

Truthful Lies: The Ethics of Lying in the Old Testament

Jonathan Y. Rowe

This article explores the Old Testament's attitudes to lies, noting both its simplicity and relational complexity and highlighting some implications for the ethics of lying and truthfulness.

In a classic essay on lying published at the beginning of the twentieth century, Georg Simmel claimed that the important point about a lie is not that the other possesses false information – that is merely error – but that ‘the person deceived is held in misconception about the true intention of the person who tells the lie. Veracity and mendacity are thus of the most far-reaching significance for the relations of persons with each other’.¹ This article explores how Simmel’s observation chimes with the Old Testament’s view of lies and, in this light, critiques some popular understandings of the ethics of lying and truthfulness.

Lying Forbidden

‘You shall not bear false witness’ (Exod. 20:16; Deut. 5:20) prohibits false charges against a neighbour in a judicial setting. Although this instruction, like other texts that reflect a concern for truthful testimony (e.g. Num. 35:30; Deut. 19:15; 1 Kgs. 21:10; Ps. 27:12), does not amount to a general prohibition upon lying, verses such as Lev. 19:11, ‘you shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another’, can rightly be interpreted as referring to deception in general. Indeed, falsehood is contrasted with upright behaviour throughout the Old Testament. Thus righteous Job protests that he has not practised deceit (Job. 31:5), and in Proverbs truthful lips that endure forever are contrasted with the transience of a lying tongue (Prov. 12:19). This, naturally, is consonant with a contrast between truth and lies (Ps. 52:1–7; Is. 59:12–15; Jer. 7:9; Hos. 7:3) and God’s law and lies (Pss. 119:29, 64, 104, 128, 163; Prov. 30:8; Is. 59:12–15; Hos. 4:2; 10:12–13; Mic. 6:12; Amos 2:4). Moreover, since YHWH is a God of truth (Ps. 31:6), it is to be expected that he does not lie (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29). Idols, on the other hand, are identified with falsehood (Is. 44:20; Jer. 13:25; 16:19; 51:17; Hab. 2:18), and lying is the practice of evil people (Pss. 5:9; 58:3; 109:2; 144:8, 11; cf. Is. 32:7). Such evidence leads one commentator to conclude:

Since truth ultimately was grounded in no one less than the God who was truth, all interpretations that would raise caveats and equivocations of one sort or another, outside a proper definition for truth or lying, must come to terms not with a system of God, but with a personal accounting to the true and living Lord.²

Lying, on this understanding, leads to *personal* accountability, a face-to-face reckoning in which liars are not simply thought to have infringed an impersonal rule but to have affronted the divine being. It also has implications for relationships between people, including liar, dupe and third parties. This is why the Old Testament’s attitude to lying cannot be encapsulated only in the texts cited above but must also account for richly textured stories of lying and deception, for example, Abraham’s trickery (Gen. 12, 20, 26), the Hebrew midwives’ ruse (Exod. 1), Rahab’s deception (Josh. 2) and Michal’s lie (1 Sam. 19). Strikingly, for many readers, these texts do not seem to condemn lying as a deviant practice. Indeed, YHWH is occasionally implicated in deception, either personally or by approving of those who engage in the practice (Exod. 3:18–20; 1 Sam. 16:1–5; 1 Kgs. 22:2–23; Jer. 4:10; Ezek. 14:9).

Regardless of the view one takes of each case, it is clear that these narratives present lying in the context of multiple relations and in situations in which the liar has to choose whether to be truthful, or not, in the midst of several

obligations. In the vocabulary of ethics, there are multiple moral goods, that is, things which one *ought* to pursue or protect. The moral goods evident in the account of Rahab's deception in Joshua 2, for example, include truth, preservation of life, kinship loyalty and faith in God.

These rounded, even positive, portrayals of lying in particular narrative situations stand alongside aphorisms and laws prohibiting lying. Might the conundrum presented to readers be resolved by attending to 'a proper definition for truth or lying'? It is necessary to examine the nature of lies.

What is a Lie?

It is customary to distinguish between deception and the narrower practice of lying. The latter has been defined as 'an intentionally deceptive message in the form of a statement'.³ According to this definition there are two important components to a lie: the *intention* to deceive and the *statement*. Regarding the first element there is little debate, although it is important to highlight that the veracity of the statement is not an issue. That is, it is possible to lie yet state a fact, or not lie yet communicate a falsehood: the matter concerns *intention*. About the necessity of 'stating' the lie, however, there is considerable discussion. While some aver that the statement must be verbal, it is better to allow that a statement could also include a nod or other conventional sign, since the latter are simply alternative means of liars *asserting* something in order to dupe their victims.⁴

On this understanding of lying, the issue becomes one of whether a people do, or do not, *assert* the truth of what they communicate. Thomas Carson notes that the need to assert 'makes sense of the common view that lying involves a breach of trust. To lie ... is to invite others to trust and rely on what one says by warranting its truth, but, at the same time, to betray that trust by making false statements that one does not believe'.⁵ It is an observation that takes us back to Simmel's contention that lying and truthfulness are significant for people's relations.

Understanding Lying

Defining lies as the intention to assert a deceptive message does not, though, resolve the difficulties with the narrative examples cited above, since it is one thing to identify cases of lying but another to suppose that the Old Testament presents them as normative. Those who maintain that accounts of lying in the Bible are not intended to present standards for behaviour but evince a falling away from acceptable morality stand in a line that goes back at least as far as Augustine.⁶ At the other end of the spectrum are a number of recent commentators who posit absolutely no theological difficulty with deceptive practices and who argue that biblical authors do not attempt to sanitize characters' actions.⁷ Both of these approaches, however, are relatively infrequent in contemporary scholarship and a majority of commentators seek *reasons* for lying and deception in the Bible.

Some feminist scholars, for example, suggest that the accounts of *women's* deception are intended to smear their reputations and so diminish the credibility of their perspectives.⁸ Yet deception does not seem to be employed by women because they are inherently more duplicitous but because they are disadvantaged people.⁹ In fact, detailed study of the texts demonstrates that women's lies are endorsed because they are on the side of God and his people.¹⁰ This, though, begs the question of who constitutes this people, that is, of who is an 'insider' and who an 'outsider'. These sorts of issues take us once again to the importance of relations between individuals, matters that have received special attention in the academic discipline of anthropology.

Anthropology has been particularly attentive to the contexts for social interaction, including those practices, like lying, that often offend moral sensibilities. A prominent anthropologist observes that such phenomena can 'reflect moral valuations in which we may find explanations for what strike us, but do not strike our informants, as irrational practices'.¹¹ Among the insights from the anthropology of lying, three are pertinent to this discussion. First, the prevalence of lying does not indicate that truth is unimportant. Quite the contrary, it can show the value of true knowledge, and hence the importance of being able to distinguish between those to whom one owes that knowledge and others to whom it ought to be denied.¹² Second, lies can be a means of creating privacy in societies where people live so closely together that there are few real secrets. Because deception creates ambiguity and thus social distance, Michael Gilsenan insists that in rural Lebanon, lying 'is vital to the life of this society – indeed, lying *makes it possible*'.¹³ Importantly, in such societies lying *reveals* who is considered to be family or nation and therefore 'in on the secret', and who is regarded as being on the outside. A third observation is that the relationship between truth-telling and deception by autonomous individuals can be complex. On the one hand, truth can be more prejudicial than lies because complete truthfulness causes disharmony. On the other hand, when people live in

close proximity lying often only has the effect of *delaying* eventual understanding. Thus the deceiver's hope is that by the time the lie is uncovered it will be overshadowed by individuals' entanglement in other, more immediate considerations.

These anthropological observations reiterate the points made earlier, namely, that truthfulness is usually only one of several obligations facing individuals at any particular moment, and that lying or truth-telling takes place in the context of people's relations and at the same time affects those relations.

Truthful Lies

Understanding lies in this way sheds interesting light upon the instances of lying in Old Testament narratives, especially since it is not always obvious to modern Western interpreters that characters' moral choices are sometimes culturally unexpected. To take the case of Michal as she lies to her father, King Saul, in order to save David, most commentators are scandalized by her lie; they excuse it as necessary to save her husband. Yet ancient family arrangements would have meant that Michal would naturally have acted to disown David in favour of Saul. Since her lie is unexpected, it reimagines her social context and envisages new priorities. This is radical, hinting at God's action; indeed, Michal's might be described as a 'truthful lie', revealing how 'the pillars of the earth are the LORD's' (1 Sam. 2:8).¹⁴

At this point it is probably necessary to state quite clearly that stories like those of Rahab and Michal do not negate the Old Testament's favourable view of veracity, nor suppose a rootless 'situation ethic' in which any selection of moral goods is acceptable. On the contrary, narratives are useful for ethical reflection partly because they help readers appreciate how to act when faced by conflicting moral obligations. Nevertheless, the Old Testament presents a complex picture of truth and deception that resists ready reduction to bold aphorism or a single principle. Instead it often juxtaposes moral goods, so inviting reflection upon which goods should be sought, and highlights the importance of relationships between people as the context for an individual's choices.

This comprehension of Old Testament views of lying might inform an evaluation of traditional Christian attitudes to mendacity. Augustine, for example, held that because the soul is worth more than the body lying was always impermissible even to save a life.¹⁵ A rigorist rejection of lying was maintained by Immanuel Kant, who asserted that truthfulness 'is the formal duty of an individual to everyone, however great may be the disadvantage accruing to himself or to another'.¹⁶ Kant's duty, though, is an unconditional one to humanity, not towards the individual with whom one is relating. And although he calls truth-telling 'sacred', his view of the deity is not that of the Old Testament. It is unsurprising that the rigorist position has been challenged, for it fails to recognize that the moral good of life and the relationships that this then bestows are the essential context for truth. In the words of Duns Scotus, it is 'less bad to take away true opinion from one's neighbor, or to be the occasion of generating false opinion in him, than to take away his bodily life. Indeed, there is scarcely a comparison'.¹⁷

Yet the problem remains: what should one do when one recognizes the moral imperative to tell the truth at the same time as observing that this may bring about or be evil, because one must forego another moral good like life? An approach commended by some is the 'mental reservation' in which deception is effected by omitting some of the truth. Another, which does not cause the same disquiet about the ethics of manipulating the message, is to assert that a lie is only such if the recipient has the right to the truth. This approach has the advantage of acknowledging the importance of people's relationships. The major twentieth-century exponent of this position was Paul Ramsey, who argued that while rules prohibiting lying are always to be obeyed, they should be defined as withholding truth from someone to whom it is due.¹⁸ At this point, the reflections of Dietrich Bonhoeffer are illuminating. He distinguishes between God's truth, grounded in love, and Satan's truth, which hates creation.

It is only the cynic who claims 'to speak the truth' at all times and in all places to all men in the same way, but who, in fact, displays nothing but a lifeless image of the truth He wounds shame, desecrates mystery, breaks confidence, betrays [the] community in which he lives.¹⁹

Interestingly, Bonhoeffer considered that when things that belong to one sphere of life are used in another – he provides the example of a child being asked about private family matters in a public classroom – then lying is inevitable. Thus truth-telling, according to Bonhoeffer, must account for a person's relationships in order to identify the one to whom one is obliged to reveal truth.

Bonhoeffer's observations lead us straight back to the Old Testament and the centrality of relationships when considering truth-telling as one of multiple moral goods. For even if a rule relating to specific people is to be followed (e.g. 'do not lie to your family'), particular relationships must be seen in the right light.

Simmel observed that lying and truthfulness are important for people's relations. We have seen that this is so in both the Old Testament and life today, which is why we are invited to consider both the simplicity *and* complexity of a life informed by the Scriptures in our own moral choices.

Dr Jonathan Rowe received his Ph.D from the University of St Andrews and is Director of Ministry Development in the Diocese of Truro. A former KLICE award-holder, his publications include *Michal's Moral Dilemma: A Literary, Anthropological and Ethical Interpretation* (LHBOTS 533; T&T Clark, 2011); *Sons or Lovers: An Interpretation of David and Jonathan's Friendship* (LHBOTS 575; Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012) and *Living Witness: Explorations in Missional Ethics* (Apollos, 2012), co-edited with Andy Draycott.

¹ G. Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies', *American Journal of Sociology* 11 (1906), 445 (emphasis added).

² W. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Zondervan, 1983), 228.

³ S. Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* 2nd ed. (Vintage, 1999), 15 (emphasis deleted); cf. Augustine, *Contra mendacium*, 23.

⁴ For discussion, see R. Chisholm and T. Feehan, 'The Intent to Deceive', *The Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1977), 143–59.

⁵ T. Carson, 'The Definition of Lying', *Noûs* 40 (2006), 302.

⁶ Augustine, *Contra mendacium*, 34.

⁷ For example, R. Freund, 'Lying and Deception in the Biblical and Post-Judaic Tradition', *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 5 (1991), 45–61; D. Friedmann, *To Kill and Take Possession: Law, Morality and Society in Biblical Stories* (Hendrickson, 2002).

⁸ E. Fuchs, "'For I Have the Way of Women": Deception, Gender, and Ideology in Biblical Narrative', *Semeia* 42 (1988), 68–83.

⁹ H. Prouser, 'The Truth about Women and Lying', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 61 (1994), 15–28; M. Williams, *Deception in Genesis: an investigation into the morality of a unique Biblical phenomenon* (SBLit 32; Peter Lang, 2001).

¹⁰ T. Craven, 'Women who Lied for the Faith', in *Justice and the Holy*, edited by D. A. Knight and P. J. Paris (Scholars Press, 1989), 35–49.

¹¹ M. Herzfeld, *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society* (Blackwell, 2001), 110.

¹² See J. du Boulay, 'Lies, Mockery and Family Integrity', in *Mediterranean Family Structures*, edited by J. G. Peristiany (CSSA 13; Cambridge University Press, 1976), 389–406.

¹³ M. Gilsenan, 'Lying, Honor, and Contradiction', in *Transaction & Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behaviour*, edited by B. Kapferer (American Anthropological Association, 1976), 211.

¹⁴ See J. Y. Rowe, *Michal's Moral Dilemma: A Literary, Anthropological and Ethical Interpretation* (T&T Clark, 2011).

¹⁵ Augustine, *De mendacio* 8; *Contra mendacium* 23. For an exposition of Augustine and representative later authorities see P. Griffiths, *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Brazos, 2004).

¹⁶ I. Kant, 'On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives', in *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, edited and translated by L. W. Beck (University of Chicago Press, 1949; repr. in Bok, *Lying*), 268.

¹⁷ Quoted in T. Williams, 'Lying, Deception, and the Virtue of Truthfulness: A Reply to Garcia', *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (2000), 245.

¹⁸ P. Ramsey, 'The Case of the Curious Exception', in *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics*, edited by P. Ramsey and G. H. Outka (SCM, 1968), 67–135.

¹⁹ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, edited by E. Bethge; trans. N. H. Smith (MacMillan, 1955), 328.