

READING PRACTICE SET 5

Questions 1-11 are based on the following passage and supplementary material.

The following passage discusses the possibility that there is life on Mars. Interest in the subject reached a peak when NASA sent two unmanned spacecraft to Mars in 1975. After 10 months, Vikings 1 and 2 entered orbits around The Red Planet and released landers.

When the first of the two *Viking* landers touched down on Martian soil on July 20, 1976, and began to send camera images back to Earth, the scientists at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (J.P.L.) could not suppress a certain nervous anticipation, like people who hold a ticket to a lottery they have a one-in-a-million chance of winning. The first photographs that arrived, however, did not contain any evidence of life. What revealed itself to them was merely a barren landscape littered with rocks and boulders. The view resembled nothing so much as a flat section of desert—in fact, the winning entry in a contest at J.P.L. for the photograph most accurately predicting what Mars would look like was a snapshot taken in a particularly arid section of the Mojave Desert.

The scientists were soon ready to turn their attention from visible life to microorganisms. The twin *Viking* landers carried three experiments designed to detect current biological activity and one to detect organic compounds, because researchers thought it possible that life had developed on early Mars just as it is thought to have developed on Earth, through the gradual chemical evolution of complex organic molecules. To detect biological activity, Martian soil samples were treated with various nutrients that would produce characteristic by-products if life-forms were active in the soil. The results from all three experiments were inconclusive. The fourth experiment heated a soil sample to look for signs of organic material but found none, an unexpected result because at least organic compounds from the steady bombardment of the

Martian surface by meteorites were thought to have been present.

The absence of organic materials, some scientists speculated, was the result of intense ultraviolet radiation penetrating the atmosphere of Mars and destroying organic compounds in the soil. Although Mars's atmosphere still has a high percentage of carbon dioxide, the density of the carbon dioxide used to be greater, thus protecting the surface from harmful rays of the sun. Gradually, this concentration thinned as more carbon dioxide was converted into rock. This means that even if life had gotten a start on early Mars, it could not have survived the exposure to ultraviolet radiation when the atmosphere thinned. Mars never developed a protective layer of ozone as Earth did.

Despite the disappointing *Viking* results, there are those who still keep open the possibility of life on Mars. They point out that the *Viking* data cannot be considered the final word on Martian life because the two landers only sampled two limited—and uninteresting—sites. The *Viking* landing sites were not chosen for what they might tell of the planet's biology. They were chosen primarily because they appeared to be safe for landing a spacecraft. The landing sites were on parts of the Martian plains that appeared relatively featureless from orbital photographs. The type of Martian terrain that these researchers suggest may be a possible hiding place for active life has an earthly parallel: the ice-free region of southern Victoria Land, Antarctica, where the temperatures in some dry valleys average below zero. Organisms known as endoliths, a form of blue-green algae that has adapted to this harsh environment, were found living inside certain translucent, porous rocks in these Antarctic valleys. The argument based on this discovery is that if life did exist on early Mars, it is possible that it escaped worsening conditions by similarly seeking refuge in rocks. Skeptics object, however, stating that Mars in its present state is simply too dry, even compared with Antarctic valleys, to sustain any life whatsoever.

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