

Interpreter

**A Journal of Latter-day Saint
Faith and Scholarship**

Reconciling Evolution by Faith or Framing?

Jacob Billings

Article Print

Pages 85–92

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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Reconciling Evolution by Faith or Framing?

Jacob Billings

Review of Jamie L. Jensen, Steven L. Peck, Ugo A. Perego, and T. Benjamin Spackman, eds. The Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ and Evolution. Provo, UT: College of Life Sciences, Brigham Young University, 2025. 272 pgs.

Abstract: *This review critically evaluates The Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ and Evolution, a multi-author volume that seeks to harmonize evolutionary science with the doctrines and theological framework of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While the book offers valuable pedagogical models, personal narratives, and historical context for addressing faith-science tensions, it exhibits notable limitations. Chief among these is an oversimplified distinction between belief and acceptance in scientific discourse, a lack of engagement with legitimate critiques of evolutionary theory, and insufficient resolution of scriptural and theological tensions. Although the collection succeeds in promoting dialogue and reducing conflict among religious students and educators, its rhetorical bias toward scientific consensus and avoidance of unresolved doctrinal issues ultimately weakens its reconciliatory potential. The volume is a meaningful step forward but leaves substantial theological and epistemological work unfinished. The volume's most commendable aspiration lies in its effort to model epistemological reconciliation—not merely tolerance—between scientific and religious modes of knowing, a theme that could benefit from further theological exploration.*

The *Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ and Evolution*¹ is a timely and ambitious collection that confronts one of the most persistent points of tension within Latter-day Saint discourse: the perceived conflict between evolutionary science and the doctrines of divine creation as taught in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Edited by Jamie L. Jensen, Steven L. Peck, Ugo A. Perego, and T. Benjamin Spackman, this volume brings together scholars from diverse academic and spiritual backgrounds — biologists, theologians, historians, and educators — all of whom are committed to both scientific integrity and religious faith.

The book is structured thematically, beginning with foundational essays on the epistemologies of science and religion followed by detailed explorations of scriptural interpretation, scientific evidence for evolution, and pedagogical approaches for reconciling faith and science. Produced under the auspices of Brigham Young University's College of Life Sciences, the collection is clearly directed toward a Latter-day Saint audience, particularly students grappling with the challenges of integrating secular scientific education with religious conviction. In doing so, it positions itself not only as a scholarly resource, but also as a pastoral and pedagogical tool that is grounded in the belief that truth can be found "by study and also by faith" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118).

Despite the volume's many strengths, several recurring issues weaken its overall coherence and philosophical rigor. Chief among them is the repeated insistence that science is fundamentally belief-free. The rhetoric surrounding the terms "belief" versus "acceptance" is presented in overly stark terms. The claim that scientists accept but do not believe in theories such as evolution, while perhaps intending to signal empirical objectivity, is itself an epistemologically naïve position. Scientific frameworks — especially those not yet empirically testable, such as string theory or aspects of theoretical cosmology — are often provisionally believed in precisely because of their internal coherence, explanatory power, or mathematical elegance. Dismissing the notion of belief entirely overlooks the trust and philosophical assumptions that underpin even the most rigorous scientific inquiry. This rhetorical oversimplification, while common in science education, undermines

1. Jamie L. Jensen et al., eds., *The Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ and Evolution* (Provo, UT: College of Life Sciences, Brigham Young University, 2025), lifesciences.byu.edu/00000196-3fde-d175-add6-bfdf50c80001/gospel-evolution-pdf.

the book's broader goal of fostering epistemological humility and integration.

A second weakness is the book's limited engagement with substantive critiques of evolutionary theory. While the volume excels in making evolution accessible to a lay religious audience, it avoids discussing any of the more contested areas within evolutionary science. Two examples of this are the rapid diversification of life during the Cambrian explosion and unresolved questions in macroevolutionary mechanisms. The result is a presentation of evolution that feels overly settled and even dogmatic at times, rather than reflective of the vibrant, ongoing debates that characterize real scientific discourse. For a book so focused on reconciling science and faith, the lack of critical engagement with science itself risks alienating readers who are looking for a more balanced and open dialogue.

Jamie L. Jensen's essay, "Accepting Evolution: Why Does It Matter?," typifies both the strengths and limitations of the collection. Her writing is clear, compassionate, and well-structured. Drawing on personal and pedagogical experience, she persuasively argues that accepting evolution can deepen both scientific understanding and spiritual resilience. However, some of her rhetorical choices undermine the nuance of her argument. Her analogy comparing evolution denial to someone refusing to believe in gravity while standing on a ledge is philosophically problematic. It conflates directly observable phenomena (like gravitational acceleration) with complex theoretical frameworks (like evolution), which are inferential, subject to revision, and understood through indirect evidence across diverse scientific disciplines.

More significantly, her treatment of Intelligent Design (ID) reflects a serious mischaracterization. Jensen reduces ID to a simplistic argument from irreducible complexity, which fails to acknowledge its more central philosophical claim: that certain aspects of the natural world may be more plausibly explained by intelligence than by unguided processes alone. She dismisses ID as unscientific while conceding Theistic Evolution—a view that also invokes divine guidance in natural processes. This inconsistency is never addressed. If God-guided evolution is admissible within a scientific-theological synthesis, it is inconsistent to reject other frameworks involving purposeful causation without serious engagement. By neglecting to grapple with the epistemological and philosophical underpinnings of ID while accepting

Theistic Evolution, Jensen weakens the critical depth of her otherwise well-intentioned essay.

The book's first section, "What Do We Know from a Religious Epistemology?," is a welcome effort to examine scriptural texts in their historical and literary contexts. Kyle R. Greenwood and Avram R. Shannon both provide insightful contributions that challenge literalist readings of Genesis, emphasizing the theological and cosmological assumptions embedded in ancient Near Eastern literature. Nicholas J. Frederick adds an important reminder about continuing revelation in Latter-day Saint theology, which allows room for expanding doctrinal understanding over time. While these essays raise good questions and offer promising frameworks, they often leave reconciliation at the level of possibility rather than resolution. T. Benjamin Spackman's essay on death before the Fall is especially bold, challenging a deeply ingrained belief in Latter-day Saint culture. Yet even here, the lack of a fully worked-out theological alternative may leave readers intellectually intrigued but theologically unsettled.

The second section, "What Do We Know from a Scientific Epistemology?," is pedagogically strong but philosophically narrow. Steven L. Peck's essay offers a robust and user-friendly description of how science operates as a communal, corrective, and value-laden enterprise. His effort to align scientific inquiry with scriptural principles, such as truth and order, is compelling. Heath Ogden and Seth M. Bybee provide personal and empirical perspectives that make evolutionary biology accessible and relevant. Yet, as in Jensen's essay, there is a recurring tone of advocacy rather than inquiry. Bybee's evidence for human evolution is persuasive but offered without acknowledgment of ongoing questions in the field. The effect is that the book often sounds less like a dialogue and more like a position paper, undermining its stated goal of fostering mutual understanding.

The third section, "Thoughts on Reconciliation," is perhaps the book's most emotionally resonant. It offers deeply human and hopeful accounts of BYU students grappling with evolution in faith-affirming environments. Among the highlights is the ReCCEE (Religious Cultural Competence in Evolution Education) model, developed by Jensen and colleagues—a practical and compassionate blueprint designed to help students navigate the perceived conflict between science and faith. Emphasizing empathy, epistemological clarity, and emotional sensitivity, the ReCCEE model represents a major contribution to faith-based science education. Jared Lee's essay further enriches

the section with a philosophically grounded reflection on embracing uncertainty as a shared virtue of both science and religion. His appropriately humble approach invites readers into a mindset of intellectual openness rather than dogmatic resolution.

Still, the section occasionally veers into optimistic generalities. While the emotional catharsis of personal reconciliation is valuable, it may fall short for readers seeking doctrinal specificity or institutional clarity. Moreover, while the review rightly commends the ReCCEE model's practical utility, its broader transformative potential deserves more emphasis. If adopted in seminaries, institutes, and other Church-sponsored educational programs beyond BYU, ReCCEE could serve as a paradigm for addressing other doctrinally sensitive scientific topics such as climate change or bioethics—areas where cultural friction remains pronounced. A deeper engagement with the model's theoretical underpinnings in sociocultural theory and educational psychology would further reinforce its scholarly legitimacy and institutional relevance.

The final section, which examines the official position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on evolution, is arguably the strongest in terms of historical and institutional analysis. T. Benjamin Spackman's treatment of the 1909 and 1925 First Presidency statements is careful and nuanced, showing that the Church has long maintained a position of non-committal neutrality on evolutionary theory. Supporting materials from official Church sources reinforce this theme: evolution is not doctrinally prescribed or proscribed. This doctrinal flexibility is both a strength and a challenge. It creates space for personal exploration, but it also shifts the burden of reconciliation onto individual members without offering clear theological guardrails.

The book's treatment of official Church statements on evolution is particularly illuminating. The 1909 and 1925 First Presidency declarations are often misunderstood or selectively quoted in intra-Church debates. Spackman's contribution clarifies the Church's consistent emphasis on doctrinal neutrality, which contrasts with the more assertive positions taken by other Christian denominations during the twentieth century. Yet the review would benefit from a deeper discussion of how these statements have functioned in practice—often as rhetorical tools wielded to bolster either side of internal debates, particularly within Church educational systems. A more comprehensive examination of how General Authorities have navigated evolution in General Conference or Church curricula would help readers grasp

the sociological forces shaping contemporary attitudes toward the topic.

Epistemologically, the book touches on, but does not fully unpack, the methodological pluralism that underlies a faith-science synthesis. Many essays distinguish between scientific and religious epistemologies, but fewer examine the possible interplay or convergence of these domains. For example, the idea that faith may yield non-empirical, but no less valid, truths resonate with Latter-day Saint teachings on continuing revelation and personal spiritual experience. This concept could be further developed to explore how different “ways of knowing” might be reconciled not only pragmatically, but philosophically. What counts as evidence in a theological context? Can religious experience be systematized in ways analogous to empirical method? These questions remain largely unanswered but are vital for any durable synthesis of science and faith.

A comparative perspective would also have enhanced the book’s analytical depth. For instance, some Protestant denominations have developed robust frameworks for theistic evolution, often integrating insights from historical theology, philosophy of science, and biblical hermeneutics. How does the Latter-day Saint approach compare with efforts like BioLogos or the Thomistic Evolution project? While Latter-day Saint theology possesses unique features—such as eternal progression and a doctrine that rejects creation *ex nihilo*—highlighting points of convergence or divergence could have clarified what is distinctive and what is broadly applicable in Latter-day Saint reconciliatory efforts. Comparative engagement might also prompt reflection on institutional, not just doctrinal, strategies for managing science-religion tensions.

In sum, *The Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ and Evolution* is an important and largely successful attempt to bridge faith and science within the Latter-day Saint tradition. It shines as a pedagogical resource and offers much-needed guidance to students and educators navigating this complex terrain. However, its rhetorical overconfidence in science, simplistic treatment of alternative viewpoints, and reluctance to engage deeply with scriptural reconciliation diminish its overall impact. For readers seeking to understand the compatibility of evolution with Latter-day Saint theology, this book offers many valuable tools. But it also leaves much of the hardest work—the theological synthesis, the epistemological clarification, and the honest reckoning with unresolved tensions—still to be done. A more robust

engagement with the prophetic tradition and its openness to “continuing revelation” (Articles of Faith 1:9) could have greatly enriched the discussion, providing firmer theological ground for readers navigating the uncertainty that both faith and science entail.



Jacob Billings is a software engineer and linguist whose interdisciplinary research bridges computational methods and historical language studies. He holds a bachelor’s degree in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Utah and a master’s degree in linguistics from Francisco Marroquín University in Guatemala City. He is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Complex Systems at the Polytechnic University in Madrid, Spain. His research focuses on four primary areas: the application of artificial intelligence algorithms to historical linguistics and epigraphy; morphosyntactic structures in Mesoamerican and Mesopotamian languages; linguistic patterns in the Book of Mormon and among early members of the Latter-day Saint movement; and the intersection of linguistics and political philosophy, particularly how language shapes perceptions of liberty. His broader work includes tracing the evolution of languages over time, with a focus on how linguistic structures emerge, diverge, and interact across cultural and historical contexts.

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