that life has a purpose and similar practical ways to live morally.[7] This strategy was wise for a book written for a general, worldwide audience. Too often, some consider theological particulars silliness, and that could lead them to easily dismiss his compelling arguments. Focusing the book as he has should help all readers contemplate the scientific evidence and his thesis that evolution facilitated basic principles taught by most of the world's religions.

Another wise approach was Wilkinson's undogmatic stance. Evidence he includes is used to show his proposals as plausible, not as proof. In contrast, the dogmatism of many atheistic and creationistic creation-evolution arguments has added enmity to the science-religion conflict. Wilkinson's prose is soothing balm. His non-rigid

4. Samuel T. Wilkinson, *Purpose: What Evolution and Human Nature Imply About the Meaning of Our Existence* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2024).
5. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, xi–xii, 235.
6. A minor problem in the printed book was the small size of the asterisks referring to footnotes. These symbols were often easy to miss or difficult to find. More visible asterisks in the next printing would be helpful to readers like me, who like to read every note.
7. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, xii–xiii, 6, 17.

arguments remind us that faith is still needed — whether that be faith in God or faith in atheism.[8]

In the next four sections, I review Wilkinson's dilemmas and evidence for compatibility between divine principles and evolution. Then, I end where resolution of Wilkinson's dilemmas began — with epiphanies.

Dilemmas of Evolution

Wilkinson had struggled with two "central dilemmas:" (1) evolution's haphazardness or randomness and (2) its implied selfishness. If from random origins, our lives appear accidental and meaningless. Increased "deaths of despair" (including suicides) and rampant cynicism in our current world are, at least in part, attributable to views springing from implications that we humans are random accidents without any purpose to our existence. If each person is a selfish creature seeking only his or her own benefit, humans have a bleak future. Additionally, many appalling policies have been proposed or implemented under the guise of improving the human race through artificial selection. For example, needy people have been ignored because they are "weak" and deserve "thinning." Such policies and attitudes are often called "Social Darwinism."[9]

Unhesitatingly, Wilkinson states that randomness and selfishness "do not pose the challenge to orthodox religion that I once assumed they did." In summary, he proposes the following: (i) evolution is not random; (ii) evolution gave us competing dispositions, free will is a key feature of human nature, and life is a test; and (iii) strong family relationships were facilitated by evolution and are key to a good life and society.[10]

Randomness and Non-randomness

Evolution's random component influences some to think that the results are also random, but Wilkinson questions that conclusion. "Evolution . . . had a direction and was guided by natural principles,"

8. Examples of Wilkinson's undogmatic manner: *Purpose*, 19–20, 160–61, 168, 194. Please note that my citations to Wilkinson's book are not necessarily comprehensive and may be only examples. Justifiably, Wilkinson repeatedly mentions ideas.
9. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 4–12, 48–49, 162–66.
10. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 6, 12–16.

he writes. Convergent evolution, now known to be a common phenomenon, suggests that higher-order, but currently unknown, principles have led to similar attributes emerging independently in distinct organisms. Examples of this include flight in birds, bats, and butterflies; body shape in sharks and dolphins; echolocation in bats, toothed whales, dolphins, birds, and shrews; silken thread in twenty-three different types of animals; eyes at least forty times; and body coloration in dolphins and fish. Natural selection appears to be constrained to only certain solutions, not a plethora of possibilities. Randomness is not the whole process because selection is not arbitrary.[11] He asks rhetorically, "If biological life is merely the result of the blind forces of nature, then why are we — as products of a random biological process — so driven to find meaning and purpose?"[12]

To add to Wilkinson's discussion, randomness followed by nonrandom selection (a fitness test) is a powerful way to solve complex problems. Potential solutions are generated randomly, and then a selection mechanism chooses from those solutions. For example, our bodies have no idea what new pathogens we may encounter today or in coming days. To solve this difficult problem, each person's immune system produces millions of randomly different antibody types each day. Those that interact with pathogens are saved. Those that do not are discarded. Randomness followed by selection is even more powerful when executed iteratively. Complex mathematical problems can be solved this way. Engineers can use this to design complex devices.[13]

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11. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, xi, 12–13, 19–40. *Convergent evolution* is defined as distantly related organisms developing a common characteristic. This contrasts with *divergent evolution* in which closely related species or a common-ancestor species developed divergent characteristics.
12. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 9. A corollary is, why do we feel so fulfilled when we find a purpose for our lives?
13. David M. Belnap, "The Theory of Evolution is Compatible with Both Belief and Unbelief in a Supreme Being" *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2015): 261–81, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-theory-of-evolution-is-compatible-with-both-belief-and-unbelief-in-a-supreme-being/. A slightly improved version (minus the abstract) was published as David M. Belnap, "The Theory of Evolution is Compatible with Both Belief and Unbelief in a Supreme Being" in *Science and Mormonism 1: Cosmos, Earth, and Man* ed. David H. Bailey, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, John S. Lewis, Gregory L. Smith, and Michael R. Stark (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2016) 369–92, interpreterfoundation.org/reprint-sm1-14-the-theory-of-evolution-is-compatible-with-both-belief-and-unbelief-in-a-supreme-being/.

Likewise, evolution — the cumulative result of random (or nonrandom) possibilities coupled to selection — is a powerful way to make and maintain living organisms that interact with each other and their environment.[14] From intricate biochemical processes in every cell to complex interactions among all living things, life on earth is the most complicated entity we know. Evolution enabled life to develop in a methodical way and allows living things to respond to environmental changes and to other organisms.

Evolution is not comparable to "an explosion in a printing shop producing a dictionary." The U.S. National Academy of Sciences and Institute of Medicine says the following:

> Contrary to a widespread public impression, biological evolution is not random, even though the biological changes that provide the raw material for evolution are not directed toward predetermined, specific goals. When DNA is being copied, mistakes in the copying process generate novel DNA sequences. These new sequences act as evolutionary "experiments." Most mutations do not change traits or fitness. But some mutations give organisms traits that enhance their ability to survive and reproduce, while other mutations reduce the reproductive fitness of an organism.[15]

14. Wilkinson states that not all mutations may be random, and randomness is not thought to be necessary (Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 28–29, 275–76n25). Nevertheless, the selection mechanism is the critical step, and this is not random. Wilkinson quotes notable atheist and evolutionist Richard Dawkins: "Evolution . . . is '*not* a theory of random chance. It is a theory of random mutation plus *nonrandom* cumulative natural selection'" (p. 32). Whether or not the mutations or initial choices are randomly given or intelligently chosen is irrelevant. In either case, the new solution must pass the fitness test.

15. National Academy of Sciences and Institute of Medicine, *Science, Evolution, and Creationism* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2008), 50, nationalacademies.org/read/11876/chapter/6#50. The 2001 documentary *Evolution*, produced by the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service, states the following in answer to the question, "Is evolution a random process?"

    > Evolution is not a random process. The genetic variation on which natural selection acts may occur randomly, but natural selection itself is not random at all. The survival and reproductive success of an individual is directly related to the ways its inherited traits function in the context of its local environment. Whether or not an individual survives and reproduces depends on whether it has genes that produce traits that are well adapted to its environment.

Evolution is compatible with life on earth being created by God.[16] Wilkinson states, "my overall thesis is that evolution was the means by which a Divine Being created all life, including us."[17] "Randomness is *part* of the process, but it seems to have played a much smaller role than many originally assumed. . . . On a higher level, when we take a step back, biological evolution is constrained."[18]

Human Evolution and Choices

Wilkinson beautifully extends evolution (variation, selection, and iteration) to human characteristics beyond physical traits—to our inner desires and interactions with others.[19] He argues that evolution has created us with characteristics compatible with religious teachings that an important purpose of our existence is to make choices.

Evolution gave us dual, competing characteristics. We have tendencies to be selfish and altruistic, aggressive and cooperative, promiscuous and monogamous, with altruism, cooperation, and committed love delivering the most benefit to our species.[20] These dual tendencies appear to result from multi-level natural selection; for example, selfishness favors individuals, whereas altruism favors kin or groups.[21] Although "clearly genes play some role in our behavior," human behavior is more complex than just a gene for kindness or selfishness.[22]

"Frequently Asked Questions About Evolution" *Evolution* (website), Public Broadcasting Service, pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/library/faq/cat01.html.

16. Belnap, "Theory of Evolution Is Compatible." See also David M. Belnap, "Questions and Comments about Evolution" in *Science and Mormonism 1: Cosmos, Earth, and Man* ed. David H. Bailey, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, John S. Lewis, Gregory L. Smith, and Michael R. Stark (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2016) 393–409, interpreterfoundation.org/reprint-sm1-15-questions-and-comments-about-evolution/.
17. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 12; see also pp. 39–40.
18. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 34–37; see also pp. 230–31.
19. Any inheritable trait, or any attribute connected to an inheritable trait, is evolutionarily related.
20. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 10–12, 66–94 ("Selfishness and Altruism"), 95–122 ("Aggression and Cooperation"), 123–37 ("Lust and Love").
21. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 63–65, 168. "Groups comprised of unselfish individuals will outcompete groups comprised of selfish individuals, and the power of a cohesive and cooperative group is always superior to the power of an individual" (p. 69). Wilkinson illustrates this with stories of two shipwrecks in the Auckland Islands. All survived where people were cooperative but only 16% survived where people were not (pp. 71–79).
22. In humans, single-gene traits "are incredibly rare," even for things like eye

Human behavior makes most sense when we view humans as free and responsible agents and not the result of deterministic forces. Deterministic processes, such as biochemical reactions in our brains, are involved in decision-making, but this does not mean the higher-level actions of our mind — where the choice is made — are deterministic. Even the behavior of fruit flies and roundworms was observed to be indeterministic. From trivial decisions, such as what to eat for lunch, to major decisions, like whom to marry, humans have alternatives. Conscious thoughts, like mental practice and imagining successfully completing a task, affect behavior. As further evidence of our free will, people put in similarly difficult situations act differently. Some act selfishly, and some act kindly. With some exceptions due to mental illness or other conditions, people generally have control over their decisions and therefore have free will.[23]

The God-centered view says we are placed in a world where we are influenced by good and evil — and we must choose; Wilkinson shows that view is consistent with the world around us. He writes, "Evolution seems to have shaped us in such a way that we are pulled in different directions."[24] Tying this directly to the idea that earth is a proving-ground,[25] he says:

> We are pulled in different directions: selfishness and altruism, aggression and cooperation, lust and love. When we

color (Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 51–53).

23. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 71–79, 138–78. Referencing Jonathan Haidt, Wilkinson gives the example of a person riding and guiding an elephant (pp. 175–77). "The elephant represents our automatic, intuitive, or emotional behaviors that we cannot (easily) control. The rider represents the rational and deliberate parts of our behavior that we can control." We hold the reins and can direct the elephant, but not if the elephant has desires of its own. "Our free will is perhaps not as free as we think. But we do have some control. The trick is to lead our elephant to places where he will be influenced to be on his best behavior. At the very least, we should avoid leading him to places that bring out the very worst in our natures" (pp. 175–76).
24. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 177. Wilkinson noted that positive and negative behaviors may have co-evolved (pp. 110–15). "Altruism and cooperation might not have evolved independently without the tendency to become aggressive, competitive, and even warlike. With respect to some of the ways in which evolution has shaped human nature, it seems that opposition was required. In other words, our capacity for good might not have developed without our capacity for evil" (p. 115).
25. Abraham 3:24–25. This beautiful passage is consistent with Wilkinson's idea that evolution was part of God's creation mechanism to make the world where we could be tested.

> couple this with the finding that we possess a measure of free will, all this strongly implies that there is a purpose to our existence. This purpose, at least one of them, is to choose between the good and evil impulses that nature has created within us.

Therefore, "this life is a test," as many religions teach.[26]

Human Evolution, Families, and Society

Through analyzing studies of human bodies and behavior, Wilkinson extends evolution further into divine purposes. Joy is found in families. This strengthens individuals and human society.

A most enlightening discussion is the proposed evolutionary connection between brain size, monogamy, and family happiness. When our humanoid ancestors became bipedal instead of quadrupedal, they could use their forelimbs for things besides walking (such as the use of tools in different and creative ways). As intelligence increased, the most intelligent had advantage. Bigger brains gave more intelligence and were, therefore, favored. However, big brains would not pass through the birth canal of a bipedal woman. This problem was solved by keeping brains small at birth but allowing brains to continue development after birth. This meant that humans, unlike other animals, were completely helpless at birth and dependent on their mothers for many years. A mother could not care for such a dependent child on her own. After the mother, the person with the most at stake was the biological father. Natural selection favored children whose fathers assisted their mothers. "A man's reproductive success could no longer be measured simply by the number of females he impregnated. Instead, it became important for him to see his own children reach sexual maturity." The father's help involved more than bringing food to the child. The child needed to be taught. With both father and mother working together, their children had an evolutionary advantage. This, in turn, gave long-term, monogamous relationships an advantage. Love for one's children was also advantageous. "Evolution favored deep relationships among human kin — partly because of the extremely long maturation period of infants and their utter helplessness at birth. . . . As parents, we are biologically primed to love and care for our children."[27]

Evolutionarily, natural selection appears also to have applied to

26. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 231; see also pp. 13–15, 166–67.
27. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 89–90, 92–93, 127–33, 186–87.

multiple individuals of a species, not just to individuals. Groups of related humans (families) who had good relationships among themselves had advantage. This is *kin selection*, and it appears to be crucial for the success of human beings as a species. Cooperation between different families gave the collaborators evolutionary advantage. This is *group selection*. Wilkinson explains that group selection is controversial, but he suggests that it does occur.[28] Additionally, the tendency of small and large groups to cooperate has given humans significant advantage. For example, technological and artistic advances, which have greatly improved and prolonged human life, are possible only because many people are involved in development or support.[29]

Our relationships with others, especially our family, are most rewarding and meaningful; all of this was facilitated by evolution, Wilkinson notes. Caring, deep, and committed relationships are strong predictors of human health, happiness, and well-being (more so than wealth, social status, education, and other factors). Giving to others is more rewarding than receiving. We benefit emotionally from being altruistic and cooperative to our families and others. Human infants need attention and love, and we are biologically primed (by evolution) to feel deep affection for our children and to enjoy taking care of them. Yes, parenting is difficult, but we are evolutionarily equipped to feel joy and purpose as parents. Evolution made strong social connections important because for our ancestors, those with such bonds were more likely to survive. Therefore, deep relationships became very satisfying. This includes strong friendships with non-kin.[30] Wilkinson states,

> A great body of evidence demonstrates that our relationships are the most important factor in our happiness and well-being. If evolution is responsible for this, as it seems to be, then the closest of our relationships — our family relationships — should have the most bearing, for better

28. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 53–65, 81–82, 89–90, 167n, 213, 281n51, 281n53, 295n70.
29. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 96, 119–20. From duets to large technical projects, two to thousands may be directly involved. However, even if a single person makes a discovery, writes a book, paints a picture, or performs a solo, many people (often thousands to millions) willingly support science, humanities, the arts, community gatherings, and technical projects through patronage, encouragement, volunteering, taxes, or donations. This form of cooperation has greatly helped our species.
30. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 15, 65, 87–94, 179–205, 231–33; see also pp. 81–82, 120–22.

> or worse, on our mental health and happiness. This is the way we have been psychologically and evolutionarily engineered. This is the way we were created.[31]

He concludes, "God created us through evolution, and did so in such a way that we are to find life's most profound joys in our family relationships."[32]

"Family life, in essence, is nature's most powerful way of helping us choose our better natures,"[33] and strong families improve human society. Mothers are naturally drawn to their children because of their immense biological investment. The mother-infant relationship is important for the child's development. Over time, this attachment may have facilitated romantic relationships between mothers and fathers that were monogamous and long-term. Nevertheless, marriage helps fathers be more committed to their children, and fatherhood is best when linked with motherhood and marriage. Caring, engaged fathers significantly improve their children's lives. Men are responsible for most societal problems, and fatherhood makes men less aggressive, less selfish, and more socially responsible. Therefore, society is better. The biological ties between parents and their children are an important part of this, and those ties came to be because of evolution.[34]

Epiphanies

As a scientist and a believing Latter-day Saint who also struggled with evolution, I found Samuel Wilkinson's mention of an epiphany heartening. He struggled to reconcile his belief in God with evolution.

> After wrestling with this issue for many months, I experienced a sort of epiphany that shifted my understanding. Principles from many different disciplines seemed to suddenly come together in my mind in a beautiful and harmonious way. Evolution wasn't a totally random process; it had a direction and was guided by natural principles. Furthermore, the way that evolution shaped human nature produced the strongest forms of love and affection within family relationships.

31. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 193–94.
32. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 233.
33. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 213.
34. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 16, 82, 127–36, 187, 206–29, 231; see also pp. 93–94.

> Parents have a deep capacity to love their children because they evolved to do so. This is how God made us.[35]

Wilkinson concludes, "Evolution and religion are not in conflict."[36]

For believers in God who struggle with evolution or other difficulties, Wilkinson's epiphany is an invaluable example. God helps people in our day who have sought answers to controversies and difficult questions, even academics. Wilkinson is not alone.

Developmental biologist Emily Bates[37] described an epiphany she had.

> I was in school when I started learning about evolution. At the time, my Sunday School teacher had taught me that you could not believe in the teachings of The Church [of] Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and also believe in evolution. I remember learning about evolution in school and thinking it made a lot of sense. There was a lot of evidence for it. So I started praying for a way to see what was wrong with this theory, so I could go on with having my faith in my Church. It was a long time before I felt I had any response. One night I woke up in the middle of the night, and I had this impression that I should read Genesis. I did that and I had this feeling and recognition that there was no conflict. I could see the order of evolution described in the scriptures. That was my first answer to prayer. It became both my testimony of God and my testimony of science at the same time.

Bates added, "I love science; I also have faith, and I don't see a conflict between them."[38]

In his acknowledgments, Wilkinson's tribute to God "for support

35. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, xi–xii; see also p. 235.
36. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 18; see also pp. xi–xiii, 16–18.
37. Bates is currently a professor at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus and was formerly on the faculty in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry at Brigham Young University (where I knew her).
38. Bates was part of a panel discussion at a symposium on Science and Mormonism sponsored by The Interpreter Foundation in 2013. The transcript of her words and those of the other panelists are published in Emily Bates, R. Paul Evans, Steven L. Peck, Michael R. Stark, and Trent D. Stephens, "Life Sciences Panel" in *Science and Mormonism Series 1: Cosmos, Earth, and Man*, ed. David H. Bailey, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, John S. Lewis, Gregory L. Smith, and Michael R. Stark (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2016), 423–24, interpreterfoundation.org/reprint-sm1-17-life-sciences-panel.

unseen but nonetheless real"[39] moved me to tears. I resonate with his reasonings, and I also have had epiphanies like those of Wilkinson and Bates as I struggled to resolve the creation-evolution question. I likewise attribute my experiences to inspiration.

I entered graduate school with only a superficial understanding of evolution. I was keenly aware of many inside and outside the Church who opposed the theory of evolution.[40] I also was aware that many in the Church accepted evolution. Nevertheless, I struggled with the controversy. In graduate school, my thesis project forced me to confront evolution. My data on the structure of papilloma and polyoma viruses was consistent with the theory.[41] I persisted in my science and faith and sought greater understanding. In 2000, five or more years later, I came across a new article in the journal *Nature*. Researchers had used evolution in a computer to design machines to crawl across a surface.[42] Like Wilkinson, principles of faith and reason came together in a beautiful, harmonious, and simple way: if people can use evolution (defined as random changes, a test of fitness, and iteration) to make things, God could also have used it to make and maintain life on earth. Several years later, I had an impression like Bates's. While pondering the Creation during its presentation in the temple endowment, a clear thought came into my mind about evolution and Creation: "There is no conflict; there is no conflict."

A third epiphany came thirteen years after my first. I attended a talk by a colleague who studies evolution of pathogens. As an aside, he stated that the poor or imperfect design of some features of life was evidence of a godless evolutionary process.[43] To my surprise, I was

39. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 236.
40. During my time in graduate school (1989–1995), the creation-evolution controversy was often in the news.
41. These two virus groups (now classified as separate families) share an unusual structure, and this could be because they diverged from a common ancestor or because of convergent evolution (as Wilkinson noted for so many other biological characteristics). Rabbit and human papillomaviruses, thought previously to have a fundamentally different structure, have the same structure—consistent with evolutionary predictions. David M. Belnap et al., "Conserved Features in Papillomavirus and Polyomavirus Capsids" *Journal of Molecular Biology* 259 (1996): 249–63, doi.org/10.1006/jmbi.1996.0317.
42. Hod Lipson and Jordan B. Pollack, "Automatic Design and Manufacture of Robotic Lifeforms," *Nature* 406 (31 August 2000): 974–78, nature.com/articles/35023115.
43. This argument assumes that an all-knowing, all-powerful, and benevolent god's creation would be optimal and perfect. The argument is also called the

immediately impressed with a rebuttal compatible with both evolution and faith in God: Life was organized not to have the best design but to provide a test (Abraham 3:24–25). The world would be expected to be imperfect and even cruel, as indicated by the Lord's statement to Adam and Eve that the world would contain sorrows, painful childbirth, thorns, thistles, and sweat (Genesis 3:16–19; Moses 4:22–25). Thorns, thistles, weeds, and sweat suggest the competition among living things that we observe in nature and the hard work people must do to compete and to survive.[44] These scriptural teachings are consistent with a world created by an evolutionary process driven by competition. The result did not need to be optimal.[45]

Wilkinson noted that although the original ideas for his book "came to me almost all at once, in a sort of epiphany," working out the details "took many years."[46] Writing is hard work, of course, but is extremely rewarding because it allows the author to learn much in the process. Like Wilkinson, I found that my writing efforts further amplified my epiphanies. Writing often included feelings of amazement and joy as connections between my faith in God and the theory of evolution were further enhanced. Samuel Wilkinson said his experience was "immensely satisfying . . . to bring together into a unifying framework what I have learned by study and also by faith."[47]

I do not claim that Wilkinson's, Bates's, or my epiphanies have led to perfect understanding or have answered all questions. Moreover, our individual experiences are only binding on ourselves, not others. Nevertheless, we speak with the hope that others may benefit and

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"argument from poor design" or the *dysteleological argument*. An intelligent designer would have made things more intelligently. Many examples of suboptimal design exist. For a few examples, see Belnap, "Theory of Evolution Is Compatible," 278.

44. Another compatibility related to Wilkinson's book is the difficulty of giving birth to big-brained babies and the difficulties in raising children: "in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16, Moses 4:22).
45. See also Belnap, "Theory of Evolution Is Compatible" 278–79; Belnap, "Questions and Comments," 397.
46. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 235.
47. Samuel T. Wilkinson, "What Evolution and Human Nature Imply About the Meaning of Our Existence" (Lecture), 17 October 2024, Wheatley Institute and College of Life Sciences, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, youtu.be/oMoEYvjNiCw, see 37:10–37:27. The full statement is the following: "But for me at this point, this has been an immensely satisfying framework, to bring together into a unifying framework what I have learned by study and also by faith."

understand that we see value in believing in God and working in science. In my experience, other Latter-day Saint scientists concur. We may disagree about scriptural or scientific details, but we are united in accepting the theory of evolution and in our belief that God created us and other truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as taught in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Undoubtedly, our understandings have flaws, but, as in any other scholarly endeavor, deficiencies will be resolved as new knowledge is obtained.[48]

Conclusion

Rather than tearing down faith, studying evolution can build faith. It has for Wilkinson, for Bates, and for me.

We have each struggled but chose to accept both our faith and our science and then to move forward. Wilkinson said, "It all came to me after I decided to move forward despite not having all the answers. I still have questions, but this (process) taught me that even if I don't understand it now, there is going to be an answer in a way that is satisfying, because I've been through this process."[49] I feel the same as Wilkinson: not all of my questions are answered, but through the Lord's help, I was able to gain a little insight and move my quest forward. Worry and doubt are gone, replaced by increased hope and faith.

Interestingly, the pattern of questioning, persisting despite serious questions, and finding an enlightening detail also occurs in science. The big questions in scientific fields require tremendous work and, usually, decades of effort. Scientists may work their entire careers and only find morsels of new information. Numerous questions abound in science, and usually the appropriate statement is "the data suggests," not that "the data proves" (as Wilkinson appropriately showed). As the Apostle Paul wrote, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Seeing now only in part is important to the gospel plan and is a big part of modern science. The pattern of

48. I also acknowledge the many scientists of other faiths who are devoted followers of God and who also find harmony between evolution and divine creation.
49. Mariya Manzhos, "A Yale Doctor's Wrestle with Evolution and Faith" *Deseret News*, 9 March 2024, deseret.com/faith/2024/03/09/evolution-faith-purpose-samuel-wilkinson-book-yale/.

continually searching and moving forward with faith applies to other intellectual quests and any other challenge we may face.

Increased understanding can result from persisting despite questions or difficulties. Since my third epiphany, I have been amazed at how many connections have become apparent between evolution and the gospel. These harmonize with Wilkinson's insight that evolution facilitated life's test between good and evil. These connections link our world with gospel principles that God created this earth, this way, to further our eternal development:

- Both the theory of evolution and the scriptures[50] predict the world in which we find ourselves.
- Eternity and eternal life suggest unlimited time, space, knowledge, and resources, but that is not the case here on earth. Limitations of those four things create competition, struggles, and the need for choices and priorities.[51]
- Imperfections, sickness, injury, aging, and other personal limitations create challenges for us individually and opportunities to serve others.
- Competition and challenges give opportunities to put the gospel into practice.[52]
- Competition and competing priorities create situations where we may need to forgive others and to realize we each need God's grace because limitations of life mean not everyone and not even every good desire can be satisfied.
- Competition, competing priorities, and bodily imperfections mean that no one can act perfectly throughout his or her life. Therefore, we all need redemption through Jesus Christ.
- Ability or advantage in one area often means inability or disadvantage in another (another reason we may need grace).
- Everything can be used for good or ill.
- Decisions often have both good and bad effects.

50. For example, Genesis 3:16–19 (Moses 4:22–25); 2 Nephi 2:11,15–16; Doctrine and Covenants 29:39; Moses 6:55.
51. I heard the idea of unlimited (eternal) vs. limited (earthly) things from Dan Romney, whom I knew in a former ward (Kentlands Ward, Gaithersburg, Maryland). A runner, Dan noted how competition helped him run faster. Thus, competition and struggles can help us improve. Life's limitations relate to the gospel teaching that we face opposition.
52. For example, winners and losers have an opportunity to be graceful and good sports.

- If the Creation were perfect, how could this earth be a testing ground? What would challenge us?
- A perfect creation occurs in the next life — after the resurrection — not here in this life (Philippians 3:20–21). We are created in God's *image*: we are not a copy (Genesis 1:26–27). Therefore, we should not be surprised that the Creation is imperfect. It is still very good (Genesis 1:31).
- Nevertheless, given that its purpose was to provide a test, the Creation may, indeed, be considered perfect.
- How could we have faith in God if his role in Creation or his presence and influence was as clear as the geometric proof of a straight line?[53]

Seeing these connections enhanced my faith in God and belief in the restored gospel. My study of evolution has made me a better disciple of Jesus Christ.

Likewise, Wilkinson's faith was bolstered by his quest.[54] In an interview, he said, "It was a really faith-building and faith-promoting process for me to see how these things — at least in my mind — came together. I hope it, at least for some people, provides some clarity about these issues as well."[55] He urged us all to be patient with our questions and have faith that we will understand someday; we should avoid being so focused on an issue that we are spiritually blinded by it: "This process of writing and researching this, it made me see I didn't understand this before and now I do, and so [there are] a lot of things I don't understand now that I will and just to be patient and to take a step back and not struggle from spiritual-inattention blindness."[56]

Samuel Wilkinson's *Purpose* adds connections between evolutionary processes and God. "*How* we were created may help us

53. No one seriously questions that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, but many question divine creation. The theory of evolution made feasible the idea that life on earth came about by chance (Belnap, "Theory of Evolution Is Compatible"). Therefore, people are now enticed between faith in God and faith in atheism. Wilkinson's wonderful book has given us more evidence consistent with God being the creator, but this evidence is not absolute proof. Faith is still required.
54. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, xi–xiii, 16–18. See also Manzhos, "A Yale Doctor's Wrestle."
55. Daniel Peterson Interview of Dr. Samuel T. Wilkinson, Interpreter Foundation, 18 October 2024, youtu.be/_qOXI48Ns40, 15:22–15:36.
56. Interpreter Foundation Interview, 18 October 2024, 30:52–31:14. For more discussion, start at 29:34.

understand *why* we were created," he noted.[57] Wilkinson quoted Nobel-prize winning physicist Charles Townes: "If the universe has a purpose or meaning, this must be reflected in its structure and functioning, and hence in science."[58] Therefore, if obedience to eternal laws makes people happier and society better, then no wonder that loving family relationships and choosing cooperation, altruism, and love were, and are, an evolutionary advantage.

Wilkinson's ideas also are compatible with several Latter-day Saint beliefs:

- Eternal laws exist.
- God, having a complete understanding of those laws, created the world and gave us commandments for our benefit.[59]
- Opposition is necessary for our spiritual development.[60]
- "The Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was *enticed* by the one or the other" (2 Nephi 2:16).[61]
- Good parenting is critically important.

An expanded discussion of how evolution relates to these and other Latter-day Saint teachings would be a fruitful follow-up to Wilkinson's book.

Purpose shows again how embracing all truth can help us grow spiritually. Believers in God have nothing to fear and much to gain when seeking and learning new truths from scientific and scholarly endeavors.

57. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 12; see also pp. 9, 40.
58. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 18.
59. Wilkinson, *Purpose*, 17–18; *History of the Church* 6:312.
60. See 2 Nephi 2:11, 15; Dallin H. Oaks, "Divine Helps for Mortality," *Liahona*, May 2025, 104.
61. Wilkinson commented in the Interpreter Foundation Interview, 18 October 2024, 21:43–23:00: "It's pretty clear that we are left in a way that we're pulled in different directions. We have capacities for selfishness but also altruism, and it goes down the line. Good and evil, theologically, is what we usually refer to it as. When you combine this with this empirical observation—we have the ability to choose—to me this provides a framework that's very satisfying from an academic as well as a spiritual perspective, that life is a test. It can't really be a test unless you're pulled in one direction or the other. What I've tried to do is show how this makes sense from an evolutionary perspective. There's lots of things that the way evolution, natural selection—I'll use that term because it's more specific—it can and does produce traits and capacities that are in opposition. I see this is very related to this principle that we learn that there must be opposition in all things. To me, those parts are very easy to bring together."

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