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DOES G-D LIE? UNDERSTANDING DISSEMBLING IN THE BIBLE

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	To engage the reader to think more deeply about lying in the context to a discussion of fake news.
Background	Many have read the scriptures holy to Christians; this discussion leads to questions about why even characters within tell things that are not true.
Findings	The Hebrew and Greek Bibles are filled with instances where the characters, even G-d, appears to have lied, and commentators have drawn wisdom from these.
Recommendations for Researchers	When noting fake news, ask why the news with its falsehoods are presented. That is, determine if the news is an eisegesis or an exegeses.
Keywords	Bible, fake news, lying

INTRODUCTION

Fake news is in the headlines today, particularly as world powers jockey to use deception to advance their own interests. A glimpse at the past shows a long history of societies doing this. But can we find instances of untruthfulness, dishonesty, mendaciousness, deceitfulness, deception, duplicitousness, and double-dealing in books sacred to Christians and Jews? This paper, written by laymen, examine this question. We ask, do the scriptures holy in the Jewish and Christian traditions ever make it seem that G-d lies?

Since these books are revered as sacred by part of humanity, we may ask how readers and commentators have drawn wisdom from instances where the characters seem to have deceitful. Is there a les-

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son therein that can be applied to the larger and more current issue of fake news and the dissemination of disinformation in the media?

The Bible is part guidelines for righteous living and part retelling of tales that challenge us. Part of that challenge is confronting the cases where the characters of the bible tell falsehoods. This paper relates a few, select instances of falsity in the Jewish and Christian traditions, perhaps even committed by G-d, shows us how religious commentators understand these lies, and challenges us to relate these situations to our own lives. The Jewish and Christian traditions both include the Hebrew Bible. The Christian tradition adds the Greek (New) Testament while most Jewish law is expressed in the Talmud and other writings.

LYING IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The first book of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis, opens with two creation stories, the first of which tells us that the heavens and the earth and all within each sphere were created in six days (Gen 1:1-2.2). The second story tells of the creation of the plants, animals, and Adam, whom G-d then places in the garden “to work and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15, NIV). G-d then tells Adam, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die” (Gen. 2:16-17). G-d decides that Adam needs a “suitable helper,” so after Adam meets and names the animals in the garden, G-d puts him to sleep and removes a rib and uses it to form the first woman whom Adam calls woman. We are told that the new couple was naked, but not ashamed of their nakedness (Gen. 2:25).

The happy beginning is shattered in the next verse when the serpent appears and asks the woman (she is not yet named Eve) “Did G-d really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’” to which the woman responds, “‘We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but G-d did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” The serpent replied, “You surely will not die ... For G-d knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like G-d, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:1-4, NIV). Eve plucks the fruit, eats and passes it along to Adam, who also eats, and their eyes are opened, they realize they are naked, so they cover themselves and hide from G-d. G-d finds them, confronts them, pronounces various curses for the serpent, the man and the woman and banishes the first couple from the garden.

It is a sparse narrative, which raises more questions than it answers, but will become the subject of sustained debate and disagreement among Jewish and Christian exegetes and theologians for the next 2500 years. Who or what is this serpent and how did he learn to speak? Why does the serpent approach the woman? Where was Adam? How did the serpent become “craftier” than all the other creatures in the garden? How could the woman be so gullible? Why did Adam so readily accept the forbidden fruit? Why did they not die immediately? These questions are answered in a variety of creative ways over the next 2500 years by Jewish and Christian commentators, but they all pretty much agree on one thing: this is where the first lie is told.

But who told it?

Some would argue that it was the serpent, whose question to Eve might have a lie folded into it. The serpent says, “You surely will not die.” Did the serpent have full knowledge of what G-d told Adam, believed it, and wanted the couple to die and wanted to discover if the woman knows this?

But even before this, the woman knows of the warning. What the woman recounts to the serpent is different from that told to Adam; it now also includes a prohibition from even touching the tree. Did Adam build a “fence around the law,” an expansion on it so that Eve would not even get close to the tree? If so, this brings up an interesting question about whether an expansion on a commandment added to avoid harm constitutes a lie.

Since Adam and Eve don't die and live more than 900 years, did G-d lie to them, perhaps to prevent them, as the serpent recounted, from gaining divine attributes, knowing of good and evil? If so, how can religion condone this lie? Is it like the lie a mother might tell her toddler to keep her from running out into traffic?

Or could it be that G-d decided instead of taking their life, just to strip them of their immortality? Perhaps Adam and Eve would have been immortal had they stayed ignorant in the garden, but banishment from the garden gave them morality at the cost of immortality.

This story of deception is tough because there are no simple answers, only more questions.

Jewish exegetes connect the serpent with Satan, Job's adversary who works on behalf of the G-d to reveal human flaws, while Christian commentators connect the serpent with the Devil, Christ's adversary, closing a big theological loop and creating the possibility for a cosmic drama which, for believers, continues to the present day. So, for Christians lying is not only the first sin, but it sets into motion a narrative about what humans had once been (upright, holy), what they have become (sinful, unholy) and why they are so miserable. And it is the Apostle Paul in his second letter to the church at Corinth who continues to see the relevance of this, this first lie when he writes, "But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (II Cor. 11:3, NIV). Eve is deceived by this first lie of the Devil, according to Paul, but Adam knew better and simply disobeyed, committing the first human sin (Rom. 5:12-19) and creating the need for Christ, the "second Adam," to die and reverse the effects of sin and lying.

But the story leaves us shaken. Who lied, the serpent, Adam, the woman, or G-d. If the divine lied to the first human, what does this mean for us?

The Bible has many more tales of deliberate misrepresentation of the truth. Here is another.

He who laughs. Another example in the Bible where G-d misrepresents the truth relates to communication among G-d, Abraham, and Sarah. When G-d tells Sarah, wife of Abraham, who up to this point has been barren and who is now well past menopause, that she will get pregnant and bear a son, Sarah laughs and makes a quip about Abraham's advanced age. G-d recounts this to Abraham, omitting this reference to Abraham's old age (Gen. 18:10-15). This might be the first recorded "white lie," and it was committed by the Almighty. There is not much question about who lied in the story of Yitzhak's (Isaac's) conception. It is the Divine!

Before we explore how Judaism explains G-d apparent misrepresentation of Sarah's words to Abraham, a word of warning is called for. The explanation is found in the Talmud, a collection of arguments among scholars (a bit like how science is now conducted), not in the Bible. The Talmud is so vast that there is a danger of misrepresenting it when citing one quote or another without context. This leads to a concept that is important to this paper. In contrast to exegeses, the process of drawing an explanation from a text, the term eisegesis refers to starting with a bias, agenda, or presupposition and using a text to support it often by ignoring context and other statements that contradict one's biases. In other words, exegeses refers to honest searching for truth from a text, while eisegesis refers attempting to use a text to support a preconceived notion. Jonathan Neumann (2018) provides concrete examples of this from a Jewish perspective.

Know that the Talmud tells us that a lie that is told to promote peace is not prohibited. And this is how we are told to understand G-d changing Sarah's words when conveying them to Abraham. For example, Rashi (Shlomo Yitzchakim, author of commentaries on the Tanach and Talmud), explains in *On the Talmud, Bava Metz'iah 23b.*, G-d changed Sarah's words so that Abraham would not realize that Sarah had made a denigrating remark about him. Sarah said to herself: "After I have withered will I get smooth skin, and my husband is old." But when G-d repeated her comments to Abraham, G-d said that Sarah had said: "How can I give birth when I am old," omitting reference to Abraham's advanced age. (By the way, they named their child Yitzhak, which means "You will laugh.")

Sarah not only laughed at G-d's pronouncement of her upcoming pregnancy, but later denied it. The Bible tells us that she lied because she was afraid. Is that a legitimate reason for lying?

In one place in the Babylonian Talmud (Sotah 42a), the Talmud says that those who lie to find favor among others do not merit greeting the Divine Presence. We learn from the Talmud that truth-telling is virtuous; it is forbidden to tell a falsehood that would harm another. (Our politicians should take note.)

Elsewhere in the Talmud, a commentator suggests other circumstance where "white lies" are permissible:

1. To practice humility, such as not claiming knowledge when in fact, one is already knowledgeable.
2. To maintain modesty (you don't need to reveal intimate details of one's marital life).
3. To protect another from harm or inconvenience, such as telling a late guest that there is room at the table.
4. To protect another from embarrassment, such as telling a bride she is beautiful. (But another commentator thinks that this comment actually refers to telling a lie about why one is drunk on the holiday of Purim).
5. It is okay to use exaggerated expressions where it is clear that this is a figure of speech, as "You look white as a sheet."
6. The other situation relates to protecting from embarrassment. If someone thinks you acted to honor that person (but you didn't mean to), you need not correct the misconception.

And then there are the clarifications that limit the use of white-lies: If you must lie, tell only a half-truth; but don't make a habit of dissembling. Avoid lying to children. And don't lie about the future; if you say you will do something to make peace, you need to do it.

In the Talmud commentators typically argue and all sides of the disagreement appear in the Talmud. For example, is it ever permitted to lie to reach a just outcome? *Talmud Shevuos 31a* says no, but *Pardeis Yosef Parshat Vayzeitzei no. 66* and in the sources quoted there seem to indicate that there are some situations where lying to reach justice are permitted. In case you missed it, two of Talmud's authors wrote seemingly contradictory statements. Therefore, observant Jews note that it is too easy to take a quote out of context so instead of asking for simple answers, we need to study it.

LYING IN THE GREEK BIBLE

The New Testament seems at first glance to prohibit lying under any circumstances, especially in the gospel of John where Jesus is presented as "the way, the truth (he aletheia) and the life" (John 14:16) and the devil as the "father of lies" (John 10:42-47). This ontological and epistemological binary, at least in John, stands in contrast to the view of the Torah, which clearly allows for dissembling to save one's life, the life of another, or in order to deceive an enemy. The synoptic gospels present Jesus as being tempted three times by the devil, the very embodiment of evil and falsehood, only to resist the offers of power with a final rebuke (Matt. 4: 1-11; Mk. 1: 12-13; Lk. 4:1-13). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells his disciples not to swear oaths at all, but to let their "Yes be Yes" and their "No, No," a clarion call for truth-telling in relationships. And yet when Jesus sends the seventy out to preach the gospel, he warns them to be "wise as serpents (snakes in some translations) and innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16), a possible allusion to the serpent in the garden who spoke with forked tongue and is later identified as the Devil.

Jesus tells his disciples to go up to the Feast of Tabernacles, saying that he is not going himself, then "he went also, not publicly" (John 7: 8-10). In the passion narratives, Jesus is largely silent when he is brought before the Sanhedrin and Pilate. Are these cases of withholding the truth--Jesus not "casting

his pearls before swine” as he instructed his disciples to refrain from doing with unreceptive audiences. That is, is it a lie to not reveal oneself and one’s purpose?

And Paul seems to allow for deception when he claims that he has “become all things to all people” (I Cor 9:19-23) that he might “save some.” Let’s see how later Christian commentators interpret this.

AUGUSTINE AND AQUINAS ON LYING

Not surprisingly, the Christian church fathers, including Augustine, developed a typology of lies, which varied in their sinfulness, depending upon the intention of the liar and the consequences to the deceived. And there is no better place to start than with Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* (1920), Question #110, where he has been treating the matter of vices opposed to virtues and now takes up the matter of lying and whether or not it is always opposed to the virtue of truth. His opening statement, “It seems that lying is not always opposed to truth” (1920, para 1) is the beginning of a four-fold analysis of Augustine’s position, of whom Aquinas later notes, “Whoever thinks that there is any kind of lie that is not a sin deceives himself shamefully, since he deems himself an honest man when he deceives others” (1920, para 28). Aquinas then moves on to types of lying and asks whether the popular, contemporary division of “officious,” “jocose” and “mischievous” lies is accurate and sufficient. He avers that it is not and begins his analysis with Augustine’s eightfold division:

The first is “in religious doctrine”; the second is “a lie that profits no one and injures someone”; the third “profits one party so as to injure another”; the fourth is “told out of mere lust of lying and deceiving”; the fifth is “told out of the desire to please”; the sixth “injures no one, and profits someone in saving his money”; the seventh “injures no one and profits someone in saving him from death”; the eighth “injures no one, and profits someone in saving him from defilement of the body.” (1920, para 14)

Aquinas concludes that the contemporary threefold “division of lies is insufficient” (officious, jocose and mischievous, para 13), and then goes on to analyze Augustine’s eight categories of lies, concluding that the last four kinds of lies “lessen the gravity” of the sin of lying, because “it is evident that the greater the good intended, the more is the sin of lying diminished in gravity” (1920, para 22). Yet all lying, in the end, according to Aquinas, is sinful. In this he agrees with Augustine; however, not all lies are mortal sins. He quotes Augustine again: “‘There are two kinds of lie, that are not grievously sinful yet are not devoid of sin when we lie either in joking or for the sake of our neighbor’s good.’ But every mortal sin is grievous. Therefore, jocose and officious lies are not mortal sins” (1920, para 43). Jocose lies are lies told in obvious jest, and officious lies involve dissembling “for the sake of our neighbor’s good” (1920, para 43).

Aquinas utilizes the “Philosopher’s” (Aristotle’s) categories to update Augustine’s typology of lying while identifying problematic passages in the Bible and addressing each in turn. He opens “Article 3: Whether every lie is a sin?” with the following objections:

Objection 1. It seems that not every lie is a sin. For it is evident that the evangelists did not sin in the writing of the Gospel. Yet they seem to have told something false: since their accounts of the words of Christ and of others often differ from one another: wherefore seemingly one of them must have given an untrue account. Therefore, not every lie is a sin.

Objection 2. Further, no one is rewarded by G-d for sin. But the midwives of Egypt were rewarded by G-d for a lie, for it is stated that “G-d built them houses” (Exodus 1:21). Therefore a lie is not a sin.

Objection 3. Further, the deeds of holy men are related in Sacred Writ that they may be a model of human life. But we read of certain very holy men that they lied. Thus (Genesis 12 and 20) we are told that Abraham said of his wife that she was his sister. Jacob also lied when he said that he was Esau, and yet he received a blessing (Genesis 27:27-29). Again, Ju-

dith is commended (Judith 15:10-11) although she lied to Holofernes. Therefore, not every lie is a sin.

Are these and other stories instances of lies? According to Aquinas, they are not, but it takes some serious Aristotelean casuistry and Augustinian allegorical hermeneutics to make it so. The serious differences in the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus are not lies but must be understood “figuratively” and “prophetically,” not literally (1920, para 33). “The midwives were rewarded not for their lie, but for their fear of G-d, and for their good will, which latter led them to tell a lie” (1920, para 32). And, “Jacob’s assertion that he was Esau, Isaac’s first-born, was spoken in a mystical sense, because, to wit, the latter’s birthright was due to him by right: and he made use of this mode of speech being moved by the spirit of prophecy, in order to signify a mystery, namely, that the younger people, i.e., the Gentiles, should supplant the first-born, i.e., the Jews” (1920, para 33). (From a Jewish perspective, Aquinas’s eisegesis here is the source of replacement theology, supersessionism, by which Christians claim the covenant G-d made with the Jews. Jews do not accept this theological interpretation.)

Aquinas, therefore, views all lying as sinful. The first four types of lies are categorized as mortal sins, while the last four kinds of lies in Augustine’s list are less sinful because they are less egregious and either jocose or officious, but they are still venial sins. An unconfessed mortal sin, by the time of Aquinas, consigns one to hell; whereas an unconfessed venial sin simply adds time for the sinner in Purgatory. Both theologians believed that all humans were tainted with Original Sin and, therefore, by nature sinful. G-d’s grace coupled with the believer’s faith produce the forgiveness of sins, but the sin nature remains until the sinner dies and enters heaven. What matters most in Aquinas’ treatment of lies for the purpose of this paper is that we have a clear typology of lying, which identifies jocose and officious as less serious than other lies. (The Jewish view of humor in the Torah has been explored by Friedman & Friedman [2015].)

In the history of lying in the West, these lies will later be called white lies, lies which are told in jest or for the benefit of another. In addition, Aquinas allows for a little wiggle room when it comes to lying, whereas Augustine condemns all types of lies as mortal sins.

DISCUSSION

This paper discusses just a tiny portion of the numerous instances in which these holy books tell us of its heroes and the founders of our heritage saying things that the text points out were not true. In the millennia since they were written, some great minds have endeavored to find wisdom from these challenging misrepresentations. Let us benefit from this historical, religious and cultural anchor to enlighten our understanding of the whole notion of Fake News.

The Christian theological tradition is clearly split over the question of whether or not G-d ever lies, though there is strong agreement that G-d did and does lie to the Devil. From Gregory of Nyssa through Augustine and including Luther, Christ’s nature and purpose is seen to be hidden from the Devil, a kind of extended “ruse,” which is described as a “baited hook” or, more famously, a “mousetrap” (Denery, 2015, pp. 67 ff.) Christ is the bait on the hook or in the mousetrap and the Devil takes the bait, but is hooked by or trapped and defeated by Christ’s divinity. So, God may appear to be deceptive in this centerpiece of Christian theology, but that does not necessarily give believers permission to deceive as one pleases. Still, the examples of G-d and other “holy” people in the sacred books deceiving, coupled with two millennia of discussion about the phenomenon calls for an ongoing discussion about deception in this era of Fake News.

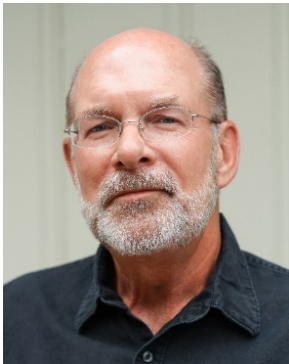
In looking at Fake News, let us learn from this history of exegesis. We too can endeavor to find the truth behind the falsehoods. We can do this by asking important questions, such as who is lying and why they are doing so, is the lie to keep us safe or to keep us from learning. Is the same actor telling lies in a different arena, as did Satan/the Devil? Are the lies just white lies to save face for another, as might be seen in a press secretary stretching the truth, or is the lie nobler, as in the case of governments lying to save lives. That is, let us develop an exegesis for fake news. Perhaps such method-

ology can also look at the culture, psychology, technology, people who are targeted. Too often today, instead of using exegesis, commentators endeavor to use eisegesis to twist slips of the tongue by others to advance their own agenda. We hope we have not done so in this paper.

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BIOGRAPHIES



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