

# God Has a Glorified Physical Body: A Latter-day Saint Defense

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LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

## 1. Introduction

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One of the most frequently raised objections to Latter-day Saint theology is the claim that God cannot possess a physical body. Critics argue that the Bible clearly teaches God is an immaterial spirit being and that the Latter-day Saint doctrine of an embodied God represents a departure from both scripture and historic Christianity. The primary proof-text is John 4:24: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." If this verse settles the question, then the Latter-day Saint position is indefensible. But if the verse is being read out of context, and if the broader biblical witness presents a more complex picture, then the criticism requires serious reconsideration. The textual, theological, and historical evidence demonstrates that the Bible does not teach divine incorporeality as a settled doctrine — and that the earliest Christian understanding of God was far more compatible with the Latter-day Saint position than modern critics acknowledge.

## 2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

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The strongest version of this argument proceeds as follows: Jesus Himself declared that "God is a Spirit" (John 4:24). Spirits do not have flesh and bones — Jesus Himself confirmed this after His resurrection when He said, "a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have" (Luke 24:39). Therefore, if God is a spirit, God does not have flesh and bones. Furthermore, the Bible teaches that God is invisible: "No man hath seen God at any time" (John 1:18); God "dwelleth in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see" (1 Timothy 6:16); God is "the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). A being with a physical body is, by definition, visible and localized. The God of the Bible is omnipresent — "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" (Jeremiah 23:24) — and a physical body cannot fill all of space. The doctrine of divine incorporeality is affirmed by every historic Christian creed and represents the unanimous testimony of the Christian tradition. The Latter-day Saint doctrine of an embodied God is a nineteenth-century innovation that contradicts both scripture and the entire history of Christian theology.

This argument draws on significant scriptural and traditional evidence. But it contains critical exegetical errors, ignores contradictory biblical data, and relies on a philosophical framework that postdates the biblical text.

## 3. Biblical Response

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## John 4:24 in Context

The central proof-text — "God is a Spirit" — must be read in its literary and grammatical context. Jesus is speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well about the proper *mode of worship*, not delivering a treatise on divine ontology. The Samaritan woman asks whether worship should take place on Mount Gerizim or in Jerusalem (John 4:20). Jesus responds that true worshippers will worship "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23), and then adds: "God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24, ESV).

Several observations are critical:

1. **The statement is about worship, not metaphysics.** Jesus is answering a question about worship location. His point is that worship is not confined to a geographic place but is a spiritual activity. Reading this as a definitive statement about God's ontological nature goes beyond what the text is doing.
2. **The Greek lacks the indefinite article.** The Greek reads *pneuma ho theos* — "Spirit [is] God" or "God [is] spirit." Greek does not have an indefinite article, so the translation "God is a spirit" (KJV) is interpretive. The construction is a qualitative predicate nominative, describing a quality or characteristic of God, not defining His entire nature. Compare 1 John 1:5: "God is light" (*phos ho theos*) — no one concludes God is a photon. Compare 1 John 4:8: "God is love" — no one concludes God is an abstract emotion. These are qualitative statements describing attributes, not exhaustive ontological definitions.
3. **"Spirit" describes nature, not the absence of body.** Even granting that God has a spiritual nature does not preclude embodiment. The resurrected Christ has "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39) yet is also described as a "life-giving spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45, NIV). Paul teaches that the resurrected body is a "spiritual body" (*soma pneumatikon*, 1 Corinthians 15:44). If a spiritual body is still a body, then being "spirit" does not exclude having a body.

## The Bible Describes God's Physical Form

The Bible contains numerous passages that describe God as having a physical form, not merely metaphorical language:

- **Exodus 33:11** — "And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend."
- **Exodus 33:20-23** — God tells Moses, "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live." Then God places Moses in a cleft of rock and covers him with His "hand" while His "glory" passes by, and Moses sees God's "back parts." If God has no body, what are the "back parts"?
- **Exodus 24:9-11** — Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel "saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone."
- **Genesis 1:26-27** — "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." If "image" and "likeness" are entirely non-physical, the terms lose their natural meaning. The Hebrew *tselem* (image) is used elsewhere for physical statues and representations.
- **Genesis 32:30** — Jacob says, "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."
- **Isaiah 6:1** — Isaiah sees the Lord "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up."

- **Ezekiel 1:26-28** — Ezekiel sees "the likeness of a throne" and upon it "the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it" — described as "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord."
- **Daniel 7:9** — The "Ancient of days" sits on a throne with hair "like the pure wool" and garments "white as snow."
- **Acts 7:55-56** — Stephen, "being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God." If God has no body, what does "right hand" mean? And Stephen sees two distinct beings — God and Jesus — not one substance.

### *The "Invisibility" Passages Do Not Prove Incorporeality*

Critics cite passages like John 1:18 ("No man hath seen God at any time") and 1 Timothy 6:16 ("whom no man hath seen, nor can see"). But these must be reconciled with the passages above where people explicitly *do* see God. The resolution is not that one set of passages is wrong, but that the "invisibility" passages describe God's normal state of glory — He is not casually visible to mortal eyes — while the "visibility" passages describe occasions when God chooses to reveal Himself. This is precisely the Latter-day Saint understanding: God has a glorified body of flesh and bone, radiant with glory, that mortal eyes cannot ordinarily perceive without divine enablement.

### *Omnipresence and Embodiment*

The objection that a physical God cannot be omnipresent conflates presence with influence. Even in traditional theology, God's omnipresence is not understood as God being physically smeared across all of space like a gas. It refers to God's awareness, power, and influence reaching everywhere. The Latter-day Saint position holds that God has a glorified physical body located in a specific place, while His influence, power, and awareness — mediated through the Holy Spirit and the Light of Christ — extend through all creation (D&C 88:6-13). This is functionally identical to how traditional theology actually operates, even if it uses different philosophical language.

## **4. Early Christian Evidence**

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### *The Earliest Christians Were Not Incorporealists*

The doctrine of divine incorporeality was not the original Christian teaching but entered Christianity through engagement with Greek philosophy, particularly Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism.

**Clement of Rome (c. 96 AD)** and the earliest Apostolic Fathers do not discuss divine incorporeality. Their writings reflect a simple, concrete understanding of God consistent with the biblical narratives of theophany.

**Justin Martyr (c. 150 AD)** distinguished between God the Father and the pre-incarnate Logos who appeared in Old Testament theophanies, but did not articulate a clear doctrine of incorporeality. His theology was still in the process of being shaped by Platonic categories.

**Tertullian (c. 200 AD)** explicitly stated that God has a body: "Who will deny that God is a body, although God is a Spirit? For Spirit has a bodily substance of its own kind, in its own form" (*Against Praxeas*, 7). Tertullian — one of the most important early Latin theologians — held a position remarkably close to the Latter-day Saint view.

**Origen (c. 230 AD)** was the first major Christian theologian to systematically argue for divine incorporeality, drawing heavily on Platonic philosophy. He taught that God is entirely without body and that all scriptural descriptions of God's physical form are allegorical (*De Principiis*, 1.1). Origen's views were later partially condemned, but his incorporealist theology became dominant through the influence of the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine.

**Augustine (c. 400 AD)** described in his *Confessions* (7.1) how he struggled for years to conceive of God as incorporeal, initially imagining God as a vast luminous body filling all space. His eventual embrace of incorporeality was explicitly the result of reading "certain books of the Platonists" (*Confessions*, 7.9). Augustine himself acknowledged that his understanding of God's nature came from Platonic philosophy, not from scripture alone.

The historical trajectory is clear: the earliest Christians had no settled doctrine of incorporeality. It developed gradually through philosophical engagement, reaching its mature form in the fourth and fifth centuries — the same period that produced the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds.

### ***The Anthropomorphite Controversy***

In the late fourth century, a significant controversy erupted in Egypt between monks who believed God had a human form (the "Anthropomorphites") and those who followed Origen's incorporealist theology. The monk Serapion, upon being told he could no longer pray to God as having human form, reportedly wept and said, "They have taken away my God, and I have no one to hold onto" (John Cassian, *Conferences*, 10.3). The Anthropomorphite monks were not ignorant laypeople — they represented a living tradition of concrete, embodied theology that the philosophical party was actively suppressing.

## **5. LDS Doctrinal Position**

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches:

- "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit" (D&C 130:22).
- God's body is glorified and perfected — not a mortal body subject to decay, but an immortal, resurrected, celestial body radiating glory.
- Joseph Smith's First Vision (1820) is foundational: he saw "two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other — *This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*" (Joseph Smith—History 1:17). This experience confirmed that the Father and the Son are distinct, embodied beings.

- The human body is created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27), and the purpose of mortal life includes obtaining a physical body in preparation for eventual glorification.
- God's omnipresence is understood through His Spirit, the Light of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, which "proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space" (D&C 88:12).

This teaching is presented not as a philosophical innovation but as a restoration of the original understanding obscured by centuries of philosophical accretion.

## 6. Key Scriptures

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### *Biblical*

- **John 4:24** — "God is a Spirit" — qualitative statement about worship, not exhaustive ontological definition
- **Genesis 1:26-27** — Humanity created in God's "image" and "likeness"
- **Exodus 33:11, 20-23** — God speaks face to face; Moses sees God's "back parts"
- **Exodus 24:9-11** — Moses and seventy elders see God
- **Acts 7:55-56** — Stephen sees God and Jesus as two distinct beings
- **1 Corinthians 15:44-45** — Resurrected body is a "spiritual body"; Christ is a "life-giving spirit" yet has a body
- **Luke 24:39** — Resurrected Christ has "flesh and bones"
- **Daniel 7:9** — Ancient of Days described in physical terms
- **Ezekiel 1:26-28** — The glory of the Lord in "the appearance of a man"
- **Philippians 3:21** — Christ "shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body"

### *Latter-day Saint*

- **D&C 130:22** — "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's"
- **D&C 88:6-13** — The Light of Christ fills the immensity of space
- **Joseph Smith—History 1:17** — Joseph sees the Father and the Son as distinct personages
- **Moses 1:11** — "Now mine own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural, but my spiritual eyes"

## 7. Objection Responses

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### *"God is a Spirit means God has no body."*

John 4:24 is a qualitative predicate nominative describing an attribute, not an exhaustive definition. "God is light" (1 John 1:5) does not mean God is a photon. "God is love" (1 John 4:8) does not mean God is an emotion. "God is spirit" means God has a spiritual nature — which the resurrected Christ also has, despite possessing a body of flesh and bones (1 Corinthians 15:44-45).

### ***"No man hath seen God at any time (John 1:18)."***

This contradicts Exodus 24:9-11, Exodus 33:11, Genesis 32:30, and Isaiah 6:1 unless it is understood as a general principle — God is not ordinarily visible to mortal eyes — that admits of exceptions when God chooses to reveal Himself. The Latter-day Saint position resolves the tension: God's glorified body is not naturally visible to mortal perception but can be seen through spiritual eyes or divine enablement (Moses 1:11).

### ***"An embodied God cannot be omnipresent."***

Omnipresence refers to God's awareness, power, and influence — not physical extension across space. Even in classical theology, omnipresence is not understood as God being physically located at every point in space simultaneously. The Latter-day Saint model — God's body in a specific location, His influence everywhere through the Spirit — is functionally equivalent to how omnipresence actually operates in traditional theology, stripped of Platonic metaphysical commitments.

### ***"This is a nineteenth-century invention."***

Tertullian (c. 200 AD) affirmed God has a body. The Anthropomorphite monks of the fourth century prayed to an embodied God. The doctrine of divine incorporeality was the development — a product of philosophical engagement, not biblical exegesis. The Latter-day Saint position represents a recovery of pre-philosophical Christianity, not an innovation.

### ***"The creeds affirm incorporeality — are you saying all of Christianity is wrong?"***

The creeds are human documents produced by specific historical councils under specific philosophical influences. They may contain truth, but they are not themselves scripture. The question is not what the creeds say but what the Bible says. And the Bible describes God in embodied terms far more often than it describes Him as incorporeal.

## **8. Conclusion**

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The claim that God cannot have a physical body rests primarily on a decontextualized reading of John 4:24, supported by philosophical commitments inherited from Greek philosophy rather than derived from scripture. The Bible repeatedly describes God in physical terms — with face, hands, back, and human form — and the earliest Christians had no settled doctrine of incorporeality. The philosophical doctrine of divine incorporeality entered Christianity through Platonic influence in the second through fifth centuries, and its dominance reflects the triumph of philosophy over the plain reading of scripture. The Latter-day Saint teaching that God the Father has a glorified body of flesh and bones is consistent with the biblical text, coherent with the earliest Christian understanding, and resolves tensions (such as the relationship between "invisibility" and theophany passages) that

incorporeal theology struggles to address. Far from being an innovation, the doctrine of an embodied God represents a restoration of the original Christian understanding.

## 9. Further Reading

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- [FAIR: Does God Have a Body?](#)
- [FAIR: John 4:24 – "God is a Spirit"](#)
- [FAIR: The Nature of God](#)