BIBLICAL PARADOX: DOES REVELATION CHALLENGE LOGIC?

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Most will agree with Vernon Grounds' statement that when finite humans attempt to understand God they seemingly encounter "the impenetrable, the inscrutable, the incomprehensible."[1] How can one God be composed of three distinct personages? How could God become human? How can God retain sovereign control over earthly affairs if humans are truly free? How could God have created something out of nothing? How can it be that only by dying we can live?

But what is the actual status of such puzzles? Are solutions to all actually within the scope of human understanding? Or will some remain forever insoluble at the human level?

In any consideration of such questions it is first essential to specify and define the terms to be used. For, unfortunately, relevant terms like "paradox," "contradiction," "mystery," "antinomy," "the impenetrable" and "the incomprehensible" are used loosely and interchangeably by many. I shall use the phrase "verbal puzzle" to refer to those seemingly incomprehensible or impenetrable concepts that can be resolved by clarifying the meaning of the terms involved. The concept of dying before we can live is a good example. To the uninitiated or young it might appear that we have here a real contradiction. But once what is really meant is clarified—that we must die in the sense of giving up an unhealthy preoccupation with self before we can live in the sense of experiencing the peace and contentment available to us—the seeming incompatibility disappears.

I shall use the term "mystery" to refer to those concepts that are not (and may never be) open totally to human explanation. For example, we as humans may never be able to explain how God could have become a human or how God could have created something out of nothing or how God could have raised someone from the dead. But none of these concepts is self-contradictory. The means by which such events were brought about may never be open to us as humans. Perhaps such means would not even be comprehensible from a human perspective. But all of the states of affairs in question are logically possible, given the normal definitions of the terms involved.

Finally I shall use the term "paradox" to refer to those concepts or sets of concepts that do appear to be self-contradictory. For example, given the manner in which some people define human freedom and divine control it appears that these two concepts cannot consistently be applied to the same state of affairs.

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[1]V. C. Grounds, "The Postulate of Paradox" (paper delivered at the ETS annual meeting in March, 1978) 2.

Unfortunately the distinction between these three categories of puzzles is not always clearly maintained. For example, Grounds considers the question of how Jesus Christ could have been simultaneously both God and man to be of the same logical type as the question of how a given event can be the result of free human choice and yet under total divine control at the same time.[2] Now of course it is always possible to define the relevant terms in such a way that any alleged Biblical puzzle can be made to fit into any of these three categories. But given the manner in which the relevant terms are normally defined, puzzles of all three types exist. And since an adequate response to a puzzle in one category is not necessarily an adequate response to a puzzle in another, it is crucial that we keep the categories separate.

The primary purpose of this paper is to discuss the category of paradox. Does the Bible clearly assert truths that are incompatible from a human perspective? Many theologians have thought so. Of course they have not wanted this fact to be used as an excuse for mental sloth. The task of all Christians, as Grounds puts it, is "to expose ruthlessly any mental muddles which are illogically mistaken for [paradoxes]."[3] But even when such work is done it is still the case, in the words of R. B. Kuiper, that what we find in Scripture are not just "truths which are difficult to reconcile but can be recognized before the bar of human reason." We also find truths "taught unmistakably in the infallible Word of God" which "cannot possibly be reconciled before the bar of human reason."[4] Grounds is equally emphatic. To be loyal to Scripture, he argues, we must "postulate propositions which contain logically incompatible statements; doctrines which from the standpoint of reason are contradictory."[5] Or, as J. I. Packer puts it, the Bible clearly contains seemingly contradictory statements that "we cannot expect to [reconcile] in this world."[6]

But such paradoxes, it is emphatically argued, are not really contradictory. It may be true that they can never be shown to be compatible at the human level. However, as Packer tells us, we must "refuse to regard the apparent inconsistency as real." We must rather "put down the semblance of contradiction to the deficiency of [our] own understanding."[7] Or, as Kuiper states the point, although the Bible does present us with truths that are irreconcilable at the human level we must deny that such "truths are actually contradictory."[8] But why? Why can we not claim that Scripture gives us truths that are really contradictory? We cannot, in the words of Cornelius Van Til, because a real

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[2]Ibid., pp. 9, 11.

[3]Ibid., p. 4.

[4]R. B. Kuiper in *The Voice of Authority* (ed. G. W. Marston; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960) 16.

[5]Grounds, "Postulate" 4.

[6]J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1961) 24.

[7]Ibid., p. 21.

[8]Kuiper, *Voice* 16.

contradiction destroys "all human and all divine knowledge" while seeming contradiction does not.[9]

What are we to make of this allegedly crucial distinction between real and apparent contradictions? Does it actually make sense to claim that, although no Biblical truths are really contradictory, some such truths cannot in principle be shown to be compatible at the human level? To respond to this question we must further clarify exactly what is meant.

Let us first assume that to claim that certain Biblical truths are only apparently contradictory is to claim that, although they are in fact contradictory at the human level, from God's perspective such is not the case. That is, let us assume that to claim that certain Biblical truths are apparently contradictory means that while from a human perspective such truths are on a logical par with the contention that something is a square circle, from God's perspective they are not. For from God's perspective the Biblical truths in question are actually self-consistent. It appears that this is what theologians of paradox like Packer and Grounds have in mind. But if so, a number of serious problems arise.

The first is exegetical. Most conservative Christians agree that the Bible is the authoritative word of God and, thus, that whatever is actually revealed therein must be accepted as true. But not all conservative Christians believe that the Bible clearly asserts truths that can never be shown to be compatible from a human perspective. Let us consider, for example, the apparent incompatibility between total divine control and meaningful human freedom. The theologians of paradox seem to hold that revelation requires us to affirm both in a sense that makes them inconsistent from a human perspective. But some Reformed theologians such as John Feinberg strongly disagree. It is not that they challenge the authority of Scripture. And they are perfectly willing to accept the fact that God's ways are above our ways. What they challenge is the indeterministic view of freedom being presupposed. Freedom, they argue, must be defined deterministically. And once this is done, any semblance of a contradiction between human freedom and divine control disappears.[10]

On the other hand there are many theologians who interpret divine control in much more general terms than do the theologians of paradox. God certainly does have the power to control us, they argue. And at times he unilaterally does so. Moreover, no matter what we decide, God's overall will cannot be thwarted. He is the chess master who can respond appropriately to any human move. But God has chosen to allow us to control certain things—that is, he has chosen to give us the capacity to perform acts that are not consistent with God's will. And since self-limitation in no way reflects badly on God, there is no logical or moral tension between sovereignty and freedom to be resolved.[11]

In short, for many theologians, to deny that the Bible presents us with

[9]C. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955) 61–62.

[10]J. Feinberg in *Predestination and Free Will* (ed. D. and R. Basinger; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 19–43.

[11]See e.g. C. Pinnock and B. Reichenbach in ibid., pp. 143–162, 102–124.

truths that are irreconcilable at the human level is not, as Packer implies, to hesitate to "trust what [God] says."[12] Nor is it to claim that all Biblical concepts are or should be totally comprehensible to the human intellect. That is, such theologians do not deny that the Bible contains a great deal of mystery. They simply deny that the Bible asserts seemingly inconsistent truths "side by side in the strongest and most unambiguous terms as two ultimate facts."[13]

The second problem with claiming that some Biblical truths are actually contradictory from a human perspective is more serious. If concepts such as human freedom and divine sovereignty are really contradictory at the human level, then, as has already been stated, they are at the human level comparable to the relationship between a square and a circle. Now let us assume that God had told us in Scripture that he had created square circles. The crucial problem would not be that we would not know how this could have been accomplished. For no one assumes that all divine activity must be comprehensible from our perspective. Nor would the fundamental problem be one of truth. If God had said it, then it would be true. The fundamental problem would be one of meaning. We can say the phrase "square circle," and we can conceive of squares and we can conceive of circles. But since a circle is a nonsquare by definition and a square is noncircular by definition, it is not at all clear that we can conceive of a square circle—that is, conceive of something that is both totally a square and totally a circle at the same time. This is because on the human level, language (and thought about linguistic referents) presupposes the law of noncontradiction. "Square" is only a useful term because to say something is a square distinguishes it from other objects that are not squares. But if something can be a square and also not a square at the same time, then our ability to conceive of, and thus identify and discuss, squares is destroyed. In short, "square" no longer remains from the human level a meaningful term. And the same is true of the term "circle" in this context.

But what if we were to add that the concept of a square circle is not contradictory from God's perspective and thus that to him it is meaningful? Would this clarify anything? This certainly would tell us something about God: that he is able to think in other than human categories. But it would not make the concept any more meaningful to us. Given the categories of meaning with which we seem to have been created, the concept would remain just as meaningless from our perspective as before.

The same holds for the "apparent contradictions" of which the theologians of paradox speak. We can, for example, say, "An event can be the result of free human choice and yet totally determined by God." But if we mean by saying that a human makes a free choice that no one or no thing apart from the person (not even God) can totally determine what that choice will be, then this concept of "controlled freedom" is no more meaningful than the concept of a square circle at the human level, whatever may be the case from God's perspective.

But what of the claim that science furnishes a counter to my argument? Consider, for example, Packer's reference to the well-known controversy over

[12]Packer, *Evangelism* 24.

[13]Ibid., p. 35.

the true nature of light. "There is equally cogent evidence that light is composed of particles and that light is composed of waves. Our minds want to reject one in favor of the other. But the *evidence* is there. Thus, serious scientists have no choice but to hold the two seemingly incompatible truths together; both must be treated as true."[14] And accordingly, he concludes, we should find no problem in principle in applying such paradoxical reasoning to Biblical teaching.

Unfortunately this analogy is dubious. It is certainly true that in science (and other areas) we sometimes come to the point where the evidence appears to equally support two incompatible theories or statements. In the nature of light controversy, for example, physicists have stated that light sometimes displays wave-like properties and sometimes displays particle-like properties— that is, they have stated that some properties of light are best explained by a wave hypothesis while other properties of light are best explained by a particle hypothesis.[15] And it is certainly true that in such cases we ought not arbitrarily reject one in favor of the other just to resolve the tension. Moreover, for instrumental reasons it may well be justifiable for scientists to assume as a working hypothesis in specific contexts that one or both are true.

But theoretical scientists have never made the claim, as the theologians of paradox seem to with respect to Biblical truths, that two incompatible propositions can in fact be simultaneously true. Physicists, for example, have never claimed that light is in fact simultaneously both wholly particle and wholly wave, where "wave" and "particle" are defined in such a way that the terms are contradictory.[16] The claim of the scientist, rather, is only that there is at times no good basis for considering either of two seemingly incompatible propositions false. And this is a much different, weaker claim than its alleged theological counterpart (given our current interpretation). For only the claim that two incompatible propositions are in fact simultaneously true threatens the meaning of the concepts involved.[17]

Perhaps, however, I have significantly misinterpreted what theologians like Kuiper, Packer, Grounds and Van Til have in mind when they claim that the Bible presents us with truths that we as humans can never show to be compatible. Perhaps they do not mean that such apparent contradictions are really contradictory from a human perspective although not from God's. Perhaps they mean rather that such truths are only apparently contradictory at the human level, although only God is capable of seeing how in fact they can be considered consistent.

This may well be what D. A. Carson has in mind when he argues that

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[14]Ibid., p. 19 (italics his).

[15]See e.g. A. Baez, *The New College Physics* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1967) 233–241.

[16]As a matter of fact some scientists, such as T. Kuhn, believe that "light is a self-consistent entity different from both waves and particles." *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2d ed; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970) 114.

[17]For a fuller discussion of this distinction between complementarity and contradiction see J. Hass, "Complementarity and Christian Thought," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 35 (December 1983) 203–209.

for us mortals, there are no rational, logical solutions to the sovereignty-respon-
sibility tension: . . . neatly packaged harmonisations are impossible. But, on the
other hand, it is difficult to see why logical inconsistency is *necessitated*, especially
in view of the many ambiguous parameters and numerous unknown quantities.
The whole tension remains restless in our hands; but it is the restlessness of
having a few randomly-selected pieces of a jigsaw puzzle when thousands more
are needed to complete the design.[18]

And perhaps this is what Duane Lindsey means when he argues that a paradox
"is an apparent contradiction due to incomplete information or understanding"
and thus that "the only legitimate objection to the use of [paradox] would be
that man's knowledge is complete."[19]

To argue in this fashion does circumvent the charge that Biblical paradoxes
are, from a human perspective, nonsense. But new problems arise. First of all,
it must be reemphasized that the concept of contradiction is not nearly so
complex and murky as the statements by Carson and Lindsey might lead us
to believe. If two terms are defined in such a way that to affirm one automat-
ically renders the other false, then we have a contradiction.

Consider again, for example, the concept of a square circle. Given an essen-
tial characteristic of a square—for example, four right angles—and an essen-
tial characteristic of a circle—for example, no right angles—to say that a figure
is a square is to say it is not a circle and vice versa. Now of course if we are not
sure of the exact meaning of the terms involved, then we may not be sure
whether a concept is in fact self-contradictory. For example, if someone begins
to talk about a rectangular trapezoid, we may not know whether the concept
is self-consistent until the terms are clarified. But if we discover that a rectan-
gular figure is one with two sets of parallel sides, we then know that the concept
of a rectangular trapezoid is self-contradictory because, by definition, a tra-
pezoid has only one set of parallel sides.

The same principle holds with respect to alleged Biblical contradictions. If
Biblical truths are defined in such a way that to affirm one automatically
renders the other false by definition, then we have a contradiction. Again, for
example, if we mean by saying that a human makes a free choice that no one
or no thing apart from that person (not even God) totally determines what this
choice will be and then say that God totally determines all actions—including
free human choices—we have a contradiction. On the other hand, if these con-
cepts are defined in such a way that freedom does not entail that humans alone
always have some control and/or sovereignty does not entail that God always
has total control, then there is no contradiction.

In short, we must not let the fact that we as humans do not have all the
pieces of the puzzle lead us to believe that the concept of contradiction is in-
herently ambiguous. This again is to confuse paradox with mystery. The con-
cept of contradiction is itself perfectly clear, and it is usually quite easy to
determine if two concepts are in fact contradictory once we understand how

[18]D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 218 (italics
his).

[19]D. Lindsey, "An Evangelical Overview of Process Theology," *BSac* (January-March 1977) 31.

the terms in question are being defined.

But there are occasions when it is difficult to determine whether certain concepts are in fact contradictory, even if we understand what the terms mean. Take, for example, the age-old question of the compatibility between divine foreknowledge and human freedom. Few claim that there is an immediate and obvious contradiction in this case. But many have argued that once we draw out the implications implicit in these concepts a contradiction appears. Specifically they maintain that if God has always infallibly known that we will perform a given action, then we have no choice but to do so. And if this is so then it cannot be said that we are performing the action freely. Others disagree. They point out that we do not perform actions because God knows we will do so. Rather, God's knowledge of what we will do is based on that which we will freely do. Thus no incompatibility exists.

Similar controversies arise in the sovereignty/freedom debate. Let us assume, for example, that to be free from a human perspective entails only that humans not be directly influenced by God in such a way that the action God desires is assured. And let us suppose that for God to be sovereign entails only that nothing comes about that God does not want to come about. It is not initially obvious that these two concepts are contradictory. They may be. But even when we attempt to draw out the implications of these concepts, no consensus may emerge.

Perhaps these are the types of truths the theologians of paradox really have in mind when they argue that we must affirm the apparently contradictory. That is, perhaps their real argument is the following. The Bible does present us with sets of truths that initially strike us as humans as incompatible and that some people believe are actually contradictory. However, it has not been demonstrated conclusively that such truths are really contradictory. Moreover since God would not have given us truths that are truly contradictory from a human perspective, we may be assured that no logical incompatibility in fact exists. Such logical tensions are only apparent contradictions.

This certainly is a coherent position. But if this is what is really meant, then it is difficult to see why Carson would say, for example, that there are "no rational, logical solutions to the sovereignty-responsibility tension" or why Grounds would say that the Bible "logically requires defiance of logic at crucial junctures" or why Packer would say that our faith in God's revelation forces us to affirm "seemingly irreconcilable, yet undeniable" truths. If the truths in question have not clearly been shown to be contradictory, then no "logical solution" or "defiance of logic" is required. Nor need the authority of revelation be evoked. If the truths are not clearly contradictory there is no logical problem as of yet to worry about.

Now of course if at some point it could be shown that seemingly clear Biblical teachings are in fact contradictory, then the theologians in question would have a logic problem. In fact, given their assumption that God would never present us with that which is really contradictory, the discovery of real contradiction would necessitate reinterpretation. But as long as Biblical concepts are defined and applied in such a way that no logical incompatibility can be conclusively demonstrated, no logical apologies of the kind given by Carson, Grounds and Packer are necessary, for no logical etiquette has been disturbed.

Where does all this leave us? What exactly do the theologians of paradox mean when they claim that the Bible presents us with apparent contradictions? And what exactly is the logic status of such paradoxical beliefs?

I am not sure exactly what such theologians have in mind. In fact there may well be no unanimity on this point. But whatever is actually meant enough has been said, I believe, to demonstrate that much of what has been written on this issue is at best confusing. More specifically I have argued that three types of confusion surface.

First, there has often been a misplaced emphasis on human finitude. The theologians of paradox are surely right in maintaining that God's ways are above our ways. It would be foolish to contend that we as finite humans could understand God exhaustively. But it is unjustifiable to use this fact as a basis for affirming Biblical paradox. It is unjustifiable, for example, for Packer to support paradox by arguing that "a God whom we could understand exhaustively, and whose revelation of Himself confronted us with no [paradoxes] whatsoever, would be a God in man's image."[20] For to ask whether a Biblical concept is paradoxical is solely to ask whether it is logically consistent—that is, it is to ask whether the terms are being defined in such a way that to affirm one is to deny the other. And the fact that we do not know how or why God has done certain things is irrelevant to this point. In other words, we can readily admit our human finitude without granting that Biblical truth is paradoxical. To maintain otherwise is, as I have repeatedly argued, to confuse paradox with mystery.

Second, there has often been a misplaced emphasis on the relevance of Biblical authority. The theologians of paradox often ask challengers why they hesitate to trust what God says. But this type of comment, we have seen, basically begs the question. Those who deny the existence of Biblical paradox do not normally do so because they do not believe revelation to be normative or because they have placed reason above faith. They do so because they do not think that God—whom they trust—has actually given us concepts that are to be understood in the manner done so by the theologians of paradox. In other words the dispute, as I see it, is one of exegesis and not of authority.

Third, and most importantly, I have argued that the widespread use of the phrase "apparent contradiction" is inappropriate. The Biblical truths in question are either contradictory from a human perspective or they are not. If such truths really are contradictory from a human perspective, then at the human level they must be viewed on a logical par with concepts such as square circles, which even Packer grants to be nonsensical.[21] The fact that God has presented us with such truths is irrelevant. They remain meaningless at our level, whatever may be the case for God.

On the other hand, if such truths cannot be shown to be contradictory—that is, if it cannot be shown that to affirm one Biblical truth is to deny another—then it is quite misleading to claim that certain Biblical tensions have no logical solutions or that they require us to defy logic. For the puzzles in this

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[20]Packer, *Evangelism* 24.

[21]Ibid., p. 20.

case are not primarily logical in nature.

This is not to say, of course, that I do not believe the Bible presents us with significant ambiguities and puzzles that theologians and philosophers must take seriously. We should not, as I have granted, expect to be able to understand God or his interaction with his creation exhaustively. We may not even be able always to determine with certainty whether given statements describing God and his activities are self-consistent. But if concepts that are really self-contradictory at the human level are meaningless while concepts that have not been shown to be self-contradictory can be affirmed with logical impunity, then to label any such ambiguity or puzzle an "apparent contradiction" that "defies logic" is a confusion that ought to be avoided.

But the real issue of import here is not simply one of terminology. It is hermeneutical in nature. If no real contradiction from a human level is meaningful and God would not reveal nonsense, then the primary purpose for attempting to determine whether certain Biblical statements are self-contradictory should not be, as it appears to be for the theologians of paradox, to determine the logical status of undeniable Biblical truths. It should be to attempt to identify the truth. For, given my analysis, if two seeming truths are really incompatible, then reinterpretation or suspension of judgment is necessary.

In short, given my analysis, "self-contradictory" is not simply the label for a category into which some Biblical truths may need to be placed, as it appears to be for the theologians of paradox. Rather the law of noncontradiction is a tool that must be used to identify Biblical truth in the first place.

To view things this way is not to give human reason preeminence over revelation or faith. It is simply to take a certain position on the essential categories of thought with which God made us. And while this stance may be wrong, to claim that it is any less consistent with Biblical teaching, as the theologians of paradox sometimes imply, is simply hermeneutical question-begging.