

LIVING WITH CONTRADICTIONS

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Contradiction—that unpleasant state of mind when contrary conditions collide. Few enjoy dealing with inconsistencies; even fewer welcome contradictions. Here I examine contradictions by exploring two properties of deductive systems¹: *consistency* and *completeness*. These ideas are valuable not only in the study of logic but also in the study of theological systems. More specifically, they help make sense of important yet perplexing scriptural accounts: Adam and Eve; Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac; Nephi and Laban. They also provide an interesting perspective on the Atonement, drawing a possible distinction between transgression and sin. Finally, I briefly explore what completeness might mean for some detractors of LDS theology.

CONSISTENCY VERSUS COMPLETENESS

In mathematics, *consistency* refers to a harmonious relationship among the axioms² of a deductive system. Consistency requires that no statement—couched in the language of the system—be regarded as both “true” and “false.”³ In a consistent system a statement and its logical opposite, such as $1+1=2$ and $1+1\neq 2$, cannot both be “true.”⁴ *Completeness*, on the other hand, refers to an equally desirable property of a deductive system where every true statement (expressible within the system) is deducible from the axioms of the system.⁵ Let me emphasize: In a complete system *all* true statements are deducible from the axioms.

Among deductive systems, the ordinary arithmetic of whole numbers (0, 1, 2, 3, . . .) is comparatively simple in structure yet indispensable in practical applications. For centuries mathematicians believed the whole number system was both consistent and complete. In 1931 Kurt Gödel proved otherwise.⁶ To the surprise of his contemporaries—most notably Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead (who were laboring to establish the consistency and completeness of the whole number system)⁷—Gödel showed that if ordinary arithmetic is consistent, then it must be incomplete. Said differently, if the whole number system is consistent, there are arithmetic truths that cannot be deduced from the axioms of arithmetic.

Gödel further proved that *any* deductive system of adequate complexity could not be consistent and complete.⁸ For if such a system is consistent, then it is incomplete; and if complete, it is inconsistent. In the latter case completeness implies the system contains contradictions. Gödel’s work has been generalized to the extent that his conclusions apply to an impressively large class of deductive systems.⁹ Philip J. Davis observes:

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“The fact that the GIT [Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem] has contemporary applications, implications, or suggestions relative to a wide variety of fields ranging from cognition, physics, and philosophy, to literature, theology, and politics, gives it a special and remarkable status among mathematical statements.”¹⁰

A rigorous mapping of Gödel’s logical structure onto a body of theology (viewed as a deductive system) has never been demonstrated, but this in no way precludes the possibility and may only reflect the complexity of the undertaking. Nonetheless, it would be cavalier to speak of “applications” of Gödel’s proof to theology. I am comfortable, however, using one of Davis’ descriptors in stating that Gödel’s work strongly “suggests” that any sufficiently rich system of theology—based on a finite set of beliefs and employing commonsense rules of inference—cannot be consistent and complete. In particular, if every truth (expressed in the language of the system) can be known (i.e., deduced) from within the system, then the system invariably contains contradictions. One must therefore choose between consistency and completeness.

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As a theological system Mormonism places paramount importance on “completeness.” Witness a few (among many) statements by modern-day prophets: Brigham Young—“‘Mormonism’ includes all truth. There is no truth but what belongs to the Gospel.”¹¹ Wilford Woodruff—“Our religion embraces every truth in heaven, earth or hell; it embraces all truth...”¹² Ezra Taft Benson—“In the broadest sense, the gospel embraces all truth...”¹³ This emphasis on having a fulness of truth indicates LDS theology favors completeness over consistency—if indeed a dichotomous choice must be made—and provides a possible explanation for many significant yet perplexing scriptural events. More to the point, embracing the “fulness of the gospel”¹⁴ may require the faithful to endure not only trivial inconsistencies but also profound contradictions.

THE GRAND COUNCIL

Before exploring some of these perplexing scriptural accounts, consider the earliest event in canonized scripture: “the Grand Council before the world was formed.”¹⁵ It can be argued that the pre-mortal debate (regarding mortality) centered on the choice between consistency and completeness. Satan apparently advocated consistency. Under his plan no egregious mistakes or violations of law would be possible: “one soul shall not be lost.”¹⁶ Perhaps by limiting the set of laws to which man would be subjected or by controlling in some way man’s choices, Satan could guarantee that every mortal would pass through this life spiritually unmarred. Recall that Satan “sought to destroy the agency of man.”¹⁷ But as I have argued in a previous paper, without agency certain truths cannot be confirmed or known.¹⁸ Limiting a person’s agency, therefore,

also limits the truths he or she can embrace. This in turn limits one's spiritual development and enjoyment. Satan might have been able to achieve absolute consistency but at the sacrifice of completeness.

In contrast, the Father's plan emphasizes completeness. Through the atonement of Christ mankind can enjoy a fulness of life: "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."¹⁹ Through the reception of the Holy Ghost, mankind can enjoy a fulness of truth: "And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things."²⁰ I cannot imagine a clearer description of a complete system of theology. So where is evidence of the inconsistency of such a system? What do we mean by an inconsistent system of theology? A natural identification of "right" with "true" and "wrong" with "false" shows that in an inconsistent theological system, a particular statement (or action) can be regarded as both right and wrong. This is not as surprising as it may seem. For example, within our own theology (as we shall see) the taking of human life can be viewed as right, and it can be viewed as wrong.

ADAM AND EVE

While in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were given two divine directives: 1) "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth..."²¹ and 2) "...of the fruit of the tree which thou beholdest...ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die."²² The Book of Mormon teaches that if Adam and Eve had not transgressed, they would have remained in the Garden of Eden and would have had no children.²³ Although it is unclear to what extent Eve understood their predicament, after she had partaken of the forbidden fruit, Adam was faced with a dilemma: a) He could choose not to partake of the fruit and be left alone in the Garden—violating the first directive,²⁴ or b) He could partake of the forbidden fruit and remain with his wife Eve—violating the second directive.²⁵ Some might argue that Adam and Eve may not have fully understood the choices before them nor the consequences that would follow. Nevertheless, once Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit, Adam was required to choose between two directives that were now at variance.²⁶ So in a manner of speaking, one could say that mortality itself was ushered in by way of a contradiction.

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ABRAHAM, SARAH, AND ISAAC

The conflicting of divine directives extends beyond the enigmatic events of the Garden of Eden. Abraham and his wife Sarah faced a troublesome choice while journeying to Egypt:

And it came to pass when I [Abraham] was come near to enter into Egypt, the Lord said unto me: Behold, Sarai, thy wife, is a very fair woman to look upon;

Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see her, they will say—She is his wife; and they will kill you, but they will save her alive; therefore see that ye do on this wise:

Let her say unto the Egyptians, she is thy sister, and thy soul shall live.

And it came to pass that I, Abraham, told Sarai, my wife, all that the Lord had said unto me—Therefore say unto them, I pray thee, thou art my sister, that it may be well with me for thy sake, and my soul shall live because of thee.²⁷

Although Sarah was Abraham’s half-sister²⁸, her answer to the Egyptians was intended to mislead—or less euphemistically, to deceive. I imagine every one of us can empathize with her plight. If Sarah had doggedly maintained that God (who first issued an injunction against deceit) would never ask her to dissemble, Abraham would not have been around to become “a father of many nations.”²⁹

This clashing of directives was minor compared to what Abraham would encounter later. First, a little background. Abraham recounts how he narrowly escaped from being offered as a human sacrifice:

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My fathers, having turned from their righteousness, and from the holy commandments which the Lord their God had given unto them, unto the worshiping of the gods of the heathen, utterly refused to hearken to my voice....

Therefore they turned their hearts to the sacrifice of the heathen *in offering up their children* unto these dumb idols, and...endeavored to take away my life by the hand of the priest of Elkenah....

And it came to pass that the priests laid violence upon me, that they might slay me....

And as they lifted up their hands upon me, that they might offer me up and take away my life,...[an] angel...stood by me, and immediately unloosed my bands.³⁰

Some years later Abraham must have recognized the terrible irony when God—who had rescued him from a sacrificial altar—asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac.³¹ It is too easy to distance ourselves from the horrific reality of this request. Perhaps because the event occurred so many centuries ago in a far off land, it loses its psychological and emotional impact. Moreover, I wonder whether Abraham had the constitution—who would?—to tell Sarah what he was about to do. Short of having received a divine witness, she surely would have questioned her husband’s mental health.

Spiritually and emotionally Abraham probably had to go it alone. For how could he logically explain to anyone his intended action: “Abraham was commanded to offer his son Isaac; nevertheless, it was written: Thou shalt not kill. Abraham, however, did not refuse, and it was accounted unto him for righteousness.”³² Surviving this collision of commandments, Abraham manifested his faith in the living God: “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac...of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead.”³³

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NEPHI AND LABAN

Unlike Abraham, Nephi (the son of Lehi) was required to carry out the unsavory deed—although he demurred and needed further persuading. It was only after Nephi “made sense” of the situation that he consented to killing Laban. Look for the interplay between feeling and reasoning as Nephi both *feels* and *reasons* his way through the ordeal:

And it was by night; and...I, Nephi, crept into the city and went forth towards the house of Laban.

And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do.

Nevertheless I went forth, and as I came near unto the house of Laban I beheld a man, and he had fallen to the earth before me, for he was drunken with wine.

And when I came to him I found that it was Laban....

And it came to pass that I was constrained by the Spirit that I should kill Laban; but I said in my heart: Never at any time have I shed the blood of man. And I shrunk and would that I might not slay him.

And the Spirit said unto me again: Behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands. Yea, and I also knew that he had sought to take away mine own life; yea, and he would not hearken unto the commandments of the Lord; and he also had taken away our property.

And it came to pass that the Spirit said unto me again: Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands;

Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief.

And now, when I, Nephi, had heard these words, I remembered the words of the Lord which he spake unto me in the wilderness, saying that: Inasmuch

as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise.

Yea, and I also thought that they could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law.

And I also knew that the law was engraven upon the plates of brass.

And again, I knew that the Lord had delivered Laban into my hands for this cause—that I might obtain the records according to his commandments.

Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit, and took Laban by the hair of the head, and I smote off his head with his own sword.³⁴

Some might argue that if Laban needed to be killed, surely the Lord could have quietly seen to it without involving Nephi. But I suspect Nephi needed to learn something about Nephi that night. I do not presume to know exactly what this was, but I can venture a guess: To what or to whom should Nephi ultimately pay allegiance? The “law” or the “lawgiver”? Judged by the law, Nephi was in deep trouble. In a legal court he would have had an extremely difficult time justifying his behavior. And he would have likely fared no better in an ecclesiastical court of his day. Succinctly put, Nephi *broke* the Mosaic law in order to *keep* the Mosaic law. That is, he broke the Mosaic law by killing Laban so that his posterity could keep the Mosaic law as recorded on the plates of brass. Yet I imagine the Lawgiver, who directed Nephi to take this course of action, would absolve him. Faced with two divine directives at odds with one another, Nephi may have had his first inkling that the Mosaic law is not the final word in matters of faith or righteousness.

After Nephi had decapitated Laban, he put on Laban’s clothes and armor.³⁵ As he walked toward the treasury that housed the plates of brass, he met Zoram the servant of Laban, who had the keys to the treasury.³⁶ “In the voice of Laban,” Nephi commanded Zoram to accompany him.³⁷ Nephi then reports: “[Zoram] supposed me to be his master, Laban, for he beheld the garments and also the sword girded about my loins.... And I [Nephi] spake unto him *as if it had been Laban*.”³⁸ Fooled by Nephi’s disguise, Zoram followed Nephi to the treasury.³⁹ At that moment, if I had been in Nephi’s shoes (or would they have been Laban’s shoes?), I would have thought to myself: “I just killed a man—I’m not going to stress out now over impersonating him.” Perhaps some have an easy explanation, but I cannot make sense of Nephi’s behavior without believing there are times when commandments collide. And the thesis of this paper provides a context within which these contradictions can be viewed as natural, inescapable consequences of the completeness of our theology.

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THE ATONEMENT

At this point I wish to touch upon the atonement of Christ. I suspect the Atonement will largely remain a mystery during our sojourn in mortality. Nevertheless, the notion of completeness versus consistency may shed a little light on the subject. Christ is the personification of completeness: “The Spirit of truth is of God. I am the Spirit of truth, and John bore record of me, saying: He received a fulness of truth, yea, even of all truth.”⁴⁰

I have argued that such a reception of truth necessitates a concomitant exposure to contradictions. And I will even go so far as to say that the greater the reception of truth, the more severe the contradictions. The scriptures are virtually silent regarding the precise nature of Christ’s suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Prophet Joseph Smith, however, made a statement that may be germane to our discussion: “[Christ] descended in suffering below that which man can suffer; or, in other words, suffered greater sufferings, and *was exposed to more powerful contradictions* than any man can be.”⁴¹ What these contradictions were I can only speculate, but I find the Prophet Joseph’s word choice very interesting.

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We can now consider a possible distinction between “transgression” and “sin” as they relate to the Atonement. Some have questioned whether Adam and Eve “sinned” when they partook of the forbidden fruit. Brigham Young responds: “How did Adam and Eve sin? Did they come out in direct opposition to God and to his government? No. But they transgressed a command of the Lord, and through that transgression sin came into the world.”⁴² Bruce R. McConkie agrees:

In a general sense and in most instances the terms sin and transgression are synonymous, although the use of the term transgression lays emphasis on the violation of the law or rule involved whereas the term sin points up the wilful nature of the disobedience. *There are situations, however, in which it is possible to transgress a law without committing a sin*, as in the case of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.⁴³

What are these situations where “it is possible to transgress a law without committing a sin”? Searching LDS publications, I could not find an answer to this question. Yet, to my mind, the thesis of this paper provides a satisfactory one. Could it be that “transgression” (in the strictest sense of the word) refers to the violation of a law when two or more laws conflict? In other words, the “transgressor” had to make a judicious choice among contradictory directives resulting in the infraction of one or more of them. And might it be that the atonement of Christ “pays the price” in such instances? If so, this could explain the universality of the resurrection, since physical death came as a consequence of Adam’s

transgression, for which individually we are not held culpable.⁴⁴ “Sin,” on the other hand, refers to the willful violation of divine law when no conflicts of law are present; and the Atonement applies only after the person repents.

ATTEMPTS TO UNDERMINE LDS THEOLOGY

Before exploring a final idea, we should revisit the notion of *completeness*. As discussed earlier, complex deductive systems cannot be consistent and complete.⁴⁵ To show that such a system is incomplete requires us to find a truth (expressed in the language of the system) that cannot be deduced from the axioms. Pointing out inconsistencies—or even contradictions—has no bearing on whether the system is complete. Furthermore, when such a system is complete, it will of necessity contain contradictions. If, as I have argued previously, Gödel’s results have analogous counterparts in the structure of theological systems, then the purported completeness of a system of theology cannot be undermined by the discovery of contradictions. This potentially paints a bleak picture for those laboring to “overthrow” LDS theology by identifying inconsistencies or contradictions. Provided the thesis of this paper holds, all such attempts will prove futile because a claim of completeness cannot be compromised by such discoveries.

SUMMARY

**Some of the “noble
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Some of the “noble and great ones”⁴⁶ in canonized scripture had to work their way through weighty contradictions. The notions of *consistency* and *completeness* (taken from the study of deductive systems) together with Gödel’s conclusions provide an analogical context for studying systems of theology. In particular, embracing a “complete” theological system may require an individual to endure not only trivial inconsistencies but also contradictions. In the latter case, rules of inference will prove insufficient, and logic will fall short. For the correctness of a course of action cannot always be determined by an application of a finite set of rules but by an appeal to a living standard of truth: “For they that are wise...and *have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide*...shall abide the day.”⁴⁷ Ultimately, living the gospel is not algorithmic or mechanical—we need continual guidance from heaven in the choices we make and in the priorities we set. ∞

NOTES:

- 1 By definition, a *deductive system* is a pair (S, R) , where S represents the set of sentences of a formal language and R represents a collection of inference rules on S .
- 2 An *axiom* is a self-evident truth; it is a statement, assertion, or proposition that is accepted as true and is used as a basis for developing a system of logic.
- 3 The system regards a statement to be “true” if it is deducible from the axioms of the system; the system regards a statement to be “false” if its logical negation is deducible from the axioms of the system.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Central to an understanding of *completeness* is the idea of “decidability.” When the truth or falsity of a statement can be determined from within the system, such a statement is called “decidable.” More precisely, a statement is *decidable* if either the statement or its logical negation is deducible from the axioms of the system. A deductive system is *complete* if every statement (expressed in the language of the system) is decidable. Informally this means that every true statement in a complete system is deducible from the axioms of the system.
- 6 Gödel originally proved that axiomatic set theory cannot be both consistent and complete, but his method of proof applies also to axiomatic number theory.
- 7 In *Principia Mathematica*.
- 8 Gödel proved that any deductive system exhibiting the complexity of the whole number system—or more technically, a finitely presentable logical system that can support Peano’s axioms—cannot be consistent and complete. For a reasonably accessible book on Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem, see Ernest Nagel and James R. Newman, *Gödel’s Proof* (New York: New York University Press, 1958).
- 9 Raymond M. Smullyan in his book *Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) states: “Each of the languages L to which Gödel’s argument is applicable contains at least the following items: 1) A denumerable set E whose elements are called the *expressions* of L , 2) A subset S of E whose elements are called the *sentences* of L , 3) A subset P of S whose elements are called the *provable* sentences of L , 4) A subset R of S whose elements are called the *refutable* (sometimes *disprovable*) sentences of L , 5) A set H of expressions whose elements are called the *predicates* of L . [These were called *class names* in Gödel’s introduction. Informally, each predicate H is thought of as being the name of a set of natural numbers.], 6) A function Φ that assigns to every expression E and every natural number n an expression $E(n)$. The function is required to obey the condition that for every predicate H and every natural number n , the expression $H(n)$ is a sentence. [Informally, the sentence $H(n)$ expresses the proposition that the number n belongs to the set named by H .], and 7) A set T of sentences whose elements are called the *true* sentences of L ” (p. 5).
- 10 Philip J. Davis, “Thoughts on the Paradox of Gödel,” *Humanistic Mathematics Network Journal*, No. 24 (May 2001), 14.
- 11 *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 3.
- 12 *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, 17.
- 13 *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, 30.
- 14 Doctrine and Covenants 1:23.
- 15 See “atonement” in the Bible Dictionary.

- 16 Moses 4:1.
- 17 Moses 4:3.
- 18 See “Waving a Magic Wand,” *Perspective*, vol. 5, no. 1, 111-122.
- 19 John 10:10.
- 20 Moroni 10:5.
- 21 Moses 2:28.
- 22 Moses 4:9.
- 23 2 Nephi 2:22-23.
- 24 That Adam understood the consequences of this course of action is made clear in Moses 4:18: “The woman thou gavest me, and *commandest that she should remain with me*, she gave me of the fruit of the tree and I did eat” (emphasis added).
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Paul supports the line of reasoning that Adam in fact understood the incompatibility of the choices before him: “And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression” (1 Timothy 2:14).
- 27 Abraham 2:22-25.
- 28 Genesis 20:12.
- 29 Genesis 17:4.
- 30 Abraham 1:5, 7, 12, 15 (emphasis added).
- 31 Genesis 22:1-2.
- 32 Doctrine and Covenants 132:36.
- 33 Hebrews 11:17-19.
- 34 1 Nephi 4:5-8, 10-18 (emphasis added).
- 35 1 Nephi 4:19.
- 36 1 Nephi 4:20.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 1 Nephi 4:21, 23 (emphasis added).
- 39 1 Nephi 4:24-26.
- 40 Doctrine and Covenants 93:26.
- 41 *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 5, p. 48 (emphasis added).
- 42 *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 103.
- 43 *Mormon Doctrine*, 804 (emphasis added).
- 44 Articles of Faith 1:2.
- 45 See note 8.
- 46 Abraham 3:22-23.
- 47 Doctrine and Covenants 45:57 (emphasis added).