

DOES GOD HAVE A BODY IN HUMAN FORM?

by Barry Bickmore

One thing that sets Latter-day Saints apart from nearly all of the rest of Christianity is the doctrine that God the Father possesses a body in human form. In fact, many of our Christian brothers and sisters see this belief as positively strange, and some even question our claim to the title “Christian” because of it! The purpose of this short essay is to help the reader understand why we would believe such a thing, and to equip Latter-day Saints with reasons for their faith (1 Peter 3:15).

WHY DO THE LDS BELIEVE GOD HAS A BODY?

Latter-day Saints believe God has a body in human form simply because our scriptures and our prophets unanimously testify on this point. “The Father has a body of flesh and bones, as tangible as man’s; the Son also” (D&C 130:22). In other words, if we want to know what kind of being God is, who better to believe than those who have actually seen Him? For instance, why not ask the prophet Ezekiel, who described his vision of God by saying he saw “high above all, upon the throne, a form in human likeness?” (Ezekiel 1:26, *New English Bible*.) Why not ask Stephen, whose last words were, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God?” (Acts 7:56.) What about John, who saw God sitting on the throne in heaven (Revelation 4:2)? In one vision, Moses was not allowed to see God’s face (God was angry at the Israelites at the time), but God said he would “cover thee with my hand while I pass by; and I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen” (Exodus 33:22–23). Previously, however, it was written “the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Exodus 33:11). The patriarch Jacob “wrestled a man” one night in the wilderness, and after this encounter “Jacob called the name of the place Peniel [Hebrew for “the face of God”]: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” (Genesis 32:24–32). Some of these references may refer to visions of God the Son, but some of them, like Stephen’s and John’s, certainly refer to the person of the Father.

Edmond LaB. Cherbonnier of Trinity College (a non-Mormon scholar) summarizes this phenomenon as follows: “In short, to use the forbidden word, the biblical God is clearly anthropomorphic (i.e. “in the form of man”)—not apologetically so, but proudly, even militantly.”¹ Christopher Stead (another non-Mormon scholar) of the Cambridge Divinity School agrees that, “The Hebrews ... pictured the God whom they worshipped as having a body and mind like our own, though transcending humanity in the splendour of his appearance, in his power, his wisdom, and the constancy of his care for his creatures.”²

The LDS doctrine of God’s embodiment rests primarily on eyewitness testimony. We believe God has a body in human form because everyone who has seen Him has described Him in this way.

COMMON OBJECTIONS TO THE LDS BELIEF

Obviously, most other Christians interpret the Bible differently than we do on this point, and they put forward several standard objections to this kind of “anthropomorphism.” However, these objections do not hold up under close scrutiny. This will be shown for several common objections to the LDS doctrine, most of which can be found in a tract published by Catholic Answers, Inc., entitled, *Does God Have a Body?*³

Objection: “Being ‘in the image of God’ means humans have a rational soul.”

“And God said, Let us make man in our image [Hebrew *tselem*], after our likeness [Hebrew *d’muth*]” (Genesis 1:26). This statement in the first chapter of the Bible seems pretty clear to Latter-day Saints. However, our fellow Christians will often say that this is to be interpreted figuratively, in the sense that humans have “rational souls,” which set us apart from the animals. But consider the words used to describe Adam’s son



Seth, just a few chapters later: “And Adam lived an hundred thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness [Hebrew *dēmuth*], after his image [Hebrew *tselem*]; and called his name Seth” (Genesis 5:3). Adam was created in God’s *image* and *likeness*, and one of Adam’s sons had Adam’s *image* and *likeness*. *Exactly the same words* were used to describe both scenarios by the same prophetic author. Now, either Adam looked like God, or Seth was the only one of Adam’s sons who possessed a “rational soul.” If there is a good reason to interpret one passage in one way, and the other in another way, it hasn’t been brought to our attention.

Objection: “The Bible also says God has wings, etc.”

Our friends at Catholic Answers launch the following common objection to show that much of the Biblical language about God must be taken figuratively.

Second, talk in the Bible about God’s strong right arm, his eyes, and such is metaphorical language concerning God’s power and knowledge. This can be seen by the fact that the Bible also speaks of God as having feathers and wings, yet even the anthropomorphites [i.e. people who believe in “anthropomorphism,” the idea that God has a body in human form] would not go this far (cf. Ps. 91:4—“He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge”).

Of course, it is true that the Biblical writers employed numerous metaphors when talking about God. However, just because some statements about God are metaphorical doesn’t mean that every statement is. When the Psalmist speaks of God covering us with His feathers, and giving refuge under His wings, the metaphor is completely clear. As Jesus said, “How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (Matthew 23:37.) Exactly what is the metaphorical interpretation of God’s “back parts” that Moses saw? When Stephen reported his vision, the text gives no clue as to any metaphorical interpretation; he simply reported what he saw, as did the others.

Objection: John 4:24 says, “God is a Spirit.”

The Catholic Answers tract goes on to assert that since the Bible says, “God is a Spirit,” He cannot have a body.

Anthropomorphites maintain their doctrine in defiance of verses, such as John 4:24, where Jesus teaches us: “God is a spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” This means God has no body, because a spirit is, by nature, an incorporeal being. As Jesus tells us elsewhere, “a spirit has not flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39).

There are several problems with this objection. First, Paul wrote, “But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:17). To say that God is “a spirit” is grammatically equivalent to the statement that a man joined to the Lord is “one spirit,” and yet, Christians obviously have bodies as well as spirits.

Second, there are no indefinite articles (“a” or “an”) in ancient Greek, so the passage can be translated “God is a Spirit” or “God is Spirit.” Most modern translations have chosen the latter, because John’s statement “God is Spirit” is parallel to two passages in his first epistle, “God is light” (1 John 1:5) and “God is love” (1 John 4:8). In context, all of these passages seem to be referring to God’s activity toward men rather than to the nature of His “Being,” and of course we would never say that God is “a love” or “a light.” Furthermore, Christopher Stead of the Cambridge Divinity School (another non-Mormon scholar) explains how such statements would have been interpreted within ancient Judaism: “By saying that God is spiritual, we do not mean that he has no body ... but rather that he is the source of a mysterious life-giving power and energy that animates the human body, and himself possesses this energy in the fullest measure.”⁴ It must always be remembered that the Bible was written by Hebrews, and the New Testament writers were all Jews. We saw at the beginning of this article that the Hebrews consistently pictured God in human form.

Finally, Latter-day Saints do not believe that “spirit” is incorporeal (i.e. “without substance”), and neither did the earliest Christians. The great Protestant historian, Adolf von Harnack, wrote, “God was naturally conceived and represented as corporeal by uncultured Christians, though not by these alone, as the later controversies prove.”⁵ For instance, the great Christian writer, Tertullian (ca. 200 A.D.) wrote, “For 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.”⁶

Why did Christians start believing otherwise? J.W.C. Wand, a historian and former Anglican bishop of London, writes that one of the Greek philosophical schools

(Neoplatonism), which was popular in the days of the Roman Empire, exerted a particular influence in this respect. (See below for more information about the influence of the Greek philosophers.)

It is easy to see what influence this school of thought [Neoplatonism] must have had upon Christian leaders. It was from it that they learnt what was involved in a metaphysical sense by calling God a Spirit. They were also helped to free themselves from their primitive eschatology and to get rid of that crude anthropomorphism which made even Tertullian believe that God had a material body.⁷

Objection: Christians have always believed that God is an unchangeable, simple, immaterial spirit essence.

Our Catholic friends go on to claim that Christians since the beginning have always declared, as was stated in the first Vatican council, that God is “a unique spiritual substance by nature, absolutely simple and unchangeable, [and] must be declared distinct from the world in fact and by essence.”⁸ They write:

The early Church Fathers, of course, agreed, and loudly declared the fact that God is an unchangeable, immaterial spirit who has an entirely simple nature—that is, a nature containing no parts, which rules out him having a body since all bodies are extended over space and thus can be divided into parts.

To establish their point they quote several early Christian writers who wrote between 170 and 429 A.D. But did all the early Christians accept this doctrine? Clearly not. For instance, Catholic Answers quotes Origen (ca. 225 A.D.) saying, “God, therefore, is not to be thought of as being either a body or as existing in a body, but as a simple intellectual being, admitting within himself no addition of any kind.”⁹ However, they neglect to note that in the preface to the very same work, Origen wrote, “For it is also to be a subject of investigation how God himself is to be understood—whether as corporeal, and formed according to some shape, or of a different nature from bodies—a point which is not clearly indicated in our teaching.”¹⁰ Origen admitted there was considerable confusion among Christians of that era about this very question, but why?

Origen gives us another clue in a sermon on the book of Genesis. “The Jews indeed, but also some of our people, supposed that God should be understood as a man, that is, adorned with human members and human appear-

ance. But the philosophers despise these stories as fabulous and formed in the likeness of poetic fictions.”¹¹ The Jews, and Christians who followed the standard Jewish interpretations, believed that God had a body in human form. Why did Origen reject this? Simply because *the philosophers* thought it was silly. For instance, the Middle Platonist philosopher Plutarch wrote the following:

Socrates and Plato held that (God is) the One, the single self-existent nature, the monadic, the real Being, the good: and all this variety of names points immediately to mind. God therefore is mind, a separate species, that is to say what is purely immaterial and unconnected with anything passible [i.e. changeable].¹²

Another Greek philosopher, Empedocles (ca. 444 B.C.) claimed that God “does not possess a head and limbs similar to those of humans...[He is] a spirit, a holy and inexpressible one.”¹³

Greek converts to Christianity, like many of the men quoted in the Catholic Answers tract, wanted to make their faith more appealing to people in their own culture, and so they adopted a definition of God from the Greek philosophers, whose thought was widely respected at the time. The temptation is always there to make one’s faith more popular by “modernizing” it, but the Apostle Paul had warned against exactly this kind of thing. “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (Colossians 2:8). What was the “philosophy” current in Paul’s day? Greek philosophy. Similarly, Father Jean Daniélou, a Catholic historian and later a Cardinal, wrote that,

If we now examine the forms of thought and philosophical systems current at the time when Christianity first made its appearance in the world, it is clear that they were by no means ready to assimilate this Christian conception: on the contrary, they were wholly antagonistic thereto.¹⁴

However, within a few generations that had all changed, and philosophy ruled Christian theology.¹⁵

Objection: John 1:18 says, “No man has seen God at any time.”

Some mainstream Christians object that the passages in the Bible that describe God’s human form must be taken figuratively, because Jesus said, “No man has seen

God at any time” (John 1:18). Similarly, God told Moses, “there shall no man see me, and live” (Exodus 33:20). Of course, God said that to Moses right before he told him that He would pass by so Moses could see His “back parts,” but not his face (Exodus 33:21–23), and God was angry at the time, so it may have been a special circumstance. Still, this presents an odd problem, considering the number of times the Bible reports that people *did* see God. Samuel Meier, Associate Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Semitics at Ohio State University, writes this about the problem:

A deity’s physical manifestation is seen by human beings. The appearance of gods and their involvement with humans are common motifs in ancient Near Eastern and classical mythology. That similar phenomena are found in the Bible seems problematic at first, for a persistent tradition in the Hebrew Bible affirmed that death comes to any human who sees God (Gen 16.13; 32:30; 24.10–11; 33:20; Deut. 5.24–26; 18:16; Judg. 6.22–23; 13:22; cf Exod. 20.19; Isa. 6:5). In most of these contexts, however, the narration undermines this sentiment by depicting the pleasant surprise of those who survive. The text presents this perspective as a misperception to which human beings subscribe, for no humans in the Bible ever die simply because they have seen God. On the contrary, throughout the Bible God wants to communicate intimately with humans. The problem of how God can adequately show himself to humankind without harm is a conundrum that is never really resolved in the Bible.¹⁶

Latter-day Saints can harmonize these passages with those that describe visions of the Father by referring to Moses’ vision of God, as described in the Pearl of Great Price. “And he saw God face to face, and he talked with him, and the glory of God was upon Moses; therefore Moses could endure his presence ... [Moses said] For behold, I could not look upon God, except his glory should come upon me, and I were transfigured before him” (Moses 1:2, 14). An identical solution is offered by Peter in an early (second or third century) Jewish Christian work called the *Clementine Homilies*.

For I maintain that the eyes of mortals cannot see the incorporeal form of the Father or Son, because it is illumined by exceeding great light ... For he who sees God cannot live. For the excess of light dissolves the flesh of him who sees; unless by the secret power of God the flesh be changed into the nature of light, so that it can see light.¹⁷

In the same document, another conversation between Peter and Simon Magus is reported. “And Simon said: ‘I should like to know, Peter, if you really believe that the shape of man has been moulded after the shape of God.’ And Peter said: ‘I am really quite certain, Simon, that this is the case ... It is the shape of the just God.’”¹⁸

The point of these passages is not that no one has or will have a vision of God’s person, but rather that men cannot see God as He is. We must be changed and protected by the grace of God to withstand His presence, and even then we cannot fully comprehend His majesty. However, this will not always be the case. As John further wrote, “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him *as he is*” (1 John 3:2, emphasis added).

CONCLUSIONS

Does God have a body? Obviously the issue cannot be settled by quoting a couple Bible verses and declaring victory. However, the choice before the reader should be clear at this point. Will you interpret the testimony of the prophets at face value, as the ancient Jews and Jewish Christians would have? Or will you accept the definition of God Christians have borrowed from the Greek philosophers? It is an article of faith for Latter-day Saints that we should simply take the prophets’ word for it when it comes to questions like this. After all, they are the ones who claim to have seen God, and what can Greek philosophers say about Him that they cannot?

We invite everyone to consider our message, and pray to God to find out if the message is true. You can find out straight from the Source of all Truth whether or not He has restored the true Church of Jesus Christ to the earth, and sent prophets and apostles once again.

FURTHER READING

Cherbonnier, Edmond LaB., “In Defense of Anthropomorphism,” in Truman Madsen, editor, *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978).

Neusner, Jacob. “Conversation in Nauvoo about the Corporeality of God,” *BYU Studies* 36:1 (1996–97), 7–30.

Paulsen, David L. “The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives,” *BYU Studies* 35:4 (1995–96), 6–94.

NOTES

1. Edmond LaB. Cherbonnier, "In Defense of Anthropomorphism," in Truman Madsen, editor, *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaean-Christian Parallels* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 162; compare G.E. Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM Press, 1952), 49–50.
2. Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120.
3. *Does God Have a Body?* Catholic Answers tract, 1996. Since this article was first written, the title of the tract was changed to "God Has No Body," and can now be downloaded at http://www.catholic.com/library/god_has_no_body.asp.
4. Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 98.
5. Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, tr. Neil Buchanan (New York: Dover, 1961), 1:180 n.1.
6. Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 7.
7. J.W.C. Wand, *A History of the Early Church to A.D. 500* (London: Methuen & Co., 1937), 140.
8. George Brantl, *Catholicism* (New York: George Braziller, 1962), 41.
9. Origen, *On First Principles* 1:1:6.
10. Origen, *On First Principles* Preface 9.
11. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 3:1.
12. Plutarch, quoted in Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 14:16
13. Empedocles, in Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981), 3:51.
14. Jean Daniélou, *The Lord of History: Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History*, translated by N. Abercrombie (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958), 1.
15. For more information on this topic, see Barry R. Bickmore, *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity* (Ben Lomond, Cal.: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 1999).
16. Samuel A. Meier, "Theophany," in Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 740. The citations of Genesis 24:10–11 and 32:20 should be to Exodus 24:10–11 and 33:20. I thank James Juris for pointing out this mistake, as well as a mistake in another citation.
17. *Clementine Homilies* 17:16
18. *Clementine Homilies* 16:19.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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