Mormons Believe in Multiple Gods / Polytheism

Introduction

The accusation of polytheism is one of the most common charges leveled against Latter-day Saint theology. Critics argue that the LDS rejection of the Nicene Trinity, the teaching that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are separate beings, and the doctrine of exaltation (that humans can become like God) constitute polytheism — a fundamental departure from biblical monotheism. This document demonstrates that LDS theology is consistent with the biblical text, that the Nicene formulation of the Trinity is itself a post-biblical development, and that the concept of humans becoming divine has deep roots in both scripture and early Christian thought.

The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The critic's case is built on foundational texts and a coherent theological concern:

1. **The Shema — Deuteronomy 6:4**: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." This is the most fundamental declaration of Jewish and Christian monotheism. Any theology that posits multiple divine beings appears to violate this bedrock confession.

2. **Isaiah's exclusivity claims**:

3. Isaiah 43:10 — "Before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me."

4. Isaiah 44:6 — "I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God."

5. Isaiah 44:8 — "Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any."

6. Isaiah 45:5 — "I am the Lord, and there is none else, there is no God beside me."

7. **The Nicene formulation**: The Trinity — one God in three persons, coequal, coeternal, of one substance (*homoousios*) — was developed precisely to preserve monotheism while accounting for the three divine persons revealed in scripture. The LDS rejection of this formulation, critics argue, inevitably leads to tritheism or polytheism.

8. **The exaltation concern**: If humans can become gods, this multiplies the number of divine beings infinitely, creating a polytheistic cosmos fundamentally incompatible with biblical monotheism.

9. **The King Follett Discourse**: Joseph Smith's teaching that "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man" appears to deny God's unique, eternal, uncreated nature — a cornerstone of classical theism.

This is a serious theological challenge that goes to the very nature of God and the structure of reality. It deserves a thorough response.

Biblical Response

The Biblical Text Itself Presents a Complex Picture of God's "Oneness"

The Nicene formulation of the Trinity is presented by critics as the only way to read the biblical data. But the biblical text itself presents a picture far more complex than classical trinitarianism acknowledges:

The Father and Son are distinguished as separate persons throughout the New Testament:

- **John 17:3** — "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." Jesus distinguishes himself from "the only true God" (the Father).
- **John 14:28** — "My Father is greater than I." If they are coequal in every sense, this statement is incoherent.
- **John 20:17** — "I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God." Jesus calls the Father "my God."
- **Mark 13:32** — "But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father." The Son lacks knowledge the Father possesses.
- **Matthew 26:39** — "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." Two distinct wills.
- **Mark 15:34** — "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" One divine person addresses another as separate from himself.
- **Acts 7:55-56** — Stephen sees "the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." Two distinct beings in distinct spatial locations.
- **1 Corinthians 15:27-28** — "When he saith all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, which did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all." The Son is subject to the Father — a relationship of subordination.
- **1 Timothy 2:5** — "There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." Jesus mediates *between* God and humanity — implying distinction from both.
- **Hebrews 1:3** — Christ is "the express image of his [the Father's] person." An image of a person is distinct from that person.

The straightforward reading of these texts presents the Father and Son as distinct persons with distinct wills, distinct knowledge, distinct spatial locations, and a relationship of subordination. This is exactly what LDS theology teaches.

What Does "One" Mean in the Bible?

The word "one" (*echad* in Hebrew, *hen* in Greek) does not necessarily mean numerical singularity. Consider:

- **Genesis 2:24** — "They shall be one [*echad*] flesh." Husband and wife become "one" while remaining two distinct persons.
- **John 17:11** — Jesus prays that his disciples may "be one, as we are." The disciples do not merge into a single being — they are one in purpose, unity, and love. Jesus explicitly states that His oneness with the Father is *the same kind* of oneness He desires for His followers.
- **John 17:21-22** — "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us... that they may be one, even as we are one." The oneness of the Father and Son is the same oneness available to believers — a oneness of purpose, love, and will, not of substance.
- **1 Corinthians 3:8** — "He that planteth and he that watereth are one." Paul and Apollos are "one" — clearly not one being but one in purpose.
- **1 Corinthians 12:12-20** — The body is one but has many members. Unity does not require numerical singularity.

The Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4) affirms that the Lord is "one" — but in a Hebraic sense that emphasizes unity of purpose, authority, and covenant commitment, not necessarily metaphysical singularity in the Greek philosophical sense. The Hebrew word *echad* is used for compound unity throughout the Old Testament.

The "No Other Gods" Passages in Context

The Isaiah passages (43:10; 44:6, 8; 45:5) are powerful, but context matters:

1. **Polemical context**: These statements are made in the context of Israel's confrontation with idolatry — the worship of Baal, Marduk, Asherah, and other Canaanite and Babylonian deities. God is declaring that these idols are not real gods. They have no power, no life, no authority. He is not making a metaphysical statement about the impossibility of any other divine beings ever existing; He is making a covenantal statement that Israel has one God and no other deserves worship.

2. **The Bible itself acknowledges other divine beings**: Despite these "no other gods" statements, the Bible speaks of:

3. **Psalm 82:1, 6** — "God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods... I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High." God addresses other beings as "gods" — and Jesus cites this passage approvingly in John 10:34-36.

4. **Psalm 8:5** — Man was made "a little lower than the gods" (*elohim*; some translations say "angels," but the Hebrew is *elohim*).

5. **1 Corinthians 8:5-6** — "For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) but to us there is but one God, the Father." Paul acknowledges the existence of beings called "gods" while affirming that for Christians, there is one God the Father. This is henotheistic language — one God for us, without denying the existence of other divine beings.

6. **Deuteronomy 10:17** — "The Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords." The phrase "God of gods" presupposes the existence of other "gods" over whom He presides.

7. **Exodus 15:11** — "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods?"

8. **The divine council**: Scholars increasingly recognize that ancient Israelite theology included a "divine council" — a heavenly assembly of divine beings over whom Yahweh presides (Psalm 89:5-7; 1 Kings 22:19-22; Job 1:6; 2:1; Isaiah 6:1-8 — "whom shall I send, and who will go for *us*?"). This is not polytheism in the pagan sense but a recognition of a heavenly hierarchy with one supreme God.

The Trinity Is a Post-Biblical Development

The Nicene formulation of the Trinity (325 AD, refined at Constantinople in 381 AD) uses terminology and concepts found nowhere in scripture:

- **"Trinity"** — The word never appears in the Bible.
- **"Homoousios"** (of one substance) — A Greek philosophical term not found in scripture.
- **"Three persons in one substance"** — This formula is a product of centuries of theological debate, not a direct biblical teaching.
- **"Coequal, coeternal, consubstantial"** — These are creedal terms, not biblical ones.

The development of Trinitarian theology involved explicit engagement with Greek philosophy — particularly Neoplatonism and the concept of divine simplicity. The God of the creeds is as much a product of Athens as of Jerusalem.

This is not to say the Trinity is necessarily wrong — it is to say that it is one theological interpretation of the biblical data, not the only possible one, and not a direct biblical teaching. The LDS reading of the biblical text — three distinct divine persons united in purpose, will, and glory — is at least as faithful to the actual scriptural language as the Nicene formulation.

Early Christian Evidence

Early Christians Did Not Hold Nicene Trinitarianism

The Nicene Creed was adopted in 325 AD precisely because the question of the relationship between Father and Son had not been settled. The pre-Nicene period shows significant diversity:

- **Justin Martyr** (c. 150 AD) described the Son as "another God and Lord" distinct from and subject to the Father (*Dialogue with Trypho* 56, 128). He used language that would later be

considered subordinationist.

- **Irenaeus** (c. 180 AD) emphasized the distinction between Father and Son while affirming their unity.
- **Tertullian** (c. 200 AD) was the first to use the Latin word *trinitas* and described the three as distinct persons (*personae*) sharing one substance (*substantia*). But his formulation is not identical to later Nicene orthodoxy — he described the Son as subordinate to the Father.
- **Origen** (c. 230 AD) explicitly taught that the Father was greater than the Son, who was in turn greater than the Holy Spirit. He was later condemned for some of his views.

The Nicene formulation was not a recovery of original apostolic teaching — it was the *resolution* of a centuries-long debate. The fact that it took 300 years to arrive at this formulation suggests that the apostles did not teach it in the clear, systematic form in which it was later codified.

Theosis (Deification) in Early Christianity

The LDS doctrine of exaltation — that humans can become like God — is often presented as the most shocking aspect of LDS theology. But this concept, known as *theosis* or *deification*, was widespread in early Christianity:

- **Irenaeus** (c. 180 AD): "The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself" (*Against Heresies* 5, Preface). This is a clear statement that Christ became human so that humans might become what He is.

- **Clement of Alexandria** (c. 195 AD): "The Word of God became man, that thou mayest learn from man how man may become God" (*Protrepticus* 1.8.4).

- **Athanasius** (c. 318 AD): "He was made man that we might be made God" (*On the Incarnation* 54.3). Athanasius — the champion of Nicene orthodoxy — explicitly taught deification.

- **Augustine** (c. 400 AD): "God became man so that man might become God" (various sermons).

- **2 Peter 1:4** — "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature." The New Testament itself speaks of humans becoming "partakers of the divine nature."

- **Psalm 82:6 / John 10:34** — "I said, Ye are gods." Jesus himself quotes this passage and applies it to human beings, arguing that it is not blasphemy to call humans "gods" because "the scripture cannot be broken."

- **Romans 8:16-17** — "Joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together." We are heirs of everything Christ inherits.

- **1 John 3:2** — "When he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."

- **Revelation 3:21** — "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne." We inherit Christ's throne as He inherited the Father's throne.

The Eastern Orthodox churches continue to teach *theosis* to this day. The LDS doctrine of exaltation is not a bizarre innovation but a restoration of an ancient Christian teaching.

LDS Doctrinal Position

The Godhead: Three Distinct Beings, One in Purpose

Latter-day Saints believe:

1. **God the Father** is a glorified, exalted, perfected being with a body of flesh and bones (D&C 130:22). He is the supreme God, the Father of our spirits (Hebrews 12:9), and the ultimate object of our worship.

2. **Jesus Christ** is the literal Son of God, a separate being from the Father, who is also divine. He is the Creator (under the Father's direction), the Redeemer, and the Savior of the world. He has a glorified, resurrected body of flesh and bones.

3. **The Holy Ghost** is a distinct personage of spirit who has not yet received a body of flesh and bones (D&C 130:22).

These three are "one God" in the sense that they are perfectly united in purpose, will, power, knowledge, and love (see John 17:21-22). They are not one in substance in the Nicene sense.

This Is Not Polytheism

LDS theology is not polytheistic in any meaningful sense:

- **We worship one God**: The Father, through the Son, by the power of the Holy Ghost. We do not worship multiple competing deities with conflicting purposes.
- **We acknowledge one supreme God**: The Father is the ultimate source of all authority and power. The Son and the Holy Ghost operate under His direction and in perfect unity with Him.
- **The correct term, if any label is needed, is "social trinitarianism"** — a view held by some respected Christian philosophers (Richard Swinburne, William Lane Craig at times) that emphasizes the distinct personhood of the three while affirming their unity.
- **Or "monarchical monotheism"** — one supreme God (the Father) who rules over all, with the Son and Holy Ghost sharing in His divine authority.

Exaltation Is Not Creating Rival Gods

The doctrine of exaltation does not create new gods who compete with or replace God the Father:

- Exalted beings remain eternally subject to and dependent on the Father.

- Exaltation is the gift of the Father, not a seizure of power.
- It is the fulfillment of the Father's purpose: "For behold, this is my work and my glory — to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39).
- Just as a child growing to become a parent does not diminish or threaten the original parent, so human exaltation does not diminish or threaten God.
- The concept is that God's children become like Him — participating in His nature, His love, His creative power — not that they replace Him or become independent of Him.

Key Scriptures

Supporting the LDS View of Distinct Persons

Scripture	Key Text
John 17:3	Jesus distinguishes himself from "the only true God"
John 14:28	"My Father is greater than I"
John 20:17	Jesus calls the Father "my God"
Acts 7:55-56	Stephen sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God — two beings
Matthew 26:39	"Not as I will, but as thou wilt" — two wills
Mark 13:32	The Son lacks knowledge the Father has
1 Corinthians 15:27-28	The Son is subject to the Father
1 Timothy 2:5	One mediator *between* God and men

Supporting Divine Unity of Purpose

Scripture	Key Text
John 17:11, 21-22	"That they may be one, as we are" — unity of purpose
John 10:30	"I and my Father are one" — one in purpose (see context, John 17)
Genesis 2:24	"One flesh" — *echad* as compound unity

Supporting Theosis / Exaltation

Scripture	Key Text
Psalm 82:6 / John 10:34	"Ye are gods" — Jesus endorses this language

Scripture	Key Text
2 Peter 1:4	"Partakers of the divine nature"
Romans 8:16-17	"Joint-heirs with Christ"
1 John 3:2	"We shall be like him"
Revelation 3:21	"Sit with me in my throne"
Philippians 3:21	Christ will "change our vile body... like unto his glorious body"
Matthew 5:48	"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect"

The Divine Council / Other Divine Beings

Scripture	Key Text
Psalm 82:1	"God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods"
Psalm 89:5-7	"Who in the heaven can be compared unto the Lord? who among the sons of the mighty?"
1 Corinthians 8:5-6	"There be gods many... but to us there is but one God, the Father"
Deuteronomy 10:17	"God of gods, and Lord of lords"

▎Responses to Common Objections

"The Shema says God is one — Deuteronomy 6:4"

Response: The Hebrew word *echad* means "one" in the sense of unity, not necessarily numerical singularity. The same word is used in Genesis 2:24 where two people become "one flesh." Jesus himself interprets his oneness with the Father as the same kind of oneness his disciples should have with each other (John 17:21-22). Moreover, the LDS position affirms that there is one God — the Father — who is the supreme deity, with the Son and Holy Ghost sharing in His divine authority. This is consistent with 1 Corinthians 8:6: "To us there is but one God, the Father."

"Isaiah says there are no other gods"

Response: These statements (Isaiah 43:10; 44:6, 8; 45:5) are polemical declarations against idol worship, not metaphysical impossibility statements. God is telling Israel that the Babylonian and Canaanite gods are false — they have no power, no life, no reality. He is not making a philosophical claim that no other divine beings can ever exist. The Bible itself speaks of "gods" (Psalm 82:6), a "God

of gods" (Deuteronomy 10:17), and beings called gods in heaven (1 Corinthians 8:5). Jesus quotes Psalm 82:6 approvingly (John 10:34-36). If the Isaiah passages absolutely exclude all other divine beings of any kind, then these other passages are contradictions — which they are not.

"Separate beings = polytheism by definition"

Response: If three separate persons who are perfectly united in purpose, will, and glory constitute polytheism, then the New Testament is polytheistic — because it consistently presents the Father and Son as distinct persons (John 17:3; Acts 7:55-56; 1 Timothy 2:5; 1 Corinthians 15:27-28). The Nicene solution — one substance, three persons — uses non-biblical philosophical categories to solve a problem the biblical authors apparently did not feel needed solving in those terms. The LDS solution — three distinct beings, perfectly one in purpose — is at least as faithful to the biblical language and avoids the well-known philosophical paradoxes of Nicene trinitarianism (how can three persons be one being without either compromising their personhood or their unity?).

"Human exaltation is blasphemous"

Response: Jesus himself said, "Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?" (John 10:34). Peter teaches that we may become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Paul says we are "joint-heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17). John says "we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). Irenaeus, Clement, Athanasius, and Augustine all taught that God became man so that man might become God. The Eastern Orthodox Church teaches theosis to this day. The LDS doctrine of exaltation stands in a long and venerable Christian tradition. What is blasphemous is not the claim that God wants to share His nature with His children — it is the claim that He does not.

"Joseph Smith taught God was once a man — that's not biblical"

Response: The King Follett Discourse contains teachings that go beyond what is explicitly stated in the Bible. Latter-day Saints accept this teaching through the principle of continuing revelation — the same principle by which the early church accepted truths not contained in the Old Testament. However, the core principle — that God has a glorified physical body — is supported by scriptures indicating that humans are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27), that Christ's resurrected body is physical (Luke 24:36-43), and that the Father also has a specific form (Acts 7:55-56; Exodus 33:20-23 — God's "back parts"; Daniel 7:9 — "the Ancient of days did sit"; Revelation 4-5 — God on a throne). The concept that God is incorporeal, immaterial, and without body or parts is a product of Greek philosophy (divine simplicity, Platonic Forms), not biblical testimony.

"The Trinity is essential Christian doctrine — rejecting it makes Mormons non-Christian"

Response: The Nicene Creed was formulated in 325 AD — three centuries after Christ. The apostles did not teach Nicene trinitarianism. The pre-Nicene Church Fathers show significant diversity on the relationship between Father and Son. The Bible uses relational language (Father/Son), not

philosophical language (substance/essence), to describe the Godhead. If Christianity is defined by the Nicene Creed, then the apostles themselves were not "Christian." Latter-day Saints believe in God the Eternal Father, in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost (Articles of Faith 1:1). We worship Christ as divine, accept His Atonement as the sole means of salvation, and strive to follow His teachings. By any New Testament standard, this is Christian faith.

Conclusion

The charge of polytheism against Latter-day Saint theology rests on the assumption that the Nicene formulation of the Trinity is the only legitimate way to understand the biblical data about God. It is not. The Bible itself presents the Father and Son as distinct persons with distinct wills, distinct knowledge, and distinct spatial locations — while affirming their perfect unity of purpose. The concept of human deification (*theosis*) is not an LDS invention but a teaching found in scripture, in the early Church Fathers, and in Eastern Orthodox Christianity to this day. The LDS Godhead — three distinct divine beings, perfectly one in purpose, will, and love — is a faithful reading of the New Testament text. It avoids the philosophical complications of Nicene trinitarianism while preserving the genuine monotheism of the biblical witness: one supreme God, the Father, working through His divine Son and Holy Spirit to bring about the exaltation of His children.

Resources

- FAIR: Godhead and the Trinity
- Church of Jesus Christ: Godhead
- FAIR: Deification of Man (Theosis)
- Church of Jesus Christ: Are Mormons Christian?
- FAIR: Polytheism
- David L. Paulsen, "Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses," *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990): 105-116.
- Daniel C. Peterson, "Ye Are Gods: Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witnesses to the Divine Nature of Humankind," in *The Disciple as Scholar* (2000).
- Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (1991)

Addresses

- [[_obsidian_research/arguments/Mormons-Believe-in-Multiple-Gods-Polytheism|Argument: Mormons Believe in Multiple Gods (Polytheism)]]

Related Defenses

- [[_obsidian_research/defense-drafts/trinity-biblical-orthodoxy-full|Trinity Defense (Full)]]
- [[_obsidian_research/defense-drafts/trinity-biblical-orthodoxy-cheatsheet|Trinity Defense (Cheat Sheet)]]
- [[_obsidian_research/defense-drafts/mormons-not-real-christians-full|Not Real Christians Defense (Full)]]
- [[_obsidian_research/defense-drafts/mormons-not-real-christians-cheatsheet|Not Real Christians Defense (Cheat Sheet)]]