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Diffusing Apparent Biblical Contradictions: A Logical Demonstration

Joseph B. O. Okello

A few years back, I had a conversation with a Muslim friend. In our discussion of religious matters, he insisted that Christianity could not be justified epistemically because of its numerous contradictions. He contended that a major instance of apparent inconsistency can be found between the sixth commandment and King Solomon's explication of time: "You shall not commit murder"[1] and "there is a time to kill"[2] are Biblical sentences that contradict each other. It would be self-contradictory for the Bible to issue commands, on the one hand, against a specific course of action x; and on the other hand, allow one to do x. Thus, when God says, "x is wrong," he would be contradicting himself when he creates instances permitting x.

I intend to argue that there is no inconsistency here. The apparent tension between these two statements can be neutralized in one way: by considering the different situations in which "kill" is not identical to "murder." We begin such a consideration by stipulating the following frameworks: First, when the Bible says you shall not commit murder, we stipulate the structure of that command as "you shall not do x." Second, when it says there is a time to kill, we stipulate the structure of that claim as "there is a time to do y." My task is to show how these two differ from each other. If x is different from y in our findings, we will additionally discover that when one enumerates the set of properties of x, and the set of properties of y, x and y bear a sub-contrary relation to each other. A sub-contrary relation between two sets of properties of un-identical entities is such that some members of one set x are identical to members of another set y, and some members of x are not identical to y. And following George

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[1] Exodus 20:13

[2] Ecclesiastes 3:3

Boulos and Richard Jeffrey,[3] the sets may be finite or infinite. But irrespective of whether they are finite or infinite, what is crucial is that we know enough about members of x and members of y to enumerate them. Such enumeration should allow us to make the following claims:

1.   Some members of y are members of x.   .
2.   Some members of y are not members of x.

If our observations of the members of both sets allow us to make these two claims successfully, then we will be able to show that x is different from y.

It is possible to apply this operation to the relationship between the terms "murder" and "kill." But before applying this operation, we must consult a lexicon in order to discover the etymological significance of "murder" and "kill," especially as used in the books of Exodus and Ecclesiastes. Thus, Moses quotes God as using the term "murder" in the Decalogue, while Solomon is quoted as using the term "kill." The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon (henceforth referred to as the BDB) lists the following actions as falling properly under the act of murder: to break, to bruise, to crush, to slay with premeditation (with regard to a human being), to assassinate, and so on.[4] The same lexicon lists the following actions as falling under the act of killing: to slay, to slaughter, to destroy, to ruin and so on.[5] In order to see the difference between both terms, it will be helpful to list the actions falling under each term, as a property of that term. In other words, actions like "bruise," "crush," and "slay" should all be taken as properties of "murder" in the Hebraic sense of the word. And the set of properties of murder can be listed as follows:

Murder = {to break, to bruise, to crush, to slay with premeditation, ...}
Similarly, actions like "to slay," "to slaughter," "to destroy," "to ruin" and so on should be taken as properties of the verb "to kill." And the set of properties of the verb "to kill" can also be enumerated as:
Kill = {to slay, to slaughter, to destroy, to ruin, ...}

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[3]   George S. Boulos and Richard C. Jeffrey, *Computability and Logic 3rd Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 1
[4]   Francis Brown, ed. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996) p. 953.
[5]   Brown, p. 246-7

Both terms have at least one identical member in their set, namely, "to slay." This allows us to make the following claim:

1.   Some acts of killing are acts of murder.

Note, however, that both terms also have un-identical properties functioning as members of their different sets. For instance, whereas the premeditation motif appears in our understanding of murder, it does not appear in our understanding of "kill." Also, from this explication, murder seems to be talked of in relation to human beings, while killing has a wider scope: namely, it is applicable to human beings as well animals. This allows us to make the following claim:

2.   Some acts of killing are not acts of murder.

In both (1) and (2) above, the claims we have made about "killing" and "murder" bear a sub-contrary relation to each other. This shows that it is not the case that all acts of killing are acts of murder.

According to Leibniz's law, an entity x is identical to an entity y if and only if every property of x is a property of y, and every property of y is a property of x. Let us, for example, arbitrarily assume that there is a set w whose members are a, b, c, d and e. Let us also assume that there is a set z, whose members are a, b, c, d, and e. We discover at once that all the members of w are members of z. If the members of both sets are a list of properties of sets w and z, we conclude that w is identical to z. But if we have an additional set v, whose members are a, b, c, d and k, we discover that at least one member of v is not a member of w, namely k. Thus by Leibniz's law, we conclude that v is not identical to w, and also that v is not identical to z. But v bears a sub-contrary relation to w and z, since the claim "some w are v" and "some w are not v" are both true of the relationship between v and w. But that is not to say that v *always* contradicts w. It only enables us to conclude that v is not identical to w and z. Thus an imperative like "you shall not do w" is necessarily violated, and contradicted by the claim "there is a time to do z," since both refer to identical actions.

Take an everyday example: Assume I have a house with no back door, but only one front door. Above the door-frame, you see two sentences: The first sentence reads: "You must never walk through this door" and another,

right below it, reads: "You must always walk through this door." You will wonder whether I mean that you should follow only one of them and disregard the other, or whether I am serious at all that you should obey both imperatives. And you will be convinced, by considering the very nature of the rules, that I will not want you to keep both of them, for to keep one is to break the other.

But perhaps this is overstating the issue. Perhaps we need to change the second rule to read, "there is a time to walk though this door." This still does not help, for the very inclusion of the word "never" in the first rule introduces the notion of time, such that the rule can be correctly re-stated as "at no time should you walk through this door." Thus, however we look at these two rules, it appears that keeping any one of them necessarily violates the other rule. If this seems to be the case with the two instances regarding "murder" and "kill," then we clearly have a contradiction.

But this does not seem to be the case at all. The relationship between murder and kill is not an identical relation. Rather, it seems to be a sub-contrary relation. One can make two claims bearing sub-contrary relations to each other without necessarily contradicting oneself. Some sub-contrary relations contradict each other. Others do not.[6] And when God says, "you shall not commit murder" and Solomon says, "there is a time to kill," both are not contradicting each other in the sense I have stipulated above. This is because of the special case of a sub-contrary relation that sentences about "murder" bear to sentences about "kill."

Let us take another example from the very words themselves. It appears it would be more correct to state that all acts of murder are acts of killing, for murder necessarily involves killing. But it would be incorrect to stipulate the converse, namely, that all acts of killing are acts of murder. The intuitiveness of this emerges when we make a substitution instance of this claim. Let us substitute M for murder and K for killing such that we have a sentence of the structure "all M are K." Just because "all M are K" does not mean that "all K are M." Now, let us retain the structure of both

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[6] For instance, "some animals are cats" is a claim bearing a sub-contrary relation to "some animals are not cats." These two claims do not contradict each other. But the following sub-contrary-related claims contradict each other: "some cats are animals" and "some cats are not animals."

statements, but substitute the letters with familiar names. In other words, if instead of "all *M* are *K*," let us have "all women are humans." We know that the claim "all women are humans is true." But we also know that the converse claim "all humans are women" is absurd. Similarly, when we claim that "all murder is killing", we would commit the fallacy of illicit conversion when we conclude that all killing is murder. We might as well argue that since all women are humans, it follows that all humans are women!

But an identical relation permits just such a move, precisely because an identical relation is not really a comparison between two entities; rather, it is a consideration of a *single* entity. Thus, if murder and killing were exactly identical, bearing the same properties in every way, then claiming that all murder is killing and all killing is murder would not be fallacious at all. Consider the claim, "all bachelors are unmarried single adult males." One would not be committing the fallacy of illicit conversion by conversely inferring that "all unmarried single adult males are bachelors." This is because "bachelors" and "single adult males" both refer to the same thing. Here, we are considering a single entity rather than comparing two entities. It is therefore not fallacious to make a claim of this sort along with its converse. But we cannot perform the same operation with the claim "all acts of murder are acts of killing."

Perhaps another illustration will make it clear. Suppose I make the claim all *M* are *M* and call it θ. Suppose I make a second claim thus, "all *M* are *M*" and call it δ. Suppose, further, that I tell you that in claim δ, the first *M* of θ switched positions in a converse operation with the second *M* in θ. How would you know the difference between any of the *M*s? You would not know the difference because *M* is always identical to *M*, whichever way we look at it. One might as well say any person called President George Bush, is that person called President George Bush, which is a true statement. Once again, the upshot of all this is that if *M* is a identical to *M* (and we know it is), then we can validly make a conversion operation between *M* and *M*, without the fear of committing the fallacy of illicit conversion. But when we are dealing with two different entities, such as "murder" and "killing", we at once run into a fallacy of illicit conversion when we switch the terms in a conversion operation. Once again, this helps to underscore the fact that murder is not identical to killing; for if murder is killing, then we could easily state "all murder is killing" and its converse, namely that "all killing is murder." But we have seen that we cannot do this

without running into a fallacy. Therefore, murder is not identical to killing. Now, if murder is not identical to killing, then "you shall not murder" does not contradict "there is a time to kill."

As you have probably realized, I have relied quite heavily on logic to determine whether or not the action of murdering is identical to the act of killing. To be sure, logic is a crucial tool here, for without it, this whole treatment would not make sense. I understand, however, that one may object to this sort of interpretation of the passages I cited above. The objection may arise out of one's suspicions about logic's ability to preserve truth, leave alone arriving at the truth. It is to these objections that I now turn.

Before examining particular objections, I will classify possible objections into two possible categories: The first category is what I will call a hard-objection. Here, I define a hard objection as the kind of objection that expresses complete agnosticism about my treatment of the apparent contradiction between the two actions above. This poses a greater challenge to my treatment, and will be discussed below. The second category of objections is what I will call a soft-objection. Such an objection agrees with my treatment of the two verbs, "murder" and "kill," but insists that I need to give a more comprehensive treatment of my tension-diffusing goal. Thus, they will insist that besides logic, I need to add other exegetical considerations like context, language and so on. Since this is in general agreement to my thesis above, I will only outline its thesis and provide an abbreviated response.

Let me begin with the soft-objection. It has been suggested that in considerations of Biblical words and phrases, one should pay undivided attention to the geographical, cultural, historical and linguistic contexts of the words or phrases in question. One must do this if one aims to be true to the historical-grammatical method of interpretations. This treatment of the tension between the 'command not to murder' and the 'permission to kill at certain times' ignores context considerations. Thus, even though it is successful, it is not a good example of correct Biblical hermeneutics.

I respond to this charge by agreeing with the objection. It is almost impossible to be true to the grammatical-historical method of Biblical interpretation if one does not take issues of context seriously. But this does

not mean that I ignored this issue. In fact, it was at the very heart of my interpretation of the terms, considering my dependence on the BDB lexicon for the understanding of the terms involved. My use of the BDB here was quite purposeful and intentional – it was an attempt to arrive at the intended meaning of both words in their different cultural contexts.

But there is a larger issue here. My interpretation of the two verbs presupposes a use of the historical-grammatical method, and my logical frameworks operate within this presupposition. Within such a presupposition, one can use logic without having to expose one's hermeneutic persuasions. In other words, whereas the question of hermeneutics is important in considering the meaning of words, one is able to use logical tools without exposing one's hermeneutic method. The advantage of this approach is that one can be involved in a meaningful dialogue with a person subscribing to other methods of interpretation without having to be caught up with debates on the correct method of interpretation – which I think are motifs for later debates.

A hard-objection may be stated on another front: namely, this treatment of the contradiction does not absolve the Bible from contradictions. Even if it succeeds, we still have other areas where the Bible seems to clearly contradict itself. Take the case of proverbs 26: 4 and 5. It reads: *Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.* Clearly, the objector would argue, there is a flat-out contradiction here. Thus, even though I might have succeeded in showing that the contradiction on the laws between "murder" and "kill" are really no contradictions at all, I still have not defended the Bible convincingly from other numerous contradictions.

My first response to this objection is simply this: I am sure one can cite many Biblical passages that seem to contradict each other. In *Does the Bible Contradict Itself?* W. Arndt cites passages that appear contradictory. He then juxtaposes conflicting passages of a historical and doctrinal nature, both from the Old Testament and the New Testament, and proceeds to harmonize what appears contradictory in them. But prior to dealing with these alleged contradictions, he reminds us of several things. I point two of them. First, he reminds us that:

> It is of the utmost importance to remember that two propositions may differ from each other without being contradictory. In most cases, people who charge the Bible with containing discrepancies have become victims of confused thinking. They fail to distinguish between difference and contradictions.[7]

Second, he reminds us of Dr. Pieper's comments appearing in *Christian Dogmatics*. Here, Dr. Pieper writes:

> In explaining a difficulty, it is always to be remembered that even a possible explanation is sufficient to meet the objector. If several possible explanations are suggested, it becomes all the more unreasonable for one to contend that the discrepancy is irreconcilable . . .. The harmonist has done his duty if he can show a reasonable explanation of the problem before him."[8] [Sic]

In both instances above, Arndt reminds us that we must be willing to dig deeper into the text to determine what it really says, rather than make quick and rash judgments about what we think is the case when the reality is, in fact, different.

My second response to the objection cited above is that a deeper look into the book of Proverbs shows that there really is no contradiction, as initially thought. Before I explain that there is no contradiction, perhaps we need to revisit our definition of what a contradiction is. We contradict each other when we make a claim (call it p) and at the same time deny that claim (by claiming not-p). That is to say, to claim "it is the case that p and *not-p*," is a contradiction. For instance, one would be contradicting oneself if one were to assert that "John is a human being and John is not a human being." In the first conjunct, we assert that John is a human being. In the second conjunct, we deny this assertion. Both claims contradict each other. This arises from the principle of non-contradiction defined by Aristotle in the following way: "That the same thing should at the same time both be and not be for the same person and in the same respect is impossible."[9]

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[7] W. Arndt, *Does the Bible Contradict Itself: A Discussion of Alleged Contradictions in the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955) p. xiv
[8] Arndt, p. xviii
[9] Arndt, x

The question we ought to ask ourselves, then, is this: does Proverbs 26: 4–5 violate this principle? One may think it does. But a deeper look suggests that it does not. It would be contradictory if verse 4 had the form *p*, and verse 5 had the form *not-p*. Let us look at the verses themselves. Verse 4 reads: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself." What verse 4 really implies is that if you answer a fool according to his folly, you will be like him yourself." Also, verse 5 reads: "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes." This implies that if you do not answer a fool according to his folly, he will be wise in his own eyes. In other words, both passages tell us of the conditions that follow when one chooses to do one thing rather than another. Here, I have somehow changed the sentences from Imperative Sentences to Propositions. The former term deals with the right-ness or wrong-ness of actions. The latter term, however, deals with truth or falsity of statements. Whether or not one is able to change a proposition to an imperative is questionable, and may plunge one into the naturalistic fallacy. But to infer a proposition from an imperative, as I have done with Proverbs 26: 4 and 5, does not appear fallacious here. At any rate, it seems to be an interpretive move, namely, stating what is the case by looking at what ought or ought not to be done.

However, my concern here is not how to interpret this passage. I leave that to the Biblical exegete. My concern is to show that the passages are not contradictory, for imperatives, like propositions, are capable of contradicting each other. As stated earlier, a contradictory statement is one that makes a claim and denies it at the same time. Also, imperatives contradict each other when they issue a command both to do something and not to do the same thing. The law of non-contradiction is therefore applicable to both cases. I have suggested that Proverbs 26: 4, 5 is not contradictory and is therefore not guilty of violating the law of non-contradiction. Let us revisit verse 4. We note that it has two atomic sentences, namely, ""do not answer a fool according to his folly," and "you will be like him yourself." Nevertheless, a closer look at this verse suggests that it is really a compound sentence because it is a combination of two atomic sentences.[10] Let us label the first atomic sentence "*not-F*," and the second atomic sentence *Y*. *F* will contradict *not-F* if we suggest or

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[10] I define an atomic sentence as a clause, that is, a group of words that contains a subject and a verb. I then define a compound sentence as consisting of two or more atomic sentences.

command one to do *F* and *not-F*. A compound sentence that has *F* and *not-F* as its atomic sentences necessarily contradicts itself. Similarly *Y* will contradict *not-Y* if we suggest or command one to do both *Y* and *not-Y*. A compound sentence that has *Y* and *not-Y* as its atomic sentences necessarily contradicts itself. But commanding one to do "either *not-F* or *Y*" will not be contradictory. In fact, "either *not-F* or *Y*" is a contingent compound sentence. Let us label this compound sentence *R*. Thus, the compound sentence R tells us this: "either *not-F* or *Y*". And this is really the structure of verse 4, which reads as follows: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly (i.e., *not-F*) or you will be like him yourself (i.e., *Y*). Thus, R is identical to "either *not-F* or *Y.*"

Let us now consider verse 5. It reads, "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes." Once again, we are looking at a compound sentence. Its two atomic components are: "Answer a fool according to his folly" and "A fool will be wise in his own eyes." Since the first atomic sentence of *R* is a negation (i.e., *not-F*) of the first atomic statement of verse 5, let us designate the first atomic sentence of verse 5 with the letter *F*. We will then designate the second atomic sentence of verse 5 with the letter *W*. Thus, the compound sentence in verse 5 has the following structure: "either *F* or *W.*" Let us designate this compound sentence with the letter *S*. Thus the set of atomic sentences that make up the compound sentences *R* and *S* as found in verse 4 could be represented as follows:

R = Verse 4 = {*not-F*, *Y*}
S = Verse 5 = {*F*, W}

Under what conditions would *R* contradict *S*? *R* would contradict *S* if and only if all the atomic statements of *R* contradicted at least one of the atomic statements of *S*. To put it differently, if *R* would have "*not-F*" and "*Y*" as its atomic statements, then *S* should have *F* and "*not-Y*" as its atomic statements. Thus, if *R* were to contradict *S*, the set of *R*'s atomic sentences would be as follows:

R = {*not-F*, *Y*}

And the set of all atomic sentences belonging to S, which I will call $S*$[11] owing to its distinction from verse 5, would be as follows:

$S* = \{F, not\text{-}Y\}$.

In R, the first member of the set is *not-F*. In $S*$, the first member is F. Therefore, the first members of both sets contradict each other. And in R, the second member of the set is Y, while in $S*$, the second member is *not-Y*. Therefore, the second members of both sets also contradict each other. If both members of the set contradict each other, it is likely that we are faced with an overall contradiction between R and $S*$. In other words, since every member of R contradicts at least another member of $S*$, we conclude that R contradicts $S*$. And if R contradicts $S*$, then $S*$ should be identical to *not-R*, precisely because the suggestions of all the members of one set directly contradict the suggestions of the members of the other set.

But a look at the relationship between S and R (i.e., verse 4 and 5) shows that there is at least one member of S, namely, W, that does not contradict any member of R. W is different from any of the members of R. Also, there is at least one member of R, namely Y that does not contradict any member of S. This member, Y, is simply different from any member of S. But just because W is different does not mean that W contradicts any member of R. W is just that – different. Similarly, just because Y is different from any member of S does not mean that R contradicts S. Y is just that – different. And this places us in a position to show that verse 4 (R) is not a contradiction of verse 5 (S). The set of all members of verse 4 is:

R = Verse 4 = {do not answer a fool according to his folly, you will be like him yourself}.

Verse 4 would have contradicted verse 5 if and only if every atomic sentence of verse 4 contradicted at least one atomic sentence of verse 5. I will call this verse "verse 5-contradictory." In other words, if "verse 5-contradictory" contradicted verse 4, then the set of all atomic sentences of verse 5-contradictory ($S*$) would have been:

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[11] I use the asterisk symbol * to show that the S-set here is different from what we find in verse 5.

S^* = Verse 5 contradictory = {answer a fool according to his folly, you will not be like a fool yourself}.

In other words, "do not answer a fool according to his folly" would be contradicted by "answer a fool according to his folly." And "you will be like a fool yourself" would be contradicted by "you will not be like a fool yourself." But we know that the second member of this set is different from the second atomic sentence in verse 4. In other words, we know that verse 5 (I will call it "verse 5-correct") has the following atomic sentences as its members:

S = Verse 5 correct = {answer a fool according to his folly, he will be wise in his own eyes}.

That is to say, given our understanding of what it would be for a compound sentence to directly contradict another compound sentence, we are led to conclude that Proverbs 26: 4 does not contradict Proverbs 26: 5.

In this understanding, the first hard-objection loses its force. Besides, the reason the skeptic sees Proverbs 26:4 as contradicting Proverbs 26:5 is because the skeptic looks only at the atomic sentences in isolation. The skeptic needs to consider the compound sentence as a whole, which is what I have done above.

A second hard objection may run as follows. Immanuel Kant has shown that it is possible to encounter sophisticated theorems that cannot be defined by logic. This is especially so when we apply the principles of logic beyond the boundaries of experience. When we encounter this situation, our dilemma is made more severe by the fact that each theory will not only be contradicted by another theory, but also that both contradictory theories can be validly justified on logical grounds.[12] Thus, the objector may argue that my attempt to use logic to demonstrate that apparent Biblical contradictions can be diffused is a utopia of sorts; for it is possible to think of a case where logic will show that these contradictions are really there, and not merely apparent.[13]

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[12] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Translated and Edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 467.
[13] Ibid.

I note here that Kant did not dismiss the importance of logic altogether. He held that logic could be applied to objects of experience. But he also held that the tools of logic could fail us when we begin to apply logic beyond the boundaries of experience.[14] Therefore, our task will be to show that the act of murder, or killing, or answering a fool according to his folly, are classified as empirical acts, that is, as something one can experience. Of course we know that such is possible in our day-to-day lives. We hear, time and again, of incidents of murder and killing. People get mugged on our city streets. Goats get slaughtered as delicacies for the barbeques marking our festive seasons. We clearly can show that murder and killing are empirical acts. And if we can do this, then it means we can apply the principles of logic to these situations without worrying about the possibility of encountering successful refutations of our theses by other counter-arguments.

The upshot of all this is clear – the alleged contradictions are really not contradictions as initially thought. Moreover, logic seems to be a valuable tool in helping to clarify the issues involved, and helping to solve the tensions we encounter while reading the Biblical text. What appears as a contradiction may not really be a contradiction at all. Our hermeneutical method will help us arrive at the background of these apparent contradictions. But logic will also play the role of formulating proper frameworks for diffusing the tensions in question.

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