

17 Biblical Paradoxes

The Bible is full of paradoxical statements and situations. By paradox I mean a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that despite sound reasoning from acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems senseless, logically unacceptable.

We have all encountered these and probably either ignored them or landed on one statement is correct and the other is wrong. This is typical of our Western cultures where we are prone to accepting only one possibility of a statement or situation. ^{LL}

You may have seen the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* where the father, Tevya, had the habit of chewing over every issue with several rounds of, "*On the one hand... but on the other hand...!*" You probably thought that it was amusing but not very useful.

This habit of looking at things in terms of two contrasting viewpoints is distinctly Jewish, and a part of their Eastern way of thinking. Often the two points of view are left unresolved and simply accepted as a paradox. In our Western way of thinking, however, we often struggle to find systematic treatment of every issue. When confronted with this in our Bible we are frustrated by how sometimes it seems to be contradictory.

Many of the most important truths of the Bible are paradoxical. God is both omniscient, but yet he is present at certain times in a unique way, like at the burning bush. Jesus is both fully human and fully God. God is loving and in control, and yet he allows tragedy and injustice to take place. And, Jesus' words often come in paradoxes. He says that "*if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last*" (Mk 9:35) and that "*he who loves his life will lose it, while he who hates his life will keep it for eternity.*" (Jn 12:25)

But rather than trying to make the Bible more "logical" by our Western standards, we will have a deeper understanding if we learn to read it from both sides, just as Jesus, Paul and all the Jews did over the ages. ³

Remember that the Eastern-thinking people wrote the Old Testament and most of the New Testament. ^{LL}

Greek logic, which has to a large extent influenced the Western world, often used a tightly contained step logic whereby one would argue from premises to a conclusion, each step linked tightly to the next in coherent, rational, logical fashion. The conclusion, however, was usually limited to one point of view—the human being's perception of reality.

Block Logic

By contrast, the Hebrews often made use of block logic. That is, concepts were expressed in self-contained units or blocks of thought. These blocks did not necessarily fit together in any obviously rational or harmonious pattern, particularly when one block represented the human perspective on truth and the other represented the divine. This way of thinking created a propensity for paradox, or apparent contradiction, as one block stood in tension to the other, often in an illogical relation to the other. It is particularly difficult for Westerners, whose thought patterns have been influenced more by the Greeks and Romans than by the Hebrews, to piece together the block logic of Scripture. When we open the Bible we are invited to undergo a kind of intellectual conversion to the Hebraic world of the East. ²

We need to remember that we don't know everything. If two statements seem to be contradictory, then maybe we need to consider what each statement is saying at a deeper level. Is one statement from God's point of view and the other from the human point of view? If so, then the conclusion is that both statements may be correct and trying to show how God's point of view is different from ours. We need to accept both statements as true even though to us they seem contradictory. It is much like looking at a cut diamond, it looks different from different points of view, but it is still a diamond. No one's view is complete but taken together we will see the entire diamond. ^{LL}

Wisdom takes trust to hold two apparently opposite views at the same time. Trying to squeeze the two paradoxical views into one view betrays the trust, with a consequential loss in wisdom. ^{LL}

The Church's propensity for categorizing or methodologically organizing great theological systems of thought is at best risky business. Not that the Bible is a dumping ground or random repository for eclectic jottings about God and life, **far from it!** It is God's inspired Word. If that divinely breathed message has cohesiveness and an overarching structure, **and it does**, this coherence and structure are not to be imposed upon the Bible. Rather, one must discover inductively this interrelatedness within Scripture, while at the same time giving free play to the loose ends and paradoxical language found therein. ²

"Weighing" the Laws Against Each Other

Another way that Jewish thought seeks balance is in its approach to the law. Christians have traditionally understood all the commandments to be of equal importance, but in the time of Jesus, the rabbis "weighed" the laws so that in a situation where two laws

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conflict with each other, a person knew which one to follow. For instance, the command to circumcise on the eighth day took precedence over the Sabbath. (Jn 7:22) This came out of an effort to live by God's laws in all situations, rather than arbitrarily ignoring some and doing others. They would describe the laws in terms of being "light" (*kal*) and "heavy" (*hamur*).

For instance, one rabbinic principle is "*Pikuach Nephesh*" (pi-KOO-akh NEH-fesh), which is the preservation of life. The rabbis saw that Leviticus 19:16 says, "*Do not stand by while your brother's blood is shed*" - meaning if someone's life is in danger, you must intervene. Also, the Torah says that the law was given in order to bring life, (Ex. 30:15-16), so they concluded that all laws (except a few) should be set aside to save a human life. There were three laws that were so weighty that they could not be broken to save life, and these were idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder.

These also were the three laws given to the Gentiles who were entering the early church in Acts 15. Because of this, Jewish doctors and nurses go to work on the Sabbath, because they may potentially save a life. And if a person is ill, he or she is supposed to eat on Yom Kippur, the day when eating and drinking are strictly forbidden. Even the possibility of saving a life is enough to put this principle into effect. The weightier law is to save life!

An interesting example shows the contrasts in approach to the law. Imagine you lived in Europe during World War II and were hiding Jews in your home, and a Nazi came demanding to know where they were. Should you lie or tell the truth? According to the principle of *Pikuach Nephesh*, you should lie to save their lives. There is also biblical precedent in Exodus, when the midwives lied to Pharaoh rather than to kill the Israelite boys, and God rewarded them (Ex. 1:19-21). Surprisingly, Christians have sometimes come to the opposite conclusion. The theologian St. Augustine actually said, "*Since, then, eternal life is lost by lying, a lie may never be told for the preservation of the temporal life of another.*" He would conclude that a person must answer the Nazi truthfully no matter what. It appears that in his thinking, all rules are absolute. This logic forces one to conclude that the law to intervene to save life (Lev. 19:16) and the law against lying (Lev. 19:11) are irreconcilable.

Jesus also was using the principle of *Pikuach Nephesh* when he was arguing what may be done on the Sabbath in Luke 6, when he said, "*I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to **save life** or to destroy it?*" Both activities under debate in that chapter were an effort to preserve life - the plucking of

grain to satisfy hunger, and the healing of the man's hand. The point was not that Jesus was throwing aside the Sabbath as unimportant, because keeping the Sabbath was extremely important throughout the Torah. It was the "*sign of the covenant*" which was symbolic of a Jew's commitment to all of the Sinai covenant (Ex. 31:13). Jesus was saying that as important as it is to honor the Sabbath, human life is even more important. He concluded, "*The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.*" (Mark 2:27)

How then do we prioritize our obedience? The idea of "weighting" the laws of the Torah was likely the rationale for the question, "*Of all the commands, which is greatest?*" (Mark 12:28-30) The lawyer was asking, "What is our ultimate priority as we try to obey God?" Jesus' answer, of course, was to quote the commands that said that we should love God wholeheartedly and love our neighbor. Everything we do should be towards that end. He then illustrates with the parable of the Good Samaritan, which points out the wrong priorities of the two characters who wanted to go worship at the Temple rather than helping the dying man. Of course, the right thing to do in this case was to attend the needs of the wounded man, showing him the love of God.

Does this mean we can ignore God's standards altogether? *Not at all!* He emphatically said that he came not to undermine the law, but to explain it and live by it faithfully. Then he said that anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. He was emphatically stating that we should aim to be obedient in all ways, but that we should always aim to love, and that sets our priorities for how we should obey. As Tevya would phrase it, *on the one hand*, be obedient, *but on the other hand*, choose to love!

This is a very wise word for us in terms of discerning what to do when two commands conflict with each other. If you must choose one over the other, choose the one that shows the most love. If you don't do yard work on Sunday (or Saturday), but your elderly mother really needs her lawn mowed and it's the only day you can help, you should do it then. Or, if your family celebrates holidays with a tradition that you don't embrace, seek to do what is loving rather than dividing the family over it. Choose the most loving path. Jesus himself would probably do the same thing in your situation, and indeed, he is using you to do it. ³

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With all of the above stated let's read what Athol Dickson says in his book "The Gospel according to Moses" This has been edited so it is not the complete text of chapter 4. Additional comments are mine and are ended with ^{LL}.

Rabbi Zimmerman is away this Shabbat morning, so Rabbi David Stern leads Chever Torah (Chever^{SP} is a group studying the Torah together ^{LL}) in his place. The morning's discussion accelerates as he asks a question worthy of Rashi, then paces back and forth in front of the hall grinning with delight as we answer and respond with questions of our own. But a few minutes later the rhythm flags inexplicably and we sit silently, staring at our Torahs. Rabbi Stern fires off another question. No one answers. He offers a provocative observation—something controversial to stir the pot. Still, we are silent. Finally in frustration, he exclaims, "Come on people! Somebody disagree with me! How can we learn anything if no one will disagree?"

We laugh. But it occurs to me that Rabbi Stern has offered the most profound observation of the day, and it is a very Jewish idea. Unfortunately, most theological conversations I have had in church have been the self-reinforcing kind: a group of people sitting around telling each other what everyone already believes. If some brave soul interjects a radical new idea or questions one of the group's firmly held views, it is usually an unpleasant experience. We shift in our seats uncomfortably until someone rises to the bait. The discussion remains civil, but it seems that any challenge to the groups' theology must be corrected, so all comments are solidly aimed at that one goal: arriving at a preconceived answer.

Chever Torah has no such agenda. Or perhaps I should say all discussions have the same agenda: to explore the possibilities— *all* the possibilities. That is both a benefit and a problem. After many months at Chever Torah, it has finally sunken in that **God welcomes honest questions**. Far from betraying a doubting heart, the rabbis and the Jews at temple have taught me that my **questions demonstrate my faith, prove my love, display trust, and remove doubts by leading to answers I can use to help others on the path to the Lord**. In fact, I now have an entirely new problem. In response to every question I send speeding up to heaven, God sends a shower of answers back to earth, and sometimes the answers seem contradictory.

For example, with my new freedom to question God, I have already learned that the Shema means he is all-powerful. When I questioned him again, I learned that he is limited in several ways. An all-powerful God who is limited? How can I understand such a paradox? I am

not a prophet like Moses, with whom God spoke face to face. Moses' life was filled with "Mt. Sinai moments" of guidance direct from the Lord. What about me? What should I do with these paradoxes of the Bible? Like most everything else, the answer can be found in the Torah.

Story of Jacob

Abraham's grandson Jacob has been a very bad boy. He used trickery to steal his brother Esau's inheritance then fled to another country to escape Esau's wrath. There, Jacob married four women and became wealthy. Now he is returning to the land of his father after twenty years in exile, hoping to make peace with Esau. Along the way one of the most enigmatic events in the Torah occurs.

As Jacob nears Canaan, he sends advance groups of servants and animals as gifts to defuse his brother's potentially murderous anger. Having also sent his wives and children ahead, Jacob finds himself alone beside the river Jabbok (a tributary of the Jordan River from the east), where, with no preamble or explanation whatsoever, the Torah says "*a man wrestled with him until daybreak*." The struggle lasts all night. When dawn looms on the horizon, the "man," unable to extract himself from Jacob's grip, "touches" Jacob's hip and throws it out of its socket. Still, Jacob clings to him.

Then the man said, "*Let me go, for it is daybreak*." But Jacob replied, "*I will not let you go unless you bless me*." The man asked him, "*What is your name?*" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "*Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome*." Jacob said, "*Please tell me your name*." But he replied, "*Why do you ask my name?*" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "*It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared*." Genesis 32:26-30

Now questions seem to leap from the pages of the Torah, demanding answers. Why am I not told who the "man" is? Why did the man want to know Jacob's name? Why did he refuse to tell Jacob his own name? And most of all, what about that last verse, where Jacob seems to be saying that the "man" was actually God? How is that possible?

At Chever Torah I learn that there are homonymic (Having the same form (orthographic/phonetic) but unrelated meaning) undercurrents of deeper meaning in the Hebrew words of this brief story. The name "Jacob" (*Ya'aqob*), the river "Jabbok" (*Yabboq*) and the Hebrew word for "struggle" (*abaq*) all sound very similar in spoken Hebrew. *Ya'aqob*. *Yabboq*. *Abaq*. A man. A

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place. An action. Could there be some connection between these things, some hidden message?

Suddenly it occurs to me that all of these questions may be the fundamental reason for the story. For thousands of years an entire people have been called Israel, which means "struggles with God," because of this enigmatic episode. I have already seen that names are important in the Torah. When God wants to initiate a new level of intimacy with Moses, Elohim reveals his personal name, allowing the Hebrew people to call him *Yahweh*—I Am. When God wants to initiate a deeper relationship with Abram, he changes his name to Abraham. And now, this "man/God" has done it again. But what a name he has chosen for Jacob! Israel "Struggles with God." It is almost as if God has challenged Jacob to continue their wrestling match.

Ideas are flying faster now. I sense yet another level in the narrative. Could there be a connection between the name, Israel, and the paradoxical events of the story itself?

- Could it be that these things are described in this way because God *wants* me to be confused?
- Could these incomplete clues be placed here deliberately, because I am supposed to cast around for answers?
- Could the paradox in this story be God's invitation to wrestle with *me*?

A moment ago, I was reading about a literary character's struggle with God in an old book. Now, somehow, I have been drawn into that struggle myself—really drawn in, right here, right now. In an instant, five thousand years have disappeared and I am there on the riverbank with Jacob and the "man," there with the sand and stones and the grunts and sweat and the barest glimmer of a golden dawn on the horizon. I have him in my grasp, this enigmatic man; the sinews of his shoulders strain against me, but I have him. He will tell me now. I am sure of it. He will tell me what I need to know.

Then, with a touch, he is free; the class is over and I lie panting for breath beside the river.

I close the Torah and stare at the cover, overwhelmed. What is this thing that lies before me? It looks like a book, but what is it really? How did it *do* that?

In the following week, I cannot stop the memory of that tantalizing moment when I seemed to leave this world and step into another. The intensity of that feeling fades, but something permanent remains. I have a new, intimate understanding of how the Bible works. God has

spoken to me through his Torah in a way I've never experienced before, and his message is clear:

"Struggle with me."

Like Jacob with his limp, I am forever changed. Before, I saw a few questions in the Bible. They seemed like inconsistencies, and they frightened me. If the Bible is inconsistent, how can I justify my faith? But now I see something shining just beyond the questions. I see paradoxes every time I open the book, and rather than feeling fear, I am excited, because I know each paradox is another invitation to return to that wonderful wrestling match with God—to that feeling of being *right there with him*.

Some Paradoxes

Readers who have not yet found the Bible's paradoxes or who have trained themselves to ignore them for the sake of their peace of mind may doubt that I encounter them almost every time I read the Torah. Perhaps they would benefit from a few examples, so here is a brief list. For the sake of future reference, I will give each of them a name:

The Paradox of Fertility.

God commands Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply," but when he later selects a woman, Sarah, to be the mother of his chosen people, she is barren, unable to fulfill his command. This paradox is repeated with a barren Rebekah and a barren Rachel. A nation born of barren wombs—What could be more paradoxical?

The Paradox of Obedience.

1. Abraham is commanded to commit the horrible evil of human sacrifice by killing his son Isaac, but this command to violate God's law against murder *comes* from God. The paradox rises again when the Israelites are condemned for melting their golden jewelry and building a golden calf—a violation of the commandment against "graven images"—yet they are later commanded to melt their golden jewelry to make a pair of cherubim for the ark of the covenant, and later still are told to fashion and look upon a bronze serpent in order to survive snake bites. I find this paradox another time when God commands the Israelites not to seek "revenge," then orders Israel to destroy the people of Midian in the name of "vengeance." {Compare Leviticus 19:18 and Numbers 31:1. The same Hebrew word, *naqam*, is translated as "vengeance" or "revenge" in both verses.} To obey is to disobey. How is that possible?

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The Paradox of the Promise.

God promises to give Canaan to Abraham, but Abraham must pay dearly for a burial spot in that land for Sarah, and later the Israelites must fight and die to take it. How can the Promised Land be considered a gift when it must be bought with gold and lives?

The Paradox of Blessing.

God promises Abraham that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring," yet just before they enter the Promised Land, God commands Abraham's offspring to completely destroy the pagan people living there. If anything, the Canaanite people were cursed by Abraham's offspring, so how can it be true that "all peoples on earth" will be blessed?

The Paradox of Omnipresence.

God is said to be omnipresent, yet he is often described as visiting a certain place in a manner that implies he was not previously there. {See Genesis 17:1 and 18:1 for examples} If he is omnipresent, why is the Torah filled with descriptions of him coming and going on earth?

The Paradox of the Red Heifer.

Throughout Mosaic Law people must be "ceremonially pure" *before* they can bring sacrificial offerings to the tabernacle, and priests must be purified *before* they can offer those sacrifices. Also, Torah is clear that offerings can be made at the tabernacle altar and no place else. But with the "red heifer sacrifice" of Numbers 19, the offering is not made at the altar; it is made outside the camp. Also, the priest must be purified *after* making the offering, and the people are actually purified as a *result* of the offering. Why this reversal of everything else the Torah teaches about sacrifice?

The Paradox of Justice and Mercy.

The Torah defines justice as "Show no pity. Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. . . ." {The *lex talionis*, or "law of retaliation," is found in three of the five books of the Torah: Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21.} It is an unforgiving standard, yet elsewhere the Hebrew Scriptures tell us we should ". . . act justly and love mercy. . . ." {Micah 6:8} How can we simultaneously uphold the strict justice described in the Torah's "law of retaliation," and also love mercy?

The Hebrew Scriptures are not the only ones filled with paradox. Throughout the New Testament Jesus loves to use paradox to entice me to wrestle with the Lord. For example, Jesus says, "*But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.*" In a similar reversal of the usual wisdom, he also says, "*For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.*"

{Matthew 19:30; Mark 8:35} Jesus was always saying self-contradictory things like that. Indeed, one of his most frequently discussed teachings cannot be understood in any other context. I call it the Paradox of Love.

Paradox of Love

In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus explains that the greatest commandment is to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind. Then he says the second most important commandment is like the first, namely, we are to love each other in the way we love ourselves. {Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18} But if I have given all of my heart, soul, and mind over to loving God, where will I find the capacity to love my neighbor as myself? For that matter, if I must love my neighbor in the same way that I love myself, obviously I must first love myself to some extent. Yet to the same extent that I love myself, I must withhold part of my heart, soul, and mind from loving God. The paradox deepens when I observe that in spite of this high-minded commitment to love, Jesus also made the following remarkable statement: "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.*" {Luke 14:26}

Love God wholeheartedly, but save some love for yourself and your neighbor. Love your neighbor and love the Lord but hate your family and your life. How can anyone obey these teachings?

The last few pages have contained just a tiny portion of the many paradoxes in the Bible. I hope I have listed enough to convince the skeptic—be *they* a believer or unbeliever—that they do indeed fill the Scriptures. Yet because of Chever Torah, I have learned that none of these examples constitutes an inconsistency, much less a contradiction. On the contrary, I think biblical paradoxes are closer to the truth than any clear and simple statement could possibly be. If I am correct, it is the height of irony that throughout the centuries Christians and Jews have argued with each other and among themselves about the answers to these riddles.

Both religions have divided into denominations over them. Churches and synagogues alike have split over them. Wars have been fought and people martyred for them. Everyone seems to think it is vital to understand "the truth" about these things—the one and only truth.

But now at Chever Torah, armed with my new freedom to doubt and question, I read the story of Jacob's wrestling match with the "man" on the shores of the Jabbok river, and a startling train of thought begins.

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What if God placed these paradoxes within the Scriptures to *cause* me to struggle for the truth? What if it is the *struggle* he desires as much as the truth itself?

- Could it be that the truth lies not in one of the seemingly opposed answers to the paradox, but in between them, within the paradox itself?
- Could it be that uncompromising stances on the paradoxical teachings of the Scriptures are foolishness, no matter how important the doctrine or belief in question, because such dogmatic posturing misses the point entirely?
- Could it be that the answer to these either/or questions of paradox is neither this nor that, but simply, "**Yes**" and "**Yes**"?

The adversary's favorite trick is to get people to focus on one truth to the exclusion of another.

When I was five years old my father took me to a fishing barge on a lake near our home. There, he showed me how to bait a hook and throw it into the water. Watching the bobber for nibbles, I began to learn an important lesson about patience. But I did not learn it well. Soon the bobber dove beneath the surface, and with my father's help I caught my very first fish. As my father dealt with the unlucky beast, I reeled in my line, placed the pole on the deck, and told him I was ready to go. When he asked me why I wanted to leave so soon I replied, "Because I caught the fish."

The fish was real enough; I could see that for myself. But one little word in my answer—"the"—skewed the truth about that fish, making it something it was not. And just as I assumed there was only one fish, I have often made the mistake of assuming there was nothing left in the pool of knowledge after reeling in a single truth. To find out how this phenomenon transfers to matters of God I will apply the idea to a few of the paradoxes already listed.

More on Paradoxes

Consider the *Paradox of Omnipresence*. In the moment that I focus exclusively on God's omnipresence, I find myself ignoring the fact that he is personally here, within my little life. Conversely, in the moment I try to fit him in my life according to some preconceived idea of who and what he is, I fail to appreciate his omnipresent majesty. God is both in everything and beyond everything, yet he is also here watching over my shoulder as I type these words. To worship the one without the other is to worship something less than God. He is neither a dear friend I can confide in nor an impersonal force of nature. Or, more precisely, he is both at once, and when I try to limit him to either, he slips away altogether.

Now consider the *Paradox of the Promise*. When I revel in his promised gifts, I fail to see the work required to prepare me to receive those promises. When I focus on the work required, I forget that my very ability to do the work is itself a gift. It is true that a proper relationship with God is "*the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast,*" {Ephesians 2:8-9} but it is equally true that *only he who does the will of the Father will receive that gift.* {Matthew 7:21} It is true that "*faith without deeds is dead,*" {James 2:26} but deeds without faith are just as dead. This is the quintessential riddle of redemption, and it is folly to pick one side over the other.

The *Paradox of Love* also fits the pattern. If I try to love God with all of my heart and soul and mind to the exclusion of everything else, I exclude love of my neighbor and risk viewing her as a distraction, a *thing* that interferes with my devotion to God. This is the mistake of pious hermits and those of us who prefer churches or synagogues to soup kitchens. But if I center all of my attention on loving my neighbor as myself and forget about loving God, I find it impossible to maintain that neighborly love because I am no longer connected to the Source of Love itself. This is the mistake of secular humanists. True love must flow from God through me to everyone else. I am merely the conduit. Therefore, I cannot love God with all my heart without passing that love on to my neighbor, and I cannot love my neighbor as myself unless I first accept God's love. So is "love the Lord" the greatest commandment, or is "love your neighbor"?

The answer is "**yes.**" and "**yes.**"

By now, some may suspect I am making a case for moderation in all things, a favorite theme of Judaism and Christianity. But even moderation can become sinful if I ignore the fact that sometimes it is good to be wholehearted. ¹

It is said that moderation has been created as virtue to limit the ambition of great men, and to console those who are not great. ^{LL}

So moderation alone is not the secret to a virtuous life. I need more than that, because moderation itself is merely one virtue among many and can be perverted just as easily as all the others. ¹

I have learned that God uses the paradoxes of Scripture to ease me back toward the middle between the truths, because only from there can I keep all truths firmly in view. To live righteously, I must somehow find a way to:

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- Love God *and* my neighbor.
- Faith *and* works are both important.
- Justice *and* mercy are required.
- My actions are somehow free *and* predestined.
- God is somehow everywhere *and* uniquely here.

Both halves of each paradoxical statement are equally true, and in each case I must apply them to my life wholeheartedly, not in moderation, but to the greatest extent possible. Yet each half without the other becomes a distortion and a barrier on the way from here to my Creator. I must somehow find a place where the truths of each paradox mix and mingle harmoniously. There, in that delicate balance, lies the path of righteousness. And at the end of that path stands God.

Unfortunately, the human mind—or at least the Western mind—or at least *my* mind—finds it impossible to hold two paradoxical truths simultaneously and equally, much less all the virtues that exist (in each). My new insight into the need for balance is helpful as a goal, but it doesn't really tell me how to manage the seemingly impossible task of reaching that kind of balance in my life. For that, I need to turn to the Scriptures for guidance.

At home in my study, I am reading the Torah. God has just commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. I pause for a moment, remembering that this is a perfect example of the *Paradox of Obedience*. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, yet God has also said it is wrong—a capital offense—to shed human blood. {Genesis 9:6} Abraham is quite literally damned if he does and damned if he doesn't because to obey is to disobey.

What is Abraham to do?

Abraham does what he has been told to do; he ascends Mt. Moriah with the knife and wood for Isaac's sacrifice. He does not know how things will work out, but he seems to believe God will provide a middle way between his command not to murder and his command to kill his son. This becomes clear when Abraham tells his servants to wait at the base of the mountain until he *and* Isaac return. {Genesis 22:5} Of course, Abraham knows this thing he has been told to do is wrong, yet he also knows not to do it is just as wrong. Trapped between the apparently opposed truths of a bitter paradox, he resists the impulse to focus only on one truth to the exclusion of the other and proves his faith by his action, pressing onward up Moriah, believing God will provide a solution. His faith is rewarded when God delivers a ram in substitution for Isaac and a

renewal of the covenant for Abraham and his descendants.

Abraham found the way through the paradox, but how? I look deeper, and a few weeks later I find this strange little tale:

The Israelites are attacked by poisonous snakes in the Sinai wilderness. It is the *Paradox of Obedience* all over again, as God commands Moses to forge a bronze serpent, put it on a pole, and tell Israel to look at it for deliverance. Surely the Israelites must wonder if this is a cruel trick. Thousands of them were killed the last time they looked to a man-made image for help (the golden calf they built in violation of one of the Ten Commandments). Yet the fabrication of the bronze snake is a direct order from God. Although the Israelites are now trapped between the horns of Abraham's paradox—to obey is to disobey—they too pass the test. They follow God's command and look at the man-made image when the snakes attack. They are saved from death. {Numbers 21:6-9}

How did they cling to the middle ground between God's commandments?

I decide to look at the Hebrew to see if the original words offer a stronger hint. Studying the terms that seem most important in the bronze snake incident, I find nothing to explain the paradox. In fact, I am ready to give up the search and assume this is one of those questions God has chosen not to answer. But then I look into one last Hebrew word, the term *nes*, which is translated as the "pole" upon which the bronze serpent is mounted. Right away I realize this word is not as simple as it first seemed.

In other Scriptures, *nes* is translated as "example" or "banner." {See Numbers 26:10 and Psalm 60:6 (JPS)} In Isaiah 33:23, the word is translated as "sail," and another word entirely is used for the pole or mast upon which the sail hangs. In fact, I can find no other place in the Hebrew Scriptures where anything else was mounted on a *nes*. Except for the bronze snake it is always the other way around. The *nes* is never the pole; it is always the object lifted up on the pole. But here at the story of the serpents in the wilderness, the bronze serpent is mounted *on* the "banner" or "example"—the *nes*.

In other words, here in this enigmatic little story I find a *symbol* (the bronze serpent) hung upon an *example* (the *nes*, or pole).

Suddenly, I feel goose bumps rising on my arms. Could it be that this word has been deliberately chosen to hint

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that it was not the serpent Israel must look to for deliverance, but the One *behind* the serpent? Could it be that the graven image on the pole is a test to see if the Israelites can see the Truth *behind* the truth?

I flip back through my Chever Torah notes and find a remarkable statement made by Rabbi Stern. This word, *nes*, has yet another meaning.

It is the Hebrew word for "miracle."

Too excited now to remain still, I rise and pace my study. The Torah is doing it again: showing me it is more than a mere book, using the words themselves to communicate something beyond mere words, with layer behind layer behind layer of truth. I am certain that these stories of Abraham and the Israelites have given me the key to holding two truths in sight simultaneously. Could the key lie in looking past the paradox to focus on the truth behind it? And with that thought, I stop dead in my tracks.

Of course! The key is faith.

Many liberal Jews and Christians today share a distaste for blind faith. I don't blame them. Blind faith is the "my country – right or wrong" kind of belief that causes wars and bitterly divides families, congregations, denominations, and religions. Blind faith is arrogant. It is well communicated by a bumper sticker that used to be common in my town, which read, "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." Take away the middle sentence and I agree completely. But with that middle sentence in place, the real message is this: "I have chosen to believe this thing and I will never change in spite of what may come, because this is what I have chosen."

Blind faith is based on something much too small: **me**.

If Abraham had that kind of faith in the pagan gods of Ur, he would never have obeyed God's call to sacrifice Isaac. If the Israelites had that kind of faith, they would not have left their idolatrous calf-worshipping ways behind and learned to see beyond the serpent. But the faith of Abraham and the Israelites was not blind; it had a solid basis in facts external to themselves.

I have learned that true faith is open to new facts, even when they threaten to change my beliefs.

Abraham's faith was grounded in the fact of Isaac—a miracle baby given to an elderly man and his barren wife seventeen long years after God had promised to make them into a great nation. But Abraham also knew what it was to doubt God. Tired of waiting on the Lord,

he had tried to preempt the divine promise, having a child out of wedlock with Sarah's servant and suffering devastating family divisions as a result. So when the command to sacrifice Isaac came, Abraham responded with a well-informed faith, a faith based on the history of blessings God had already given and the mistakes he himself had made.

Israel's faith flowed from blood in the Nile and on their doorposts and lintels, from standing walls of water and a thunderous voice atop Mt. Sinai. Israel's faith was also instilled with a plague and the sword. When Moses took too long to return from the top of Mt. Sinai, they fashioned the golden calf and suffered death as a result. Like Abraham, Israel had seen the tragic results of failing to trust God for the resolution of intolerable situations, intolerable paradoxes. Israel and Abraham learned these lessons and proved their faith with the tests of the binding of Isaac and the bronze serpent, so God rewarded them with the deceptively simple answer to divine paradox: if I am to escape the warped perspective that turns virtues into vices, I must refuse to choose between the truths and focus instead on the Almighty Truth between the truths.

Many Christians seem to fear paradox for all the same reasons we fear questioning God. How ironic! Christianity is founded on paradox and would not exist without it. Indeed, many of the paradoxes already mentioned speak directly to me of Jesus. For example, I already mentioned the *Paradox of Fertility*, which stems from the fact that Adam and Eve were commanded to "be fruitful and multiply," but the Lord selected a barren woman, Sarah, to be the mother of his chosen people, even though she was unable to fulfill his command. This paradox is repeated with a barren Rebekah and a barren Rachel. Why would God command fruitfulness, yet establish the Jewish people through women physically unable to obey that command?

Always before, I have assumed this odd contradiction was simply a message about faith. These men and women were chosen in part because they believed the Lord could do the impossible. But as I have observed before, God never does one thing at a time, and now, after thinking about this paradox in terms of Jesus, it occurs to me that Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel may have also been God's way to prepare his chosen people to accept the virgin birth.

Then there is the *Paradox of Blessing*. Before, I could not reconcile the notion that all humanity would be blessed through a group that gained its foothold on the planet by wiping out other nations. But then I thought of this in terms of Jesus. He was a descendant of

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Abraham, as were his first followers. Christianity flows directly from the religion of Moses, which in turn traces its roots back to the Lord's promise to Abraham. If Jesus is the path to an intimate relationship with God, as over one billion people from virtually every nation on earth believe (including many descendants of the Canaanites), then this paradox is transformed into a prophecy that has already been fulfilled.

Earlier, I mentioned the *Paradox of Omnipresence*, which arises from the fact that "God is said to be omnipresent, yet he is often described as visiting a certain place in a manner that implies that he was not previously there." With the Trinity this difficulty simply evaporates. God can be everywhere yet uniquely here because he is omnipresent as the Father and uniquely here as the Spirit and the Son.

A final riddle I identified earlier is called the *Paradox of the Red Heifer*, {Numbers 19} which involves the fact that in all the Bible, no other sacrifice is made outside the camp, no other sacrifice causes impurity in the priest who offers it, and no other sacrifice is intended to purify those who are ceremonially impure. For millennia the rabbis puzzled over the red heifer, arriving at many complex explanations for what appears to be a contradiction to everything else the Torah has to say about sacrifice.

But I believe there is a simple explanation. Like the red heifer, Jesus was killed "outside the camp," that is, beyond the walls of Jerusalem. And surely the execution of Jesus—who was innocent of all wrongdoing—brought guilt upon the Jewish and Roman men directly responsible, just as the sacrifice of the red

heifer caused impurity in the priest. Yet Jesus' death and resurrection brings perfect atonement to all who believe and place their trust in him, just as the red heifer's ashes cleansed everyone and everything they touched. So once again I find that faith in Jesus has turned unexplained paradox into fulfilled prophecy.

For me, these and other paradoxes of the Hebrew Scriptures provide reasons to believe in Jesus. But of course Jesus himself is the greatest paradox of all. Like all Christians, I believe he is both fully man and fully God. The New Testament leaves no room for choice between one or the other, but demands that I see him as both simultaneously. Yet how can the created be the Creator? How can the Immortal die on a cross? How can the Omniscient have the limited mind of a man? It is as if I have been asked to believe that the flea is the sun, and the sun the flea, while both remain fully "sunnish" and "fleaish." It defies all common sense, and I believe that is exactly as it should be.

It seems obvious to me that any God capable of creating the universe must be an unsolvable riddle for a finite human mind. So I believe in Jesus precisely because he is pure paradox, and on a certain level, only paradox can reveal the divine.

Thus it is with the Paradox of Jesus. If I focus on Jesus as man, I miss Jesus as God. If I focus on Jesus as God, I miss Jesus as man. Is he God or is he just a man? As with all paradoxes of the Bible, the answer is:

"yes." and "yes."

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