

LDS God Concept Is Functionally Atheistic

LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

A sophisticated critique advanced primarily by Catholic and Orthodox theologians asserts that the Latter-day Saint concept of God is "functionally atheistic." The argument runs as follows: if God is not the necessary, self-existent, uncaused ground of all being — if He is a finite, embodied being who once progressed to His current state — then the LDS God is merely a very powerful creature, not "God" in any philosophically meaningful sense. This, critics claim, leaves the fundamental metaphysical question ("Why is there something rather than nothing?") unanswered, rendering LDS theology indistinguishable from atheism at the cosmological level. This document examines whether this critique rests on biblical revelation or on post-biblical philosophical commitments, and whether the LDS concept of God is in fact far richer and more biblically grounded than critics acknowledge.

2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The classical theistic critique proceeds through several steps:

- 1. The cosmological argument demands a necessary being.** Classical theism (rooted in Aristotle, refined by Aquinas) holds that the chain of contingent causes must terminate in a being whose existence is necessary — who exists by His own nature, who cannot not exist. This being is *ipsum esse subsistens* (subsistent being itself). Without such a being, nothing can be explained.
- 2. Classical divine attributes follow necessarily.** If God is the ground of all being, He must be infinite, immaterial, eternal (not merely everlasting), immutable, impassible, and simple (without parts). These are not arbitrary philosophical additions but logical entailments of being the uncaused cause.
- 3. The LDS God fails every criterion.** An embodied God has parts (and thus is not simple). A God who was once human changed (and thus is not immutable). A God who exists within time and space is not the transcendent ground of being. A God who progressed from a lesser state is contingent, not necessary. Therefore, critics argue, the LDS "God" is just an extremely powerful being — a demiurge, not the true God.
- 4. The regress problem.** If God the Father was once a man who was exalted by His own God, and that God was exalted by yet another God, the chain extends infinitely backward with no ultimate ground. This infinite regress, critics argue, means LDS theology has no final answer to the question of ultimate existence — making it functionally atheistic.
- 5. Catholic and Orthodox consensus.** The Councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), and Chalcedon (451) affirmed God's transcendence, and the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) declared God to be "one supreme being... incomprehensible and ineffable." Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*

developed the doctrine of divine simplicity extensively. Orthodox theologians like Vladimir Lossky affirm apophatic theology — that God is utterly beyond creaturely categories.

This is a philosophically sophisticated objection that takes metaphysics seriously. It deserves an equally rigorous response.

3. Biblical Response

The Bible Does Not Teach Classical Theism's God

The critical question is whether the God described in the Bible matches the God of classical theism — or whether classical theism is itself an interpretive framework imposed on the biblical text from Greek philosophy.

The God of the Bible is personal, active, and relational:

- **Genesis 1:26-27** — "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." God has an image and likeness that is reflected in the human form.
- **Genesis 3:8** — "They heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day." God walks. He is present in a spatial manner.
- **Exodus 33:11** — "The Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend." God has a face and speaks directly.
- **Exodus 33:20-23** — "Thou canst not see my face... thou shalt see my back parts, but my face shall not be seen." God has a face and "back parts" — bodily language.
- **Exodus 24:9-11** — "Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: and they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone." God has feet. He is seen.
- **Daniel 7:9** — "The Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool." God sits, wears garments, and has hair.
- **Acts 7:55-56** — Stephen sees "the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." Two distinct, spatially located beings.
- **Philippians 3:21** — Christ will transform our bodies "that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body." Christ has a glorified body.
- **Hebrews 1:3** — Christ is "the express image of his [the Father's] person." The Father has a "person" (*hypostasis*) of which the Son is the image.

The God of the Bible changes, responds, and is affected by creation:

- **Genesis 6:6** — "It repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart." God experiences grief and regret.
- **Exodus 32:14** — "The Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people." God changes His course of action in response to Moses's plea.

- **Jonah 3:10** — "God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not." God responds to Nineveh's repentance.
- **Jeremiah 18:7-10** — God explicitly states that He will change His plans based on how nations respond.

Classical theism must allegorize or explain away these passages. LDS theology reads them as they stand.

"I Am That I Am" Does Not Require Classical Theism

Exodus 3:14 — "I AM THAT I AM" (*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*) — is often cited as proof that God is "being itself." But this phrase in Hebrew is better translated as "I will be what I will be" — a statement of covenantal faithfulness and sovereign freedom, not a metaphysical declaration about necessary existence. The Septuagint translation (*ego eimi ho on*) introduced the Greek philosophical reading, but the Hebrew original is dynamic and relational, not static and abstract.

As scholar James Barr argued in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, importing Greek metaphysical categories into Hebrew thought distorts the text.

God's Self-Existence Does Not Require Classical Simplicity

LDS theology affirms that God is supreme, eternal as God, all-powerful, all-knowing, and the creator and ruler of all things within our sphere of existence (see D&C 20:17). Rejecting divine simplicity and impassibility does not mean rejecting God's ultimacy. It means rejecting one particular philosophical framework for describing that ultimacy — a framework that the Bible itself does not teach.

4. Early Christian/Historical Evidence

The Earliest Christians Were Not Classical Theists

Classical theism developed gradually through the engagement of Christian theology with Greek philosophy:

- **Justin Martyr (c. 100-165)** began the process of synthesizing Christianity with Platonic philosophy, calling Christ the *Logos* in a semi-Platonic sense. But Justin also taught that the Father and Son were numerically distinct — a position closer to LDS theology than to later Nicene orthodoxy.
- **Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-202)** emphasized God's direct involvement with creation and rejected Gnostic notions of an utterly transcendent God divorced from the material world. In *Against Heresies* 4.20.1, Irenaeus wrote: "The glory of God is man fully alive." God's glory is manifested in embodied, living human beings — not in abstract immateriality.
- **Tertullian (c. 155-220)** explicitly argued 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 also insisted on the distinct personhood of Father and Son.

- **Origen (c. 184-253)** introduced thoroughgoing Platonic metaphysics into Christian theology, including divine immateriality and the eternity of the soul. But Origen also taught the subordination of the Son to the Father — and many of his views were later condemned.
- **Augustine of Hippo (354-430)** and the Cappadocian Fathers brought Neoplatonic metaphysics fully into Christian doctrine, developing divine simplicity, immutability, and impassibility as formal doctrines. But this represents a *development* — not a recovery — of Christian teaching.

The charge that LDS theology is "atheistic" rests on standards that the earliest Christians themselves did not meet.

Divine Embodiment in Early Christianity

- **The Ascension of Isaiah (1st-2nd century)** describes a vision of God as a glorious, visible being in heaven.
- **The Apocalypse of Abraham (1st-2nd century)** presents God with a visible form.
- **The Shepherd of Hermas (2nd century)**, widely read in early churches, includes bodily and anthropomorphic depictions of God.
- Historian Charles Gieschen has documented that "the body of God" was a significant theme in early Judaism and Christianity before philosophical theology suppressed it.

5. LDS Doctrinal Position

God Is Supreme, Eternal, and Worthy of Worship

The LDS position does not diminish God. It affirms:

- **D&C 20:17** — "By these things we know that there is a God in heaven, who is infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting the same unchangeable God, the framer of heaven and earth, and all things which are in them."
- **Alma 11:44** — God is described as eternal and all-powerful.
- **Moses 1:3** — "Behold, thou art my son... and I have a work for thee, Moses, my son; and thou art in the similitude of mine Only Begotten."
- **D&C 130:22** — "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."

God possesses all power, all knowledge, and all glory. Whether He is described in Aristotelian categories of "necessary being" or in relational, covenantal categories, He is God — the supreme ruler, creator, and father of all.

The "Infinite Regress" Objection Is Not Unique to LDS Theology

Critics claim that if God was once a man exalted by another God, an infinite regress results. But:

1. **Infinite regress is a live philosophical option.** Many philosophers (including some classical theists) acknowledge that infinite causal chains are not logically impossible. Thomas Aquinas himself

argued against infinite regress not on logical grounds but on metaphysical grounds tied to his particular system.

2. **LDS theology does not require full articulation of every metaphysical question.** The Church has not issued definitive doctrine on whether there is an infinite chain of divine beings. The King Follett Discourse is a sermon, not a canonized creedal statement. LDS theology focuses on the God with whom humanity has a covenant relationship — Elohim, the Father.
3. **Classical theism has its own unexplained mysteries.** Why does the "necessary being" exist? What is the mechanism by which a purely immaterial, simple being creates a material, complex universe? How does an impassible God love? Classical theism does not resolve all metaphysical questions; it simply locates the mystery at a different point.

"Functionally Atheistic" Is a Category Error

The charge of "functional atheism" conflates two distinct claims:

1. **Metaphysical ultimacy:** Does reality have an ultimate explanation?
2. **Personal relationship with God:** Is there a divine being who knows, loves, creates, redeems, and governs?

LDS theology may not answer (1) in precisely the way Thomistic philosophy demands, but it answers (2) with extraordinary richness — a God who is a personal Father, who has a glorified body, who speaks to prophets, who sent His Son to atone for sin, who invites all to become like Him. If "atheism" means the absence of a personal, active, governing God, then LDS theology is the *opposite* of atheism.

6. Key Scriptures

Scripture	Relevance
Genesis 1:26-27	God creates man in His image and likeness
Exodus 24:9-11	Seventy elders of Israel see God
Exodus 33:11, 20-23	God speaks face to face; has a face and "back parts"
Daniel 7:9	Ancient of Days has physical attributes
Acts 7:55-56	Stephen sees the Father and Son as distinct beings
Philippians 3:21	Christ has a glorified body
Hebrews 1:3	The Son is the express image of the Father's person
Genesis 6:6	God grieves — is affected by creation
Exodus 32:14	God responds and changes course
John 17:3	Eternal life is knowing the Father and the Son — relational, personal
D&C 130:22	The Father has a tangible body of flesh and bones
D&C 20:17	God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable

7. Responses to Common Objections

"If God has a body, He is limited and finite."

A glorified, resurrected body is not a limitation — it is the fullness of embodied perfection. Christ's resurrected body could pass through walls (John 20:19), appear and disappear (Luke 24:31), and yet eat food and be touched (Luke 24:39-43). Embodiment in a glorified state transcends the limitations of mortal bodies. Paul teaches that the resurrected body is "raised in glory" and "raised in power" (1 Corinthians 15:43).

"Without divine simplicity, God is composite and therefore contingent."

Divine simplicity is an Aristotelian-Thomistic doctrine, not a biblical one. The Bible never teaches that God is without parts or composition. Many Christian philosophers (Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig, Richard Swinburne) reject divine simplicity while affirming robust theism. The charge of contingency does not follow from embodiment unless one presupposes the very framework being contested.

"God must be immaterial because 'God is Spirit' (John 4:24)."

The Greek text reads *pneuma ho theos* — "God is Spirit." But this is a statement about God's nature, not about immateriality. The resurrected Christ told His disciples, "A spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have" (Luke 24:39) — and yet Christ is divine. Paul distinguishes between "natural body" and "spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44), showing that "spiritual" does not mean "immaterial." A "spiritual body" is a glorified, perfected physical body animated by the Spirit.

"Thomas Aquinas proved that God must be the uncaused cause."

Aquinas's Five Ways are philosophical arguments, not biblical texts. They depend on specific Aristotelian premises about potency and act, form and matter, and the impossibility of infinite regress — premises that have been contested by philosophers for centuries (including Hume, Kant, and contemporary analytic philosophers). LDS theology is not obligated to accept Aristotelian metaphysics as the framework for understanding God.

"Without a necessary being, you have no explanation for existence."

This is a philosophical preference, not a theological requirement. Many philosophical traditions (process theology, some forms of idealism, certain interpretations of quantum cosmology) reject the notion that a single necessary being is the only way to ground existence. LDS theology holds that matter and intelligence are co-eternal with God (D&C 93:29, 33; Abraham 3:18), which provides a different — but not irrational — metaphysical framework.

"The LDS God is just a powerful alien, not God."

This caricature ignores the reality of LDS worship, devotion, and theological depth. The LDS God is all-knowing, all-powerful, perfectly loving, perfectly just, the creator of the earth, the Father of spirits, the author of the plan of salvation, and the being to whom all prayer and worship are directed. Calling this "atheism" or equating it with belief in a "powerful alien" is rhetorical rather than substantive.

8. Conclusion

The charge of "functional atheism" rests not on the Bible but on a particular philosophical tradition — classical theism rooted in Aristotelian and Neoplatonic metaphysics. The biblical text itself presents a God who is personal, embodied, relational, and responsive — attributes that classical theism must systematically reinterpret. The earliest Christians were not classical theists; the doctrines of divine simplicity, immutability, and impassibility developed through centuries of philosophical synthesis. LDS theology offers an alternative that is arguably more faithful to the biblical text: a God who is truly personal, who has a glorified body, who is the supreme ruler and Father of all, and who invites His children into a relationship so intimate that they can become like Him. This is not atheism — it is theism at its most relational and intimate.

Further Reading:

- [FAIR: Is the Mormon Concept of God Unbiblical?](#)
- [Gospel Topics: Becoming Like God](#)
- [FAIR: Divine Embodiment](#)
- David Paulsen, "The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1996).
- James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, 1961).