



Chemical Evolution: Origins of the Elements, Molecules, and Living Systems

By Stephen F. Mason

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This remarkable new book is for everyone interested in the origin and evolution of the universe. It relates the history of chemicals, from the earliest generation of the light elements in the Big Bang, to their transformation into heavier atoms and their subsequent molecular evolution into myriad forms, including life on Earth. Spanning both organic and inorganic chemical combinations, the survey thus covers billions of years and involves evidence coming from the analysis of long-extinct as well as ongoing processes. The techniques used in this fascinating study are also described. They include the analysis of many sources: isotopes from ancient nuclear reactions and still-active radionuclides; molecules from space--frozen in meteorites or continuously generated in vast interstellar clouds; and the detritus of volcanic and geochemical activity. This is also the story of the origin of life, which can be biochemically detected through the modern descendants of early microbial life-forms and from laboratory experiments in prebiotic chemistry. The author also describes the history of ideas in the study of chemistry and the development of modern theories on chemical evolution. This is a highly readable account of central issues and ideas in modern science that will be read with absorbing interest by a wide range of students, researchers, and general readers.

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