

Foreword

IN THE LATE 1980s, when I was on the faculty of a small college in Canada, the students put on a children's musical, *Sir Oliver's Song*, an entertaining presentation of the "Ten Commandments" (more appropriately called the Ten Words).¹ I remember the musical well, because I witnessed it being performed every night for two weeks while on tour to churches on the prairies of Canada. The line interpreting the command against bearing false witness is particularly memorable: "God don't dig lyin'" (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20). Cast into colloquial American English, at this stage the performance was quite humorous.

Although this rendering reflects a common interpretation of the command in the Decalogue, over the past forty years of study and teaching, my doubts whether or not the command speaks at all to the issue of lying in everyday speech have increased. On the one hand the vocabulary of the command in both the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions suggests a legal context, like that reflected in Deuteronomy 19:15–21. On the other hand, I have noticed for a long time that the biblical narratives report many instances involving deception, with no hint of punishment or even accusation. On the contrary, in many instances the deceitful speeches or actions actually succeed and the deceivers achieve their goals. How can this be, if "God don't dig lyin'"?

Ethicists have often commented on the midwives' half-truth—grounded in the fear of God—regarding the superior strength of pregnant Hebrew women vis-à-vis their Egyptian counterparts (Exod 1:15–21), or on Rahab's deceitful concealing of the Israelite scouts in Jericho (Josh 2:1–7). These cases contrast starkly with the New Testament case involving Ananias and Sapphira, whose efforts to deceive the apostles were punished with death (Acts 5:1–11). Recent work has also been done on the role of deceit and deceitfulness in the stories of Israel's ancestors in Genesis.

1. For discussion of this issue, see Block, "Reading the Decalogue Right to Left," 21–25.

In this volume Matt Newkirk surveys these and other responses to biblical narratives of deceit, and then sets out to explore the role and consequences of deceit in the books of Samuel, to determine the narrator's disposition toward the issue. After identifying twenty-eight episodes that involve deception, he classifies them on the basis of the narrator's apparent assessment of the deception. He discovered that of the twenty-eight cases, in twelve the deception was evaluated positively, and in fifteen it was assessed negatively. One case is unclear (2 Sam 18:19–30). Although the assessment is rarely declared explicitly, the narrator's disposition—negative or positive—is indicated by subtle features in the text, through descriptions of people's response to the deception, or through events that transpire after the deception.

Having carefully analyzed each of these twenty-eight texts, the author observes that deception was evaluated negatively when the goal of the deceit was to cause unjust harm or death to someone else, or when deceivers were only looking out for their own interests. By contrast, when the intent of the deception was to prevent unjust harm or death, and when the deception was intended to benefit someone else, it was assessed positively.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, the author has examined twenty-eight episodes from the events leading up to the establishment of Israel's monarchy and the early years under Saul and under David. With his particular interest in a specific feature of these narratives he has presented a nuanced interpretation of these texts that scholars writing commentaries on the books of Samuel will need to consider. Second, his work exposes the superficiality of previous evangelical ethicists' treatment of the motif of deception in Scripture. It will not do any more simply to say that persons involved in deceitful events were functioning with a lower ethic, and that God overlooked the evil of deceit itself. Rather, we must always inquire regarding the intent of the deceit. Newkirk is not the first to discover this, but in this study of the books of Samuel he has provided the most thorough study of the issue available. But this is true not only of Samuel, but coheres with the picture painted by the rest of the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments.

As suggested by the title, a biblical ethic demands Christians have room for the category of “just deceivers,” that is deceivers who are just in their deception. If the deception serves unjust ends—either the death or harm of another person or merely the deceiver's self-interest—it is to be condemned. However, a Christian who deceives to secure the well-being of another person or who does so self-sacrificially is to be honored. After reading this volume, we should no longer struggle over the decision of Corrie ten Boom and her family for helping many Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust, often through clever and deceitful means. The Jewish world has rightly recognized her with

the epithet “righteous gentile,” and with a tree planted in her honor on the grounds of the *Yad Vashem* memorial to Holocaust victims.

It has been a delight to work with Matt Newkirk on this project, and it is an honor to commend his work to the world. May the name of the living God be praised as his people take up the mantle of “righteousness, only righteousness” (Deut 16:2).

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