

A LIE IS AN ABOMINATION UNTO THE LORD, AND A VERY PRESENT HELP IN TROUBLE

by Ra McLaughlin

When, if ever, may a Christian lie? It is rather difficult to find two theologians or philosophers who agree entirely on the answer. Some argue that God's Word requires truth in all circumstances. Others insist that the Lord permits some dissembling, but often fail to agree on when such deception is permissible. The issue is not an easy one, and great minds stand on all sides of the question. In an attempt to add one more dissenting voice to the cacophony, this paper will briefly examine some of the critical biblical texts that have historically served as the flashpoints of the debate.

The Reformed tradition has generally handled the question of lying under the heading of the ninth commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."ⁱ In deference to this great tradition, it seems fitting to begin the present discussion here, and then to proceed to an initial defense of truth telling in general, and finally to a defense of lying in limited circumstances.

THE NINTH COMMANDMENT

Strictly speaking, the ninth commandment does not forbid lying as such.ⁱⁱ Rather, it addresses the specific case of bearing testimony in a judicial proceeding,ⁱⁱⁱ generally by false accusation or by providing false or useless information.^{iv} Since the goal of the judicial proceeding is to prosecute the Law and serve justice, any form of testimony or accusation that tends to pervert those ends is banned by this commandment. This would include not only misrepresentations of the facts of the case, but also other forms of deception.^v For instance, omitting pertinent information would be prohibited by this commandment, as would hiding or destroying evidence.

That the ninth commandment prohibits more than statements of falsehood can be inferred from the variety of language used in the Old Testament that identifies false witnessing. For example, although many English Bibles translate Exodus 20:16 and Deuteronomy 5:16 identically, the Hebrew is actually somewhat different. Specifically, each verse uses a different word for "false."^{vi} Many passages also include the "slanderer"^{vii} as a false witness, and Scripture

ⁱExod. 20:16; Deut. 5:20. All biblical quotes are from the NASB, 1995 edition.

ⁱⁱMurder, adultery, theft, lying frequently appear together in Ancient Near-Eastern legal codes pertaining to testimony and evidence gathering, and to lying in general, as in *Hammurapi 1-5* and *Ur-Nammu 25-27* (cf. Jer. 7:9; Hos. 4:2). The ninth commandment appearing with the sixth through eighth commandments may thus corroborate the assertion that its primary referent is juridical. Kaufman, 111-114; Childs, 424.

ⁱⁱⁱDurham, 295-296; Sarna, 114; Douma, 313; Miller, 93.

^{iv}Tigay, 71; Bovati, 266.

^vCraigie, 162.

^{vi}*shqr* in Exod. 20:16; *shw'* in Deut. 5:20.

^{vii}*rkyl* and *rgl* appear in contexts which demonstrate that the offense is particularly related to jurisprudence, or in contexts which indicate that the Ten Commandments may be particularly in

has several other words for “lying” and “deception” that also refer at times to false testimony.^{viii} In other contexts, these same words refer to many types of deception, lying, concealment, etc. Most accounts of lying and deception in the Old Testament employ a word for those acts that is elsewhere used to describe false testimony. This indicates, on the one hand, great overlap of the semantic ranges of these words, and on the other hand, a juridical prohibition against all types of distorting, hiding and denying the truth, not just of some types.

TRUTH TELLING IN GENERAL

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* rightly states that the ninth commandment requires, among other things, the “appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever.”^{ix} That is, as a summary of the Law, the Ten Commandments represent more than narrow stipulations. They are broad principles intended to be applied more or less directly to all matters of life as those matters resemble more or less closely the specific subjects of the commandments. This is evident not only from the ways in which the rest of the Pentateuch expands upon the Ten Commandments, but also from the case law prosecuting the same. The moral, civil and general equity of the ninth commandment indicate God’s own concern for truth, honesty and justice; they are reflective of his character. Insofar as believers are called to emulate God’s character,^x they are obligated to deal truthfully, honestly, and justly with each other^{xi} and with all men.^{xii}

In support of this notion, Scripture records many statements, absolute in form if not in meaning, that declare God’s opposition to lying and falsehood.^{xiii} Scripture often proscribes the practice of lying, and never prescribes it. This should leave no doubt that God is not Machiavellian; he does not allow that “one must know how to ... be a great dissembler.”^{xiv} The Christian must be committed to the truth. Despite whatever differences theologians and

mind. For example, in Ezek. 22:1-12 the Lord rebukes Israel for violations of nearly every one of the Ten Commandments, suggesting that the reference to slander pertains to the ninth commandment rather than to a more general form of slander. The language of crimes of the slanderers in Ezek. 22:9 parallels that of the crimes of the rulers in Ezek. 22:6, also implying a legal or juridical force to the slander. The same is true in Ps. 15:3, where slander is compared to doing evil to one’s neighbor and on par with taking a bribe (Ps. 15:5). Cf. Bovati, 303-304.

^{viii}It is beyond the scope of this paper to demonstrate every such word, but the typical word groups include *kzb* (e.g. Prov. 6:19; 14:5,25; 19:5,9) and *kchsh* (e.g. Lev. 6:2-3; Hos. 4:2).

^{ix}WLC, Answer 144.

^xE.g. Lev. 19:2; Matt. 5:44-48.

^{xi}The primary responsibility of God’s people is to deal in truth with each other. “Neighbor” is first and foremost the one with whom exists a reciprocal relationship of covenant community obligation. Craigie, 124; Childs, 424. Cf. Zech. 8:16; Eph. 4:25.

^{xii}Cf. Durham, 298-299. It also a reasonable application of Jesus’ corrective definition of “neighbor” in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) to extend this obligation to all mankind.

^{xiii}E.g. Prov. 6:16-19; 12:22; John 8:44; Rev. 21:8.

^{xiv}Machiavelli, 63.

philosophers may have regarding the “lie of necessity” or other exceptions to this rule, all should agree on the rule.

As soon as one begins to define such terms as “truth” and “lie,” however, the waters muddy — it is much easier to agree on how to state the rule than on what the rule means. For example, consider John Murray’s^{xv} explanation of “truth.” Murray refers the reader to Jesus’ words “I am ... the truth,”^{xvi} and offers this observation:

“‘The true’ in the usage of John is not so much the true in contrast with the false, or the real in contrast with the fictitious. It is the absolute as contrasted with the relative, the ultimate as contrasted with the derived, the eternal as contrasted with the temporal, the permanent as contrasted with the temporary, the complete in contrast with the partial, the substantial in contrast with the shadowy... It is to miss the thought entirely to suppose that truth is here contrasted with the false or the untrue.”^{xvii}

It is this definition, that “the true” is not that which is factually precise or accurate,^{xviii} which Murray expands for several paragraphs in order to establish that truth is part of God’s holy character and is therefore universally binding.^{xix} In fact, this is a very good argument, but it makes his application quite befuddling: “This is why all untruth or falsehood is wrong; it is a contradiction of what God is.”^{xx} Murray’s entire argument against lying depends upon an implied definition of “true” other than the one he has established. Specifically, it relies on the idea that “the true” really is contrasted with “the false” and “the fictitious.” Thus, instead of condemning that which contradicts God’s eternal, substantial, ultimate character, he argues, “The person who is to be branded as a liar is the person who affirms to be true what he knows or believes to be false or affirms to be false what he knows or believes to be true,”^{xxi} and “[we must] refrain from uttering or signifying what we believe to be false.”^{xxii}

In a similarly confusion fashion, Murray argues, “We think very superficially and naively if we suppose that no wrong is entailed in misrepresentation of fact.”^{xxiii} By “wrong,” Murray means “moral wrong” in this context. Nevertheless, he argues that in 1 Samuel 16^{xxiv} Samuel’s

^{xv}Murray is a primary apologist for the position that Christians must never lie.

^{xvi}John 14:6; Murray also appeals in this context to John 1:14,17. Murray, 123.

^{xvii}Murray, 123.

^{xviii}Cf. Verhey, 68: “When the Bible uses this image it does not refer simply to some correspondence between word and thought. It refers, rather, to something like *troth*, as in the trustworthiness and faithfulness that come with betrothal.” See also Kittel, 602, on John 8:44; 1 John 1:6 and 1 John 2:21-22 where lying is unbelief, the denial of the confession of Christ; and Bonhoeffer, 369.

^{xix}Murray, 123-125.

^{xx}Murray, 125.

^{xxi}Murray, 133.

^{xxii}Murray, 134.

^{xxiii}Murray, 133.

^{xxiv}In this chapter, the Lord instructs Samuel to anoint one of Jesse’s sons as king, with the explicit counsel that Samuel is to conceal the real meaning for his visit. Samuel is to let it be

“evasion” in which he “suppress[ed] ... the most important facts”^{xxv} was not a lie because it did not contain any untrue statements. In Murray’s words, “Concealment was not lying.”^{xxvi} If such concealment is not an instance of “signifying what we believe to be false,” it is hard to imagine what is. Samuel’s actions and words are not just designed not just to “conceal” — the concealment has a purpose, namely misleading Saul. The words and actions are designed to convince Saul of something that is contrary to fact. Moreover, given the broad vocabulary used in Scripture to condemn false witnesses, it is nearly inconceivable that “concealing” and “evasion” fall outside the pale of the ninth commandment. As Fleming puts it,

“Does such a statement ... really articulate the *truth*, even though the speaker anticipates and desires the listener’s mistaken interpretation? This claim makes little sense if a statement represents not just an expression of thought but a means of expressing that thought to others.”^{xxvii}

Imagine the following hypothetical case: Mrs. Simeon turns up dead with a knife in her back shortly after she and her husband engage in a rather heated round of fisticuffs. Mr. Simeon stands accused of murdering his wife, but in fact he could not have committed the crime. Immediately after losing the fight with his wife, Mr. Simeon drank himself into a stupor at the local inn, and was there observed by Mr. Levi. In the trial, Mr. Levi is called to testify regarding the violent nature of Mr. Simeon’s relationship with his wife, and he does so faithfully, explaining Mr. Simeon’s violent tendencies, as well as Mr. Simeon’s hatred for his wife. However, when asked about the events of the night in question, he declines to comment. Mr. Levi fails to volunteer the information that could exonerate Mr. Simeon. He has told no untruth; he has only concealed truth. Is he guilty of bearing misleading testimony? Does his testimony tend to serve justice or to pervert it? In point of fact, his testimony tends to sway the judicial findings against Mr. Simeon, thereby perverting justice. His testimony signifies a falsehood, even though all it contains is perfectly faithful to the truth. None of its constituent parts are lies, but taken as a whole this conglomeration of truth functions as a lie by omission.^{xxviii}

Augustin as well has offered some rather confusing views of truth and falsehood. For Augustin, John’s statement that “no lie is of the truth”^{xxix} was absolute.^{xxx} Nevertheless, he was struck by the apparent inconsistencies between the behavior of biblical heroes and the truth. This led him to argue, for example, that when Jacob deceived Isaac,^{xxxi} Jacob’s false words and dissembling actions were:

known to Saul that Samuel is visiting Jesse in order to sacrifice to the Lord. The sacrifice is real, but is not the reason for the visit.

^{xxv}Murray, 139.

^{xxvi}Murray, 140.

^{xxvii}Fleming, 25-26; cf. Douma, 328.

^{xxviii}Cf. Bonhoeffer, 369.

^{xxix}1 John 2:21.

^{xxx}*Contra Mendacium* 31; NPNF, 495. Even here Augustin’s hermeneutic is inconsistent with his understanding of other verses in absolute form which he understands to carry implicit conditions and exceptions; see Douma, 326.

^{xxxi}Gen. 27 contains the account in which Jacob disguised himself as Esau, and told Isaac that he was Esau, in order to steal or usurp the blessing Isaac intended to bestow in Esau.

“prophetic speeches and actions, to be referred to the understanding of those things which are true; which are covered as it were with a garb of figure on purpose to exercise the sense of the pious inquirer, and that they may not become cheap by lying bare and on the surface.”^{xxxii}

In short, they were parables; Jacob was prophesying, not deceiving. Aside from its total counter-intuitiveness and its violence to the actual literary genre of the text, the hardest part of this argument to swallow is that such a brilliant mind as Augustin actually owned it.

These examples from Murray and Augustin demonstrate that pinning down definitions for such important terms as “lie” and “truth” is not an easy task. In this author’s opinion, many who wish to maintain an unbreakable prohibition on lying have so diluted the applicability of that prohibition that their stance against lying is more permissive than the stance of those who define lying broadly and admit to exceptions. By using such strained hermeneutics and equivocation, Murray and Augustin fling open the door to deconstructive tactics that can ultimately justify far too many lies.^{xxxiii} It is the broader understanding of the prohibition against lying^{xxxiv} that rightly denounces more lies and deception, even though it admits exceptions to the rule. More importantly, it is the broader definition that the Bible establishes.

LYING IN LIMITED CIRCUMSTANCES

The problem with the broader definition of lying is that so many biblical examples seem to indicate that God occasionally favors lying. Indeed, God actually does it himself once in a while. This would seem to throw Scripture into a state of self-contradiction. “After all,” it is argued, “God cannot lie.”^{xxxv} In order to defend the idea that some lies are acceptable, it will be necessary to look at some texts that demonstrate that lying is sometimes compatible with the character of God. The following argument will proceed by examining some key passages that demonstrate this compatibility through God’s actions and commands, and through God’s reactions to lies told by biblical heroes. Thereafter, some brief guidelines will be suggested for times when it is praiseworthy for a Christian to lie.

God’s Actions and Commands

Perhaps the most troublesome texts in this debate are those that indicate that God himself is willing to lie. If God is willing to lie, how can he be trusted? In this regard the words of Nietzsche have new meaning: “I am affected, not because you have deceived me, but because I

^{xxxii} *Contra Mendacium* 24; NPNF, 491-492.

^{xxxiii} “What served Augustine only as an exegetical tool became the basis for a later distinction between lying per se and various techniques for concealing the truth. This concealment played upon ambiguities, either of the words themselves or of the phrase within a given context. The most famous of these techniques was the broad mental reservation, ‘the use of a form of words which express the interior thought and could be known to express it, if the hearer were sensible, prudent, reasonable and knew the circumstances,’” Fleming, 23.

^{xxxiv} I.e. that all forms of deception, misleading and concealment are effective lies.

^{xxxv} E.g. Murray, 125.

can no longer believe in you.”^{xxxvi} If the Christian does not believe in God, the Christian is not saved,^{xxxvii} and has no hope in the world.

Complicating matters is the fact that the Bible declares God’s inability to lie. Murray takes this to mean that “all untruth or falsehood ... is a contradiction of that which God is.”^{xxxviii} However, the few instances in which the Bible states God’s inability to lie place that inability in the context of an oath. That is, they state that when God swears an oath, his word cannot fail because it is contrary to God’s character to violate his oath.^{xxxix} These instances use such constructions as: “in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago”,^{xl} and

“God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.”^{xli}

Other texts that state God’s inability to lie, however, mention no explicit promise, such as: “God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent”,^{xlii} and “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind.”^{xliii} Nevertheless, these too refer to God’s oaths and/or statements of certainty as those things of which God will not repent and about which he will not change his mind.^{xliv} Moreover, these verses place God’s repentance or change of mind on the level with his lying, so that his ability to change his mind is as limited as his ability to lie — but Scripture clearly indicates many times when God repents and changes his mind,^{xlv} implying that there may also be instances in which God lies. Thus, these verses demonstrate only that God cannot or will not lie when he has given his word, not that he cannot or will not do so under any circumstance. In short, there is no scriptural impediment to the possibility that God may lie.

More importantly, Scripture contains examples of times when God has lied or dealt deceptively. Two examples should suffice. First, 1 Kings 22:19-23^{xlvi} presents the following account of God’s complicity with deception and false prophecy:

^{xxxvi}Nietzsche, 92.

^{xxxvii}Cf. Heb. 11:6.

^{xxxviii}Murray, 125.

^{xxxix}This is the very thing affirmed in the doctrine of God’s immutability.

^{xl}Tit. 1:2.

^{xli}Heb. 6:17-18.

^{xlii}Num. 23:19.

^{xliii}1 Sam. 15:29.

^{xliv}Num. 23:19 refers to God’s covenant oaths with Israel; 1 Sam. 15:29 follows God’s sign of the tearing of Samuel’s robe.

^{xlv}*nchm* is the Hebrew verb in question here. Although its semantic range includes meanings such as “comfort,” “have compassion” and “sorrow,” God is the subject of this verb in many instances where it clearly refers to “change of mind” or “regret,” e.g. Gen. 6:6,7; Exod. 32:14; 1 Sam. 15:11.

^{xlvi}Paralleled in 2 Chr. 18:18-22.

“Micaiah said, ‘Therefore, hear the word of the LORD. I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right and on His left. ‘The Lord said, “Who will entice Ahab to go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?” And one said this while another said that. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord and said, “I will entice him.” The Lord said to him, “How?” And he said, “I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.” Then He said, “You are to entice him and also prevail. Go and do so.” Now therefore, behold, the Lord has put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; and the Lord has proclaimed disaster against you.’”^{xlvii}

Many explanations of this passage have been offered that remove from it any idea that God commanded the spirit to deceive the people, despite the fact that this is the plain reading of the text. A sampling follows:

“It is true that ... God seems to do more than simply permit the deception... What else, however, does this mean than that, as God’s eternal plan contemplates both the existence and the development of evil, so it provides for its accomplishment by the foreordained permission of evil on the occasions when and in the ways in which evil can by its own working serve the divine purpose? ... He takes evil *already* there, evil actually in manifestation ... and then so overrules the tendency of this evil that of itself, though contrary to its own intention, it advances truth.”^{xlviii}

“‘Go and do it’ (i.e. deceive Ahab’s false prophets) signifies only permission, not a command or sponsorship.”^{xlix}

“The prophets were self-deceived, but this would be expressed by saying that Jehovah deceived them.”¹

“It must not be understood as declaring what really took place in heaven, but as a vision ... as in a parable.”^{li}

The first of these explanations is far from adequate. In the first place, it locates God’s foreordination of the means of evil rightly in his eternal counsel, but then suggests that such eternal counsel “takes evil that is already there.” This is a theological impossibility. Before God has ordained the evil, the evil is not “already there.” God’s eternal counsel is not reactive to foreseen history.^{lii} In the second place, foreordination occurs prior to creation, so that God’s heavenly court could not yet have been in session reacting to human events, and Micaiah could

^{xlvii}Both Murray and Augustin are curiously silent with regard to this text.

^{xlviii}Greene, *Classical Evangelical Essays*, 210-211; quoted in Kaiser, 257; Kaiser concurs.

^{xlix}Kaiser, 256.

¹Farrar, F.W., *The First Book of Kings*, New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1903, 492-493; quoted in Mayhue, 141.

^{li}Edersheim, Alfred, *The History of Israel and Judah*, 69; quoted in Mayhue, 144.

^{lii}Cf. WSC 7; WLC 12; WCF 3.1.

not have been present to witness it.^{liii} The account can only describe God's acts of providence, not his eternal decree. In the third place, it is God's idea, not the spirit's, to "entice" or "deceive"^{liv} Ahab. God does not merely use a lie that has arisen by a secondary cause or independent free moral agent; he commissions the lie.

The second explanation, that God's gives only his permission, denies that God commissions the lie. Really, it is rather amazing to construe this account in such a way that God does not "sponsor" the lie. The actual picture here is that God himself appeals to his military counsel for ways in which Ahab might be deceived into taking the field; God surveys the suggested options; God chooses the option he finds most appropriate; and God commissions his heavenly officer to carry out the mission.^{lv} Given the heavenly court setting of this prophecy, God's permission is equivalent to his sponsorship. Indeed, it is equivalent to his command.

The third explanation is also lacking. At worst, it does not correspond to any other prophetic vision, nor does it appropriately recognize God's sovereignty: it effectively denies that Micaiah was present in the heavenly court and that God had anything to do with the false prophecy of the false prophets. At best, it may suggest the means the spirit used to cause the prophets to prophesy falsely: the spirit may have caused the prophets to deceive themselves. Even if this were true, however, it would not disprove that God's actions caused this self-deception, or that God sanctioned the utterance of the false prophecies.

The fourth explanation, that Micaiah relates a parable and not a factual vision, is a literary possibility if only the vision itself is considered. However, even as a literary possibility it stands against the weight of all other such visions of prophets entering the heavenly court which were not parabolic. In any event, this explanation makes no sense in light of the immediately preceding context:

"Micaiah said, 'As the Lord lives, what the Lord says to me, that I shall speak.'
When he came to the king, the king said to him, 'Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we refrain?' And he answered him, 'Go up and succeed, and the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.'"^{lvi}

Regardless of what happened in the heavenly court, Micaiah swore "as the Lord lives" that he would speak what the Lord told him to speak. When Micaiah spoke, he lied. So then, the Lord commissioned not only the lies of the false prophets, but Micaiah's lie as well. Micaiah's lie cannot be explained by any of the other suggested options. It makes sense only if it draws its cue from God's instructions in the heavenly court.

The reasonable conclusion to draw from this text is that God himself commissioned both Micaiah and the spirit to engage in lying and deceptive practices in order to accomplish his will

^{liii}Cf. Pratt, 326: "Prophets viewed and participated in the activities of the court of God. They later reported the deliberations of the divine assembly to people on earth."

^{liv}*pth* is part of the Old Testament's vocabulary of lying; Bovati, 304.

^{lv}Cf. Pratt, 326. Many dispute that God's heavenly officer is the spirit in question (Cf. Mayhue, 148), but the identity of the spirit is not material to this argument.

^{lvi}1 Kings 22:14-15.

regarding Ahab. God's providential prerogatives include initiating and commanding statements that the Bible classifies as lies.

As a second example, consider that Jesus also engaged in deceptive language when he spoke in parables for the express purpose of withholding a saving knowledge of the gospel from those to whom understanding had not been granted.^{lvii} Granted, Jesus said that the reason they did not understand was that their hearts were "calloused," and on this basis it has sometimes been argued that they rejected his message not because it was unclear but because it was offensive. That Jesus' parables made these hardened individuals culpable for having heard the gospel message and rejected it implies at least some clarity to his words. Still, even Jesus own disciples appear not to have understood the Parable of the Sower, which gave rise to the question as to why Jesus spoke in parables, so that Jesus then explained it to them in different language than he had used with his calloused audience.^{lviii} Furthermore, in Jesus' own explanation of the parable, he spoke of those who did not receive his message as those who did not "understand"^{lix} it.

It is also difficult to get around Jesus' assertion that these hardened people were essentially blind and deaf. The implication seems to be that even though the parable could otherwise have been understandable, their hardness of heart had rendered them incapable of comprehension. Jesus could have spoken in such a way as to reveal the mysteries of heaven to these individuals, but he chose not to do so. He knew the words that would soften their hearts and pierce the veil they had placed over their minds, but he chose instead to speak to them in ways he knew they would not understand. To the disciples, he spoke differently.^{lx} As Carson puts it, "Jesus' answer cannot legitimately be softened: at least one of the functions of parables is to conceal the truth, *or at least to present it in a veiled way.*"^{lxi} This is not a charge against metaphors or other accepted literary forms that employ language that does not directly correspond to reality. It is merely pointing out that the reason Jesus used these metaphors was to prevent sufficiently accurate communication from taking place.

As in 1 Kings 22, God orchestrated Jesus' veiled speech. But unlike in 1 Kings 22 where others executed the lie, here God's perfect and holy Son Jesus was the active agent — no passing the blame to a "spirit" or "false prophets." Other examples of this principle can be found in such texts as 1 Samuel 16 (mentioned above) and 2 Thessalonians 2:11, and perhaps John 7:8-10.^{lxii}

In summary of this point, the fact that God himself engages in and sanctions lies and deception indicates that not all falsehood is contrary to God's character. If not all lies and falsehood are contrary to God's character, and the Law is the expression of God's character, then not all lies and falsehood are prohibited by scriptural command. To demonstrate this principle in further action, some few mentions of God's reactions to lies told by biblical characters are in order.

^{lvii} Matt. 13:11-15.

^{lviii} Matt. 13:18ff.

^{lix} Matt. 13:19.

^{lx} Matt. 13:19.

^{lxi} Carson, 307. Cf. Calvin, *Harmony...*, 102-103.

^{lxii} This is to say nothing of the many military deceptions commissioned by God, which are material to the case of establishing the acceptability of some lies.

God's Reactions to Lies Told by Biblical Heroes and Heroines

Another way to perceive God's attitude toward lying is to survey his reactions to those people who lie. It needs be said at the outset of this investigation that all biblical Characters save the members of the godhead are flawed, and are to be expected to sin. It is also admitted that God often blesses his people despite their sin. Nevertheless, it is literarily apparent that in some instances God approves of lies and deceptions carried out by his people. One of the most infamous instances of a liar blessed by God is Rahab, who was blessed and praised for her protection of Joshua's spies.^{lxiii}

The story of Rahab and the spies is well known: Joshua sent spies into the Promised Land, and especially Jericho. When their presence was discovered, the spies sought refuge with Rahab. In exchange for the safety of herself and her family, Rahab hid the spies and sent those hunting them on a false path, allowing the spies to escape. Leaving aside the fact that spying is itself an act of deception, the verses in contention are those in which Rahab misled the king's men:

“The king of Jericho sent word to Rahab, saying, ‘Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land.’ But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, ‘Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. It came about when it was time to shut the gate at dark, that the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them.’”^{lxiv}

All agree that Rahab lied and that the Lord subsequently blessed her; the issue is the precise correlation between her lie on the one hand, and her blessing and praise on the other hand. Rahab herself was saved from destruction, along with her family, and allowed to become part of the nation of Israel^{lxv} — a great blessing indeed. In fact, the Bible explicitly praises Rahab's behavior on several occasions.^{lxvi} However, it never specifically mentions her lie in such praise. Instead, it speaks of her hiding the spies,^{lxvii} receiving the spies with peace,^{lxviii} and sending the spies out another way.^{lxix} Murray makes much of this:

“It should not go unnoticed that the New Testament Scriptures which commend Rahab for her faith and works make allusion solely to the fact that she received the spies and sent them out another way... It is a strange theology that will insist that the approval of her faith and works in receiving the spies and helping them to

^{lxiii}Josh. 2.

^{lxiv}Josh. 2:3-5.

^{lxv}Josh. 6:23-25.

^{lxvi}Josh. 6:17,25; Heb. 11:31; Jam. 2:25.

^{lxvii}Josh. 6:17,25.

^{lxviii}Heb. 11:31; Jam. 2:25.

^{lxix}Jan. 2:25.

escape must embrace the approval of *all* the actions associated with her praiseworthy conduct.”^{lxx}

He offers three refutations for those who argue that Rahab’s lie was integral to the escape of the spies: 1) Rahab’s lie was not indispensable; 2) Rahab’s lie is not justified simply because it worked; and 3) justifying Rahab’s lie would result in justifying Jacob’s deception of Isaac. None of these refutations rules out the possibility that Rahab’s lie was acceptable to God (or that Jacob’s lie^{lxxi} was acceptable, for that matter^{lxxii}).

Appealing to Jacob’s lie begs the question of the acceptability of lying, and is largely irrelevant to the text at hand. On the other hand, it should be admitted that Rahab’s lie was not justified simply because it worked. Nevertheless, it is true that her lie was included in the means by which Rahab saved the spies, and it may well have been indispensable. If, when the king of Jericho demanded that she turn over the spies, Rahab had simply refused to comply, is one to imagine that the king would have allowed her to harbor them? If Rahab had not persuaded the king’s men that the spies were no longer on the premises, it is hard to conceive of any means by which she could have prevented the king’s men from searching her house and discovering the spies. It is reasonable to think that Rahab considered the lie to be indispensable, and not to find fault with her evaluation of the matter.

Further, that Scripture’s references to Rahab’s actions do not mention the lie when praising her is not compelling proof that her lie was not praiseworthy. Is one to assume that Joshua 6:17 and 6:25 do not praise Rahab for receiving the spies or for sending them out another way simply because these verses do not mention these acts? Does Hebrews 11:31 permit the condemnation of Rahab for sending the spies out another way because it does not praise this act? Of course not. An act is not condemned simply because it is not explicitly praised. The fact that none of the biblical passages praising Rahab’s actions lists all the things for which the Bible praises her indicates that there is an important literary dynamic at work that Murray fails to recognize: each passage employs a form of synecdoche. The authors of Joshua, Hebrews and James all respected and praised Rahab for receiving the spies, hiding them, and sending them out another way, but each one did so by mentioning only part of Rahab’s actions. The part stood for the whole; the item(s) mentioned represented the whole collage of actions and speech that were instrumental in Rahab’s protection of the spies, and Rahab’s lie was a tile in this collage.

^{lxx}Murray, 138. Cf. Calvin, *Joshua*, 47. Contrast Douma, 327: “To us it seems impossible to claim (as many have claimed) that the midwives and Rahab were praised for their faith, but not for their lies. For their faith was expressed precisely in their works. It is an abstraction to disconnect the *effect* of their acts from the *path* they took to achieve that effect.”

^{lxxi}Gen. 27.

^{lxxii}Jordan argues well that Jacob’s lie was acceptable as an act of *lex talionis*; Jordan, *Primeval...*, 55-60. Other arguments might be advanced to defend Jacob, as well, not the least of which is the literary perspective that Jacob was the hero and patriarch of the nation to whom Genesis was written — his actions secured for Israel the very Promised Land they were leaving Egypt to possess, and likely would have been heralded as a praiseworthy victory. This is quite similar to the way Americans’ laud the actions of such men as George Washington, who was no doubt thought quite a sinful rebel by the English at the time of the American Revolution.

Now, it is true that God's ability to bring good from evil^{lxxiii} does not justify the evil that he uses for good. One must agree with Murray that it is not appropriate to condone all of Rahab's actions simply because some of her actions were good. Still, the Bible does not distinguish between good and bad elements of Rahab's actions. Rather, it constantly speaks of Rahab in a positive light, and it praises her actions as a whole. Nowhere does Scripture make any negative comments about Rahab's actions in this situation.

Moreover, Rahab was explicitly praised for hiding the spies,^{lxxiv} which was itself an act of deception of the sort condemned by the ninth commandment. Is a witness culpable if he speaks no lie but hides crucial evidence that could vindicate the accused? Yes. Such an action miscarries justice. By application to life in general, other actions that deceive and conceal significant information also violate the commandment; they are non-verbal lies.^{lxxv} Yet, Scripture praises Rahab for hiding the spies. In so doing, it establishes the fact that one may sometimes "violate" the ninth commandment; there are situations in which falsehood and lies do not violate the general prohibition against lying. By praising Rahab's concealment of the spies, Scripture allows that Rahab may be praised for lying to ensure that they remained concealed, as well as it implicitly praises her for the same.

Examples of such biblical praise and blessing on people in reward for things they accomplish through lies and deceit are quite numerous. For example, Jael received praise for deceiving and killing Sisera,^{lxxvi} Jacob was blessed for usurping Esau^{lxxvii} and deceiving Isaac,^{lxxviii} the Hebrew midwives received blessings and honor for deceitfully protecting the male Hebrew children.^{lxxix} Time and space would fail if a list were here compiled of all the military deceptions, political deceptions, hidden meanings, parables, and other praiseworthy yet dissembling uses of language in Scripture. The point of all this is simply that Scripture does not condemn every lie, and that it praises some. How then is one to know which lies are acceptable and which are not?

Guidelines for Praiseworthy Christian Lies

The satirical title of this paper is a quote from Adlai E. Stevenson,^{lxxx} ironic to be sure, but serving to point out the fact that a lie sometimes greatly helps the situation. A lie is usually an abomination unto the Lord,^{lxxxi} but as the foregoing arguments have shown, sometimes it is

^{lxxiii} E.g., Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28.

^{lxxiv} Josh. 6:17.

^{lxxv} "Whether the misleading occurs through words, deeds, or gestures makes no difference in principle," Douma, 328.

^{lxxvi} Judg. 4:17ff.; 5:24ff. Note that the sixth commandment has exceptions too, indicating that statements in absolute form are not necessarily absolute in meaning, even in the Ten Commandments.

^{lxxvii} Gen. 25:31ff.

^{lxxviii} Gen. 27.

^{lxxix} Exod. 1:15-21.

^{lxxx} *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary of Quotations*. Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1992, 225.

^{lxxxi} Prov. 12:22.

also the means God gives for help in times of crisis.^{lxxxii} The latter is the “lie of necessity.” What times of crisis, however, justify this form of lying?

For Douma, “A lie of necessity may be used only in *dire circumstances*, that is to say, only in situations where a life is at stake, either our neighbor’s or ours.”^{lxxxiii} This is certainly a rather limited view of when a lie of necessity may be employed. Bonhoeffer suggests a far looser standard: “‘Telling the truth’ means saying how something is in reality, i.e. respect for secrecy, confidence and concealment.”^{lxxxiv} By this, Bonhoeffer means that the truth is that which shows the proper respect and deference for the structures and institutions in life. The higher the obligation owed to an institution, person, etc., the higher the obligation to protect it/him/her even with a lie. His famous “schoolboy” example^{lxxxv} demonstrates this in practice: a child has a greater obligation to lie to protect his family secret than he does to reveal that secret to his teacher. For Douma, a lie is only appropriate in a justifiable instance and when a life is in jeopardy; for Bonhoeffer, any occasion in which the proper loyalties and structures are challenged may justify a lie. Probably, the biblical picture is closer to Bonhoeffer’s conclusion than to Douma’s.

It seems only appropriate that since this investigation of the obligation to tell the truth began with the ninth commandment, it return there for guidance on when to lie. The principle effected by that statute is that in a court of law a witness must say and do what is necessary to secure justice for his neighbor. That application may legitimately be extended to require all men to pursue justice for each other, and to speak truth with one another, always with the goal of pursuing justice. As Douma himself admits, a “lie of necessity” involves:

“lying for my neighbor’s *benefit*. This kind of lying intends no harm against my neighbor ... but the opposite — to help him. This is not a lie *against* my neighbor, but for his *benefit*. How could this possibly violate the ninth commandment?”^{lxxxvi}

The ninth commandment, however, does not only have authority in capital cases; it has authority in all cases. Conversely, it would seem that a lie which serves justice better than the truth serves justice ought to be acceptable in all cases. It is not altogether clear why a “dire circumstance” would be necessary in order to make justice more important than factual testimony.

Of course, there are huge caveats that must be issued after making such a bold statement in favor of lying in all types of cases. First, it is often not up to the individual to determine what justice is. For example, in many cases the authority to interpret the law belongs to the state, not to the individual. This implies that when the authority for determining the issue resides with the state, individuals are not free to determine when they may and may not lie. Many individuals feel that justice will not be served if they tell the truth, and this may in fact be the case from God’s perspective. Nevertheless, when God has delegated authority to the state to make such determinations, it is the Christian’s responsibility to submit to the state.^{lxxxvii} God will hold the

^{lxxxii}Ps. 46:1, loosely applied.

^{lxxxiii}Douma, 330.

^{lxxxiv}Bonhoeffer, 372.

^{lxxxv}Bonhoeffer, 367-368.

^{lxxxvi}Douma, 325-326.

^{lxxxvii}Rom. 13:1ff.; 1 Pet. 2:18ff.

state accountable for abusing its authority and mistreating his people, but this does not free his people to spurn the state's authority simply because they disagree with its interpretation of justice. When the state attempts to pervert justice where Scripture has clearly spoken, however, or where Scripture has not delegated authority to the state, it would seem reasonable for the Christian to lie in order to pursue the justice revealed in Scripture.

In some matters in which God has not delegated authority to the state, he has delegated it to another body or figure. For example, God gives parents authority over their children in "all things,"^{lxxxviii} he gives the church certain authority over its members,^{lxxxix} and he gives husbands and wives certain authority over one another.^{xc} In these cases, the Christian would seem to be obligated to submit to these authorities as a general rule, and to allow the authority figures or structures which God has ordained to determine what is just in the sphere over which they have been given influence. Nevertheless, just as with the state, when these authorities overstep their bounds, it may be necessary for a Christian to lie to pursue justice. In those areas of life where God has not delegated authority to a hierarchy over the Christian, the Christian must determine for himself what course of action, truth or lie, will best serve the cause of justice. Rahab's lie was excusable by this standard insofar as it was designed to protect the lives of the innocent and righteous against those who would wrongly murder them.

Second, a Christian's motive in lying is terribly important. The Bible regularly condemns lying on the basis that it flows from malice, evil and hypocrisy.^{xc1} A "lie of necessity" ought not to flow from such evil motives, even if it really will serve justice. In the examples provided in this paper, it should be evident that God's motives, Jesus' motives, and Rahab's motives were all free from such evil and malice, being inspired by faith in God.^{xcii} When Jesus spoke in parables, he did so in keeping with the Father's will,^{xciii} and the Father's will in turn reflected not malice but judgment,^{xciv} just as it did in the Micaiah episode.^{xcv}

Third, a Christian ought not to violate his conscience. If a Christian believes that lying would be wrong in a particular instance, he is not to lie in that instance. It may be that the lie itself would have been appropriate apart from the Christian's conscience, but his decision to lie against his conscience is an act of rebellion against God. Otherwise, the lie cannot be praiseworthy, for all acts pleasing to God must be done in faithfulness to him.^{xcvi} Clearly the Father and Jesus acted with clear consciences, and Scripture gives no hint that Rahab's conscience disagreed with her lie.

Fourth, it takes great wisdom to know when a lie actually will serve justice better than the truth will. Such wisdom can and ought to be gained by diligent study of Scripture,^{xcvii} as well as

^{lxxxviii}Col. 3:20.

^{lxxxix}1 Cor. 5:4-5; Eph. 5:20; 1 Tim. 5:17.

^{xc}1 Cor. 7:4.

^{xc1}Ps. 78:36-37; Prov. 6:16-19; 10:18; 12:22; 17:4; 26:28; 1 Tim. 4:2.

^{xcii}Heb. 11:31.

^{xciii}Matt. 13:11-12.

^{xciv}Matt. 13:14-15.

^{xcv}1 Kings 21:19; 22:38.

^{xcvi}Rom. 14:23; Heb. 11:6.

^{xcvii}2 Tim. 2:15; 3:16-17.

by prayer.^{xcviii} Wisdom also receives counsel from others.^{xcix} Interestingly, even God himself received counsel when determining to send the lying spirit into the mouths of Ahab's false prophets.^c Jesus himself obeyed the counsel of God in using parables,^{ci} and it may well be presumed that Rahab took counsel from the spies in hiding them and perhaps in lying to preserve their concealment. When possible, wise counsel should corroborate a decision to lie.

Fifth, there may be times when justice is not the highest good. For example, the death of Christ was not just, but it was the highest good. Christ set his face toward Jerusalem^{cii} to endure an unjust death at the hands of wicked men.^{ciii} For the sake of the gospel or some other higher good than justice,^{civ} it may be necessary to abandon an otherwise praiseworthy lie.

These guidelines are all quite general — there may be circumstances that require Christians to act in ways that these guidelines might not predict. Hopefully, they are biblical, submissive to Scripture, designed to further justice and to honor God. Whatever standards and guidelines one adopts, it should be clear that Scripture allows Christians to lie in certain circumstances, and even, dare it be said, requires the occasional lie.

^{xcviii}Jam. 1:5.

^{xcix}Prov. 1:5; 12:15; 19:20.

^c1 Kings 22:20.

^{ci}Matt. 13:11.

^{cii}Luke 9:51.

^{ciii}Acts 2:23.

^{civ}E.g. mercy, Jam. 2:13, though again it is often not within the Christian's authority to determine when mercy ought to be preferred over justice.

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