

**Yes and Yes – Understanding Scriptural Paradox**

*These words neither hurt nor help my arguments.  
—Y. Taanit, 2, 12*

**Definitions**

**Paradox** 1. A seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true. 2. One exhibiting inexplicable or contradictory aspects. 3. An assertion that is essentially self-contradictory, though based on a valid deduction from acceptable premises. 4. A statement contrary to received opinion. (*American Heritage Dictionary*)

**Antinomy** 1. Antagonism between laws; the opposition of one law to another. 2. The unavoidable contradiction to pure reasoning which human limitations introduce, as formulated by Kant; paradoxical conclusion. 3. A contradiction or inconsistency between two apparently reasonable principles or laws. (*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*)

**Examples**

Following are seven examples of paradoxes or antinomies from the Torah. Think carefully about them, discuss them, but do not let your discussion become a debate! You will see why later.

**The Paradox of Omnipresence.** (See **Ge 17:1** and **18:1** for examples.)

*"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." (TGAM)*

Similar paradoxes exist in the Bible concerning God's immutability, immortality and omniscience. For example, The immutable God seems to change His mind when Abram "bargains" for the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah. (**Ge 18:16-32**) and while Jesus is the immortal and omniscient God, somehow he died on a cross and did not know the day or time of his own second coming.

**The Antinomy of Obedience.** (See the story Rabbinic Jews call the *Akeda*, or "binding" of Isaac in **Ge 22:1-19**.)

*"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 antinomy 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. [See **Ex 32:19-28** and **Nu 21:6-9**.] 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." To obey is to disobey. How is that possible?" (TGAM)*

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Abraham demonstrated a willingness to obey God, even at the risk of disobeying God's Law. (See **Dt 12:29-31** where God clearly forbids child sacrifice, and says He hates it.) This has special significance for Christians, who are commanded to worship Jesus, even at the risk of idolatry. (Compare **Nu 23:19** to **John 3:14-15**.) When one is commanded to break a command, which command should one obey?

**The Paradox of Fertility.** Compare the Bible's description of humanity's beginning, to its description of the beginning of God's chosen people:

*"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." (TGAM)*

Maybe God commanded fertility then created a nation from barren wombs to illustrate our total dependence upon Him (see **Ro 8:3-4**), or maybe this a foreshadowing of a different kind of miraculous birth (see **Mt 1:23**). Which is it?

**The Paradox of the Promise.** Consider this paradox in terms of the classic theological antinomy of predestination versus free will (see **Ro 8:28-30** and compare **Ro 10:9-10**):

*"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?" (TGAM)*

Just as God says, 1) He will freely give the Land, and 2) the Land must be purchased, so in the same way Paul says, 1) we were predestined to be saved, and 2) we must believe and confess in Jesus to be saved. Which is true?

**The Antinomy of Justice and Mercy.** This antinomy is established by the *lex talionis*, or "law of retaliation," a definition of justice found in three of the five books of the Torah, and the fact that "mercy" is defined as "withholding punishment (leniency or clemency)."

*"The Torah defines justice as balanced punishment: "Show no pity. Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth...."[Ex 21:24; Lv 24:20; Dt 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 lex talionis or "law of retaliation," and also "love mercy"?" (TGAM)*

In **John 1:14** we find that Jesus was full of both grace and truth. As with justice and mercy, how is it possible to have both at once?

**The Antinomy of the Red Heifer.** For centuries Rabbinic Jews have puzzled over the meaning of this enigmatic red heifer sacrifice, which reverses everything the Torah teaches about a proper offering in terms of time and place.

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*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 **Nu 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 (i.e. after) the offering. (TGAM)*

The rabbis assumed this antinomy had a special meaning known only to their ancestors in ancient times. Today, Christians believe everything done in the sacrifice of the red heifer was intended to symbolize what would later be done in and through the sacrifice of Jesus. Who is right?

- ▶ When faced with the two parts of a Biblical paradox or antinomy, many people attempt to choose one over the other. What was Abraham’s response? (See **Ge 22**.)
- ▶ Why are we tempted to pick one part of a Biblical paradox over the other? (Hint: **Job 38:1-4**, and **Heb 11:1**.)
- ▶ When faced with a Biblical paradox or antinomy and asked if this side is true, or if that side is true, what is the wisest reply?
- ▶ If you study God’s word diligently, pray without ceasing, and seek His will in everything, will you someday fully understand Him? (**Ro 11:33-36**) How do you feel about your answer?
- ▶ “Israel,” the name God chose for His people, means “wrestles with God” (**Ge 32:28**). Does God view this wrestling as a good thing, or a bad thing? (Hints: **Ps 135:4** and **Dt 7:6**.) What is the goal of this wrestling? (**Ex 6:7-8**) How does this goal compare to the idea that we must pick sides and argue over Biblical paradoxes and antinomies? (**1 Tim 1:3-7**)

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