

Lies by Prophets and Other Lies in the Hebrew Bible

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In light of the Bible's complex attitude to falsehood—outright condemnation, on the one hand, versus recognition of its legitimacy and its occasional necessity, on the other—my aim in this article is to examine how the Bible pictures falsehoods uttered by those figures whom one would least expect to lie, namely, the prophets. I will attempt to show that in all instances of prophets telling lies the biblical narrator is at pains to put a better face on the action. Formally speaking, the prophet cannot be accused of lying, although he has consciously and deliberately misled his interlocutor. The technique of deception involves half-truths and concealment of relevant information, or ambiguity. It will also be shown that this technique, though most characteristic of prophets, is also used on occasion by other positive human figures, and even more so by God.

1. *Lies in General*

Lies are common in all areas of life.¹ There is perhaps no one who can boast of never having lied. Nevertheless, one's natural inclination is to oppose falsehood and disapprove of it as a moral offense. Thus, for example, liars are described in Dante's *Inferno* as enduring torture in the Eighth Circle of Hell, the lowest circle except for that reserved for traitors. Liars are socially harmful because they undermine the important basis of trust between people, which is basic for personal relationships and indispensable for the proper functioning of society.

At the same time, it would seem that no one would like to be entirely barred from lying for certain needs, if necessary, according to one's own discretion. This ambivalent attitude to lying has been aptly expressed by Sissela Bok: "While we know the risks of lying, and would prefer a world where others abstained from it, we know also that there are times when it would be helpful, perhaps even necessary, if we ourselves could deceive with impunity."²

Some theologians and philosophers have objected to any kind of lying, under any circumstances whatever. Of the theologians the most prominent is Augustine,³ while

1. See, e.g., C. V. Ford, *Lies! Lies! Lies! The Psychology of Deceit* (Washington, DC, 1996); A. Cohen, *Lies—In Psychology, Politics, Love, Society, Business, Sex, Personal Life, Art, Literature and Science* (Haifa, 1999) [in Hebrew].

2. S. Bok, *Lying—Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York, 1978), 28.

3. On Augustine's position regarding falsehood see at length Bok, *Lying*, 32, 42–44 and the index—in *ibid.*

the main representative of the philosophers who have held this view is Kant, who considers truthfulness a binding principle at all times: "Truthfulness is a duty which must be regarded as the ground of all duties based on contract . . . To be truthful (honest) in all declarations, therefore, is a sacred and absolutely commanding decree of reason, limited by no expediency."⁴ Kant goes so far as to argue that even when telling the truth may cause the death of an innocent person pursued by a would-be murderer, it is forbidden to lie to the pursuer should he ask where the person is hiding and a direct answer cannot be evaded.⁵

This position seems extreme to the point of obsession.⁶ Bok rightly argues that in times of crisis, e.g., during the Holocaust, "those who share Kant's opposition to lying clearly put innocent persons at the mercy of wrongdoers."⁷ Accordingly, an individual adopting a policy of absolute honesty would constitute a danger to society in critical times. Not only is it permissible to lie to protect another person's (or one's own) life from wrongdoers, says Bok; it is one's duty to do so.⁸ This despite the fact that Bok believes in minimizing the use of lies in all areas of life because of the harm they cause society.

Other writers go so far as to maintain that lies are quite frequently worthwhile and useful as a tool for coping with many of life's difficulties.⁹ A good example of such situations may be found in Roberto Benigni's moving film *La vita e bella* (Life is Beautiful), made in 1997. Benigni, who wrote and directed the movie, himself plays the role of an Italian Jew sent to a concentration camp with his little son toward the end of World War II. To protect his son from the terrible truth about the place, he lies to him and pretends that their whole stay in the camp is a game with prizes. He is thus able to keep the boy unaware of the terrors of the time.

Some writers argue, too, that since in any case "Truth" is unknowable, there is no reason to be so strict about telling lies.¹⁰ Following Bok, one might answer this argument by pointing out that a distinction must be made between the wide range of Truth and Falsity in their epistemological sense, which is not the subject of this article, and the narrower meaning of truthfulness and deception—for the latter alone raises ethical questions.¹¹ "Truthfulness" may be defined as a situation in which what a person says accords with what one thinks and, moreover, that person believes that one is conveying correct information (even if the information is actually false). Deception, on the other hand, is the transmission of a message which the speaker believes to be

4. Immanuel Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives," in *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, trans. and ed. L. W. Beck (New York & London, 1976), 346–50, at 348.

5. *Ibid.*, 348–49.

6. G. R. Miller and J. B. Stiff (*Deceptive Communication* [Newbury Park, 1993], 1–2) argue that "only the most stubborn ethical absolutist would undertake to defend that it is never justifiable to communicate deceptively."

7. *Lying*, 41.

8. *Ibid.*, 109–10.

9. This is the basic position of Cohen, *Lies*; see, e.g., 9–10, 38, 47–59. See also Miller and Stiff, *Deceptive Communication*, 1–13, 23, who cite numerous examples from various areas—politics, commerce and interpersonal relations—in which it is justified and even imperative to resort to deceptive communication.

10. For a survey of this view see Bok, *Lying*, 3–13 (esp. 12).

11. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

false (even if it is actually—inadvertently—true), and moreover the speaker's intention is to mislead.¹²

2. *Lies in the Bible*

What does the Bible say about such deliberate lying? Does it adopt a rigid view like that of Augustine and Kant, or is it more flexible? Not surprisingly, biblical law strongly deplores perjury, prescribing a punishment of “measure for measure”: false witnesses must be made to suffer what they have schemed to do by their testimony (Deut. 19:16–21). The gravity of deception within a legal framework is self-evident, as it impairs the judge's ability to deliver a fair judgment and may cause irreparable harm to innocent people. In effect, any legal system must defend itself against lies and impose severe sanctions on false witnesses in order to deter such behavior. One cannot, therefore, draw conclusions from the specific treatment of perjury as to the Bible's attitude toward lying in general.

In a non-legal context, one finds condemnation of falsehood in the Bible, particularly in Psalms¹³ and in the wisdom literature.¹⁴ It is perhaps surprising, however, that nowhere in the legal literature of the Bible is there any general injunction to refrain from telling lies. The commandment “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod. 20:16; parallel in Deut. 5:20) refers solely to the judicial context, as does the injunction “Keep far from a false charge” (Exod. 23:7); while the verse “You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another” (Lev. 19:11) is concerned with business dealings, and the next verse (v. 12), while forbidding one to swear falsely in God's name, does not prohibit lying in itself.

As to lying in biblical narrative, it turns out that each case must be examined separately. Although the biblical narrator almost never takes an explicit stand, we readers nevertheless feel convinced that he shares our condemnation of various falsehoods described in the text. Examples are Jacob's sons' deception of their father with their presentation of Joseph's tunic, previously dipped in blood, to make him think that Joseph has fallen prey to a wild animal, while in fact they themselves had sold him into slavery (Gen. 37:31–32); the complaint of Potiphar's wife that Joseph had tried to rape her (Gen. 39:14–15, 17–18); Gehazi's lying assertion to Naaman that he had been sent by his master Elisha to accept gifts (2 Kgs. 5:22) and his later lie to Elisha about his actions (2 Kgs. 5:25). One might argue that when the lies harm innocent persons or stem from base motives (such as Gehazi's greed, which overrides his obedience to his master the prophet), it seems quite plausible that the biblical narrator's attitude to them is no less negative than our own.

Sometimes, however, it is difficult to discern the biblical narrator's attitude to deceptive conduct, as in the case of Jacob's deception of his father in order to receive his blessing (Genesis 27). On the one hand, Jacob is clearly described as being more

12. The importance of the intent to mislead in any definition of falsehood has been pointed out by many authors; see Bok, *Lying*, 8, 15; Miller and Stiff, *Deceptive Communication*, 16–22; Cohen, *Lies*, 17.

13. For example: Ps. 101:7: “He who speaks untruth shall not stand before my eyes.”

14. See, e.g., Prov. 6:16–17, 19, where lying is included among the things that God hates, and similarly in Prov. 12:22: “Lying speech is an abomination to the Lord.”

worthy of blessing than Esau. On the other, he obtains the blessing by the reprehensible measure of lying. In this specific case, however, one's uncertainty persists only as long as the story is read in isolation. Comparing Genesis 27 with the later chapter 29, one realizes that the narrator undoubtedly disapproves of Jacob's action, as the deceiver himself is deceived by Laban and so is punished, measure for measure, for lying to his father.¹⁵ In addition, classical prophecy takes a critical attitude to Jacob's deception of Isaac, as in Hosea (12:3–4) and perhaps also Jeremiah (9:3–5).

However, besides these lies, one finds biblical narratives in which the narrator's attitude to the falsehood described is undoubtedly favorable. Contrary to Augustine and Kant, the Hebrew Bible recognizes that under certain circumstances lying is unavoidable, particularly when it serves the weak as their only weapon against some force seeking to harm them or other persons.¹⁶ Included in this category are various instances of lies intended to save the liar's life¹⁷ or altruistic lies (mainly on the part of women).¹⁸

Thus, for example, David lies to Ahimelech (1 Sam. 21:3) and misleads King Achish of Gath (1 Sam. 21:14) in order to save his own life. Saul's daughter Michal lies to her father's messengers in order to save her husband David's life (1 Sam. 19:11–16), and then lies to her father in order to escape his rage (1 Sam. 19:17). Jonathan, too, lies to his father to save his friend David's life (1 Sam. 20:28–29), and the woman from Bahurim lies to Absalom's servants to save David's spies Ahimaaz and Jonathan, hidden in the well in her courtyard (2 Sam. 17:18–20). Proof that God may actually approve of such lies may be derived from His rewarding of the midwives in Egypt, who lied to Pharaoh out of compassion for the lives of the male children born to the Hebrew women (Exod. 1:15–21). A further indication to that effect is the narrator's comment concerning Hushai's deception of Absalom by pretending to support him: "The Lord had decreed that Ahithophel's sound advice be nullified, in order that the Lord might bring ruin upon Absalom" (2 Sam. 17:14).

A forgiving view of deception may also be discerned in cases where persons lie to secure what belongs to them by right but has been unjustly withheld. Thus, the initiative taken by Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar, who disguises herself as a prostitute in order to become pregnant by him after his failure to marry her to his son Shelah, is described in a favorable light, and indeed justified by Judah himself in the narrative (Gen. 38:26). Tamar is rewarded for her subterfuge by the birth of the twins Perez and Zerah, through whom the tribe of Judah is established (Gen. 38:27–30).

15. See, e.g., R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), 3–11; E. Friedman, "Who Breaks the Cycle? Deception for Deception," *Bible Review* 2/1 (1986), 22–31, 68, at 24–26.

16. See D. Marcus, "David the Deceiver and David the Dupe," *Prooftexts* 6 (1986), 163–83, at 163; S. Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters—A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco, 1987); O. H. Prouser, "The Phenomenology of the Lie in Biblical Narrative" (Ph.D. diss., Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, 1991; available from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, MI).

17. The text of the Torah, "You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the Lord" (Lev. 18:5; cf. Ezek. 20:11, 13, 21), inspired the following comment by the Sages of the Talmud: "by . . . which man shall live—and not die," on which they based the principle that danger to life overrides almost all the religious precepts (BT Yoma 85b).

18. See T. Craven, "Women who Lied for the Faith," in D. A. Knight and P. A. Paris, eds., *Justice and the Holy—Essays in Honor of Walter Harrelson* (Atlanta, 1989), 35–49.

The biblical narrator also takes a favorable view of fraud when the object is some religious goal in keeping with the general outlook of the Bible. An example is Jehu's lying to the worshippers of Baal, which is aimed at killing all the prophets of Baal and eradicating his worship from the country (2 Kgs. 10:18–28).

In one case we even find God twisting the truth in order to preserve amicable relations between Abraham and Sarah and to prevent Abraham's feelings from being hurt. Upon overhearing the prediction that she was about to become pregnant, Sarah laughs, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?" (Gen. 18:12); God, however, quotes her in Abraham's hearing as having said, "Shall I in truth bear a child, *old as I am?*" (Gen. 18:13), making no reference to Abraham's inadequacy. This episode was used by the Sages of the Talmud as a proof-text showing that it is permitted to deviate from the strict line of truth in order to establish peace (BT Yeb. 65b; BT B.M. 87a).

3. *Divine Untruths*

Our last instance of a "positive lie" raises a theological problem, bringing us to the main topic of this article (as the prophet is God's emissary): Is it possible that God should lie, and, if so, how should one relate to the fact? As Roberts has shown in an instructive article, God may at times lie to people, sometimes in order to test them (Deut. 13:2–4),¹⁹ but mainly in order to punish them.²⁰

Following Roberts, Prouser cites further instances of divine falsehood in biblical narrative, reaching the same conclusion: contrary to what one might think, God sometimes adopts deceptive measures (Gen. 2:17; 18:13; Exod. 3:22; 1 Kgs. 22:19–23), and also instructs a genuine prophet to lie (Exod. 3:18; 1 Sam. 16:2).²¹

Both Prouser and Roberts point out that ancient Near Eastern literature has no scruples about describing the gods as lying to one another or to human beings, citing interesting proofs of this observation.²² This is no surprise, since the gods are described in anthropomorphic terms: they engage in wholly human activities and possess all possible human weaknesses, such as lust, greed, jealousy, treachery, the urge to control others, and so on. Their power struggles and conflicts of interest sometimes oblige them to adopt fraudulent tactics, both in their contacts with one another and in their dealings with human beings.

However, one hesitates to compare the biblical God, who is described as the sovereign of the world, with the gods of the ancient Near East. God has no need of power struggles to impose the divine will and achieve the divine goals. In addition, God is characterized as "holy," self-referentially (Lev. 20:26; 21:8; etc.), by the angels (Isa. 6:3), and by humans (1 Sam. 2:2; 6:20; etc.). Hence the Bible would hardly describe the deity's deceptive actions as freely as other ancient Near Eastern literature.

19. For another example of falsehood used to impose a test (not cited by Roberts), see Gen. 22:1–2.

20. J. J. M. Roberts, "Does God Lie? Divine Deceit as a Theological Problem in Israelite Prophetic Literature," in *Congress Volume, VTS 40*, ed. J. A. Emerton (Leiden, 1988), 211–20. Among the examples he cites are 1 Kgs. 22:19–23; Jer. 4:10; Ezek. 14:1–11.

21. Prouser, "The Phenomenology of the Lie," 152–72 (esp. 153–54).

22. Roberts, "Does God Lie?" 211–15; Prouser, "The Phenomenology of the Lie," 174–81.

In general, God is portrayed in the Bible as a “God of truth” (Ps. 31:6), Whose word is “right” (ישר) and Whose “every deed is faithful” (Ps. 33:4). God places the following self-description in the mouth of Balaam: “God is not man to be capricious, or mortal to change His mind” (Num. 23:19). A similar affirmation is heard from the prophet Samuel: “The Glory of Israel does not deceive or change His mind” (1 Sam. 15:29).

Yairah Amit has discussed the theological problem involved in the assumption that God may lie. As she points out, God, like the biblical narrator, “must be reliable, otherwise how would the unsophisticated reader know when to believe and accept His demands and judgments?”²³ She does not, however, try to reconcile the many passages cited by Roberts and Prouser in which God seems to be shown as lying.

Perhaps a partial solution to the problem would be the following observation: if God gave advance warning that, under certain circumstances, God would mislead humanity, God’s falsehood would raise fewer difficulties. One might add that divine deception, by analogy with human deception, is justified by the theological maxim, “With the pure You act in purity, and with the perverse You are wily” (2 Sam. 22:27; Ps. 18:27). That is to say, God treats human beings in accord with their own actions.²⁴

Both Roberts and Prouser discuss the episode of 1 Kings 22, in which God deliberately misleads Ahab’s prophets.²⁵ It should be noted, however, that God does not hide the truth from Ahab: the monarch has been told the truth by the prophet Micaiah son of Imlah. It is up to him whether to believe Micaiah or his own prophets. The reader already knows that Ahab is opposed to the true prophets, for in the past he has referred to Elijah as a “troubler of Israel” (1 Kgs. 18:17) and as his personal enemy (1 Kgs. 21:20). Now, too, he treats Micaiah as a personal foe, complaining that “he never prophesies anything good for me, but only misfortune” (1 Kgs. 22:8, 18). It is much more convenient to believe the 400 prophets, who unanimously tell him, “March upon Ramoth-gilead and triumph! The Lord will deliver into Your Majesty’s hands” (v. 12; and cf. v. 6). Moreover, the Bible does not describe the 400 prophets in a favorable light: their representative, Zedekiah son of Chenaanah, strikes Micaiah (v. 24). Their large number is in itself suspicious and is probably intended to arouse associations with the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah mentioned in 1 Kgs. 18:19. It is no accident that Jehoshaphat, a king extolled by the Deuteronomistic historian for doing “what was pleasing to the Lord” (1 Kgs. 22:43), is not happy with their prophecy and asks to hear another prophet (as it were, a “second opinion”). There is no doubt, to my mind, that when Micaiah suddenly adds his voice to the prophetic chorus and, in their very words, also predicts victory for the king (v. 15), seemingly contrary to his earlier statement that he would speak only what the Lord tells him (v. 14), he is not acting out of fear of Ahab’s presence, or, alter-

23. Y. Amit, “‘The Glory of Israel Does Not Deceive or Change His Mind’: On the Reliability of Narrator and Speakers in Biblical Narrative,” *Prooftexts* 12 (1992), 201–12, at 204.

24. Thus also Roberts, “Does God Lie?” 219.

25. Roberts, “Does God Lie?” 216–17; Prouser, “The Phenomenology of the Lie,” 157–61. Whether we understand Micaiah’s account of the “spirit” sent by the Lord to be “a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets” (vv. 21–23) literally, or as a metaphor, it is quite evident that the prophets’ false prediction is inspired by God.

natively, with intent to deceive the king. Rather, he is expressing ridicule for the collective prophecy and for anyone willing to accept such a prophecy as the truth; the sarcastic tone in which his “prediction” is uttered should surely reveal his real intention to Ahab. Micaiah’s prediction of Israel’s defeat and Ahab’s death in battle (v. 17) does not basically change Ahab’s decision to go to war; it only impels him to take precautionary measures by disguising himself, hiding his real identity, as if that might confuse God. The conclusion, therefore, is that God misleads those who allow themselves to be misled.²⁶

However, concerning the other three lies cited by Prouser—Gen. 2:17; 18:13; and Exod. 3:22—is there any attempt by the biblical narrator to mitigate these falsehoods? For the moment, we will reserve judgment, returning to the question later, after presenting my thesis concerning prophets’ lies.

4. *Lies of Prophets*

Since prophets are God’s emissaries, one might expect them to exhibit the highest level of reliability and truthfulness. Given the natural aversion to falsehood—as we have seen—combined with its condemnation in various biblical passages, on the one hand, and the recognition expressed in the Bible itself that some situations may legitimately demand lying, on the other, it is interesting to see how the Bible depicts lies uttered by those persons who might be expected to adhere to truthfulness more than anyone else, namely, the prophets. Does the Bible have no hesitation about describing prophets’ lies, and can one indeed find true prophets uttering glaring untruths?

We will endeavor to show that prophets’ lies in the Bible are not considered, formally speaking, as outright lies, because the prophet did not actually say something untrue.²⁷ In essence, however, it is quite clear that the prophet intended to mislead his interlocutor, and in that sense he was undoubtedly speaking deceptively.²⁸

26. Cf. Roberts, “Does God Lie?” 219–20, for a discussion of Isa. 30:10.

27. After I had finished writing this article, Prof. Hannah Kasher informed me that a similar idea was expressed by the medieval (14th century) Jewish commentator and philosopher Joseph ibn Kaspi in a philosophical-theological work, published for the first time by herself: Joseph ibn Kaspi, *Shulḥan Kesef*, ed. H. Kasher (Jerusalem, 1996), secs. 79–99 (pp. 145–63) [in Hebrew]. Ibn Kaspi cites various biblical passages implying that a true prophet lied, arguing that careful subjection of these statements to logical criteria will prove that the prophets did not actually lie. Ibn Kaspi’s definition of the term “prophet” is quite broad, including such figures as Isaac, Jacob, and David. His use of logic is at times forced, but in some instances I was surprised to find that my ideas had approached his quite closely. Ibn Kaspi’s motive was theological-apologetic, so that he argued that a true prophet could not possibly lie, whereas I consider the techniques of deceit illustrated below as a subtle form of lying. It appears that many people who try to obey an ethical code, out of a natural reluctance to lie, prefer to deceive others in this way. See P. Ekman, *Telling Lies—Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage* (New York, 1985), 28–39. Ekman lists various techniques that help to mislead without uttering a single falsehood. Bok (*Lying*, 14), refers to the stratagem adopted by what she calls “casuist thinkers,” who evolved the idea of “mental reservation which, in some extreme formulations, can allow you to make a completely misleading statement, so long as you add something in your own mind to make it true.”

28. As already mentioned, I accept the argument that an act may be defined as falsehood only when performed with intent to mislead. For that reason, I have not dealt with such false prophecies as Jer. 28:1–11, where there is no intent to lie. Neither have I included “lies” that may be included in the literary genre

A. "She is my sister" (Gen. 20:2)

The first case of what might be defined as a prophet's lie is the episode in Genesis 20 which contains the first occurrence in the Bible of the Hebrew word נָבִיא, prophet. Abraham arrives at Gerar and, fearing for his life (cf. Gen. 12:11–13), introduces his wife Sarah as his sister. This is one of three narratives belonging to the wife-sister type-scene.²⁹ The other two revolve around Abram and Sarai in Egypt (Gen. 12:10–20) and around Isaac and Rebekah in Gerar (Gen. 26:6–11). Common to all these narratives are the following elements: The patriarch and his wife come to foreign soil; fearing for his life, the patriarch presents his wife as his sister; the sister is taken to the king's house (Genesis 12, 20) or placed in some other, similar danger (Genesis 26); the king rebukes the patriarch for having lied to him.

The accepted scholarly view assigns Genesis 20 to the E source and the other two narratives to J³⁰; it is also agreed that Genesis 20 represents a more highly developed ethical-theological position than Genesis 12,³¹ which is believed to be the oldest of the three. Our story is the only one of the three—and the only episode in all the Abraham narratives—in which Abraham is called a "prophet"; in fact, God uses the term when revealing God's self to Abimelech in a dream (v. 7). The word נָבִיא is not used here in the sense of a person who predicts the future in God's name, but in the sense of a "man of God," an attribute represented first and foremost, as many scholars have noted, by his ability to pray and thus to serve as an intermediary between God and Abimelech.³² Significantly, only in our narrative, where Abraham is defined as a prophet, does the patriarch try to justify his introduction of his wife as his sister making the point: "And besides, she is in truth my sister, my father's daughter though not my mother's; and she became my wife" (v. 12). Abraham is implying that he did not lie to Abimelech but only concealed vital information from him. Some commentators have suggested that Abraham is lying here once again,³³ but

of a juridical parable (the prophet Nathan misleading King David through his parable of the poor man's lamb in 2 Sam. 12:1–14; or the anonymous prophet misleading Ahab through the parable of the escaped captive in 1 Kgs. 20:35–43), as they constitute a separate literary genre (also including the parable of the wise woman of Tekoa in 2 Sam. 14:1–24), which differs as to means and aims from ordinary lies. On this literary genre, see U. Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, trans. L. Schramm (Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1997), 112–23.

29. For a more thorough discussion, see R. Polzin, "The Ancestress of Israel in Danger" in *Danger*, *Semeia* 3 (1975), 81–97; R. C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (Philadelphia, 1976), 33–41; R. Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York, 1992), 145–48; F. Polak, *Biblical Narrative: Aspects of Art and Design* (Jerusalem, 1994), 121–23 [in Hebrew].

30. J. Van Seters (*Abraham in History and Tradition* [New Haven & London, 1975], 173), on the other hand, claims that Genesis 20 is not an independent version of the previous account in Genesis 12, but rather "another version of the same theme, which has the older account very much in mind and which seeks to answer certain important theological and moral issues that the narrator felt were inadequately treated in the earlier account."

31. See, e.g., J. Skinner, *Genesis, ICC* (Edinburgh, 1912), 315. For a different opinion see Polzin, "The Ancestress of Israel," esp. 84.

32. See, e.g., R. P. Carroll, "The Elijah-Elisha Sages: Some Remarks on Prophetic Succession in Ancient Israel," *VT* 19 (1969), 400–15, at 402; C. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36—A Commentary*, trans. J. J. Scullion, *Continental Commentaries* 1/2 (London, 1985), 324.

33. For example: Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch*, trans. and annotated H. N. Strickman and A. M. Silver (New York, 1988), 1.212: "I believe that Abraham put Abimelech off with a timely excuse."

such a view is implausible. One would hardly expect the narrator to have Abraham, who has just been accused of lying, utter another falsehood, and one which is moreover unnecessary. Abimelech does indeed express his ethical disapproval, but presents no threat to Abraham; on the contrary, he needs him to pray for him. Most probably, then, the narrative presents Abraham as speaking the truth, and Sarah, according to the tradition alluded to here, is indeed Abraham's half-sister, whether a "sister" proper³⁴ or "sister" in the broad sense of a relative on his father's side.³⁵ Hence, Abraham's words are misleading but not an overt lie.

In this story, the misleader himself explains that he has not spoken a falsehood, while in the other narratives to be discussed below it is the details of the plot that absolve him of the guilt of directly lying.

B. "Let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness" (Exod. 3:18)

A second instance of a prophet deliberately misleading his interlocutor, this time upon God's instructions, is Moses, who was sent to say to Pharaoh: "The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, manifested Himself to us. Now therefore, let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God" (Exod. 3:18). This request gives the impression that the sole purpose of the excursion is cultic, and that the Israelites will return to Egypt upon completing the sacrifice. It should be noted, however, that nowhere in God's instruction to Moses, telling him what to say to Pharaoh, or in Moses' execution of that instruction (Exod. 5:1, 3; 8:23), is there any hint that the Israelites will return to Egypt. Pharaoh is repeatedly requested to release the people to worship God in the desert.³⁶ In addition, it is clear from the context, both immediate and more remote, that the Israelites did indeed worship God in

34. This is the view of Joseph ibn Kaspi (*Mishneh Kesef*, ed. Isaac Halevi Last [Pressburg, 1905], 96 [in Hebrew]); Skinner (*Genesis*, 318) and many others. As they point out, conjugal relations with a sister on the father's side were prohibited only later (Lev. 18:9; 20:17; Deut. 27:22).

35. This is the view of many of the medieval commentators: R. Solomon Yizhaki (Rashi), R. Samuel b. Meir, R. Joseph Bekhor Shor and R. David Kimhi. For examples of the word "brother" used in the sense of a kinsman see Gen. 13:8; 14:14, 16; 29:12, 15. For a similar solution see N. Wander, "Structure, Contradiction, and 'Resolution' in Mythology: Father's Brother's Daughter Marriage and the Treatment of Women in Genesis 11–50," *JANES* 13 (1981), 75–99, at 84. E. A. Speiser ("The Wife-Sister Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives," in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altmann [Cambridge MA, 1963], 15–28) suggests a legal interpretation of Abraham's words, "she is my sister." He associates the assertion with Nuzi texts according to which it was customary in the upper classes of Hurrian society to adopt one's wife as a sister in order to enhance her status. However, various scholars have criticized Speiser's approach to the analysis of the Nuzi finds and have questioned the very possibility that the Nuzi documents might help to explain the patriarchal narratives. See, e.g., B. Eichler, "'Say that you are my Sister': Nuzi and Biblical Studies," *Shnaton (An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies)* 3 (1978–79), 108–15 [in Hebrew].

36. Compare the commentaries of Ibn Ezra, Hizzekuni, and in particular, the comment of R. Jacob Zevi Meklenburg (*Ha-Ketav veka-Kabbalah—Be'ur al Hamishah Humshei Torah* [Frankfurt a.M., 1880], 1.4 [in Hebrew]): "Moses did not say in so many words that they would actually return after the three days expired and was therefore not guilty of uttering an actual falsehood." Nehama Leibowitz (*Studies in Shemot [The Book of Exodus]* [Jerusalem, 1976], 1.94 citing Meklenburg, rejects his view as purely formal, adding: "Surely the crux of the matter was not the actual words he said or left unsaid but how Pharaoh was supposed to understand them." Nevertheless, the formal excuse should not be discounted, as it will also follow from the other prophetic lies considered in this article.

the wilderness by offering sacrifices (Exod. 3:12; 24:5). Pharaoh, on the other hand, lies again and again in his negotiations with Moses and the people, as he breaks his own promises and undertakings to release the people (8:4 as against 8:11; 8:24 as against 8:28; 9:27–28 as against 9:34–35; 10:16–17 as against 10:20).

C. *“I have come to sacrifice to the Lord” (1 Sam. 16:2)*

A similar case is the lie told by the prophet Samuel, again on God’s orders. When God sends Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint one of Jesse’s sons instead of Saul, who has failed, and Samuel voices the fear that Saul might slay him, God tells the prophet to adopt a stratagem: “Take a heifer with you, and say: ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord’” (1 Sam. 16:2). As in the previous case, the real purpose of the act is concealed, but there is no direct, explicit lie, for a sacrifice will indeed be offered, as the biblical text takes the trouble to inform us (16:3, 5).

D. *“This is not the road” (2 Kgs. 6:19)*

The next two cases of prophetic lies are associated with the prophet Elisha. The first occurs in the episode of the siege of Dothan (2 Kgs. 6:8–23). Elisha tells the Aramean army detachment dispatched to capture him, which has been temporarily blinded: “This is not the road, and this is not the town; follow me, and I will lead you to the man you want” (v. 19). He then leads the soldiers to the king of Israel in Samaria. This seems quite clearly to be an outright deception; nevertheless, here, too, one can show that, formally speaking, the prophet has not lied, that is, has not uttered untrue words; he has, rather, misled the Arameans through ambiguity. This argument depends on one’s interpretation of the text at the beginning of the episode, concerning the purpose of the ambushes set up by the Arameans in Israel’s territory. Most scholars believe that the intention was to attack Israelite military units that might go by at random. More plausibly, to my mind, the target was the king of Israel himself, should he come to patrol the boundary.³⁷ This interpretation is preferable for several reasons:

(1) Elisha addresses the king of Israel in second person singular: *“Take care (השמר) not to pass through . . .”* (v. 9), giving the clear impression of a personal warning to the king.

(2) The Arameans’ capture of the king would have been a tremendous military and political achievement, establishing their rule over Israel.³⁸ Similarly, in another war between Aram and Israel, the Aramean king commands his chariot officers: “Don’t attack anyone, small or great, except the king of Israel” (1 Kgs. 22:31). The Ara-

37. This is also the view of R. Kittel, *Die Bücher der Könige, HKAT 1/5* (Göttingen, 1900), 210; K. Gall- ing, “Der Ehrenname Elisass und die Entrückung Elias,” *ZTK* 53 (1956), 129–48, at 136; however, neither Kittel nor Gall- ing explain their interpretation. Josephus (*Antiquities* 9.4.3 § 51) adds that the Arameans wanted to slay the king, but he, too, offers no proof to that effect.

38. In the ancient world it was particularly important to injure or kill high-ranking persons, and attempts were often made to reach the king himself; see S. Avivi, “Principles of War in the Biblical Countries Dur- ing the Period of Settlement and the Monarchy” (M.A. thesis, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, 1996), 94 [in Hebrew].

mean king could rely on spies and informers to trace the Israelite king's movements, as he indeed did later on in the story, by sending to inquire as to the prophet's whereabouts (v. 13).

(3) On a literary level, this interpretation enhances the structure of the narrative: If the Arameans were indeed out to capture the Israelite king, the whole story acquires an impressive inclusio structure, for it ends with the Arameans themselves falling into the Israelite king's hands (vv. 20–21). Moreover, there is a clear parallel to the Arameans' attempt to lay their hands on Elisha (vv. 13–14), which ends in his capture of the Arameans (v. 19).

(4) Added to all these considerations is the theological point: On such grounds, Elisha's instructions to the Arameans—"follow me, and I will lead you to the man you want" (v. 19)—are seen to be a sophisticated ruse, not an outright lie. The Arameans understand that he intends to lead them to the man of God in Dothan, whom they were sent to capture; while he intends to lead them to the man whom their master, the king of Aram, meant to capture in the first place—the king of Israel. Such a misleading trick is in good agreement with our findings about prophetic lies in general, and also with Elisha's own methods, as will also follow from a further such case in 2 Kgs. 8:7–15.

E. "Go and say to him, 'You will recover'" (2 Kgs. 8:10)

When Hazael is sent to Elisha to inquire, in the name of Ben-Hadad, king of Aram, whether the king will recover from his illness, Elisha tells him to mislead his master, telling him,³⁹ "You will recover." To Hazael himself, however, he reveals the whole truth, meant solely for his ears: "However, the Lord has revealed to me that he will die" (2 Kgs. 8:10). Once again, it appears that Elisha is not telling an outright lie but only a half-truth, which is equivalent to a lie. The king had asked, "Will I recover from this illness?" (v. 8);⁴⁰ while Elisha, aware that the king's illness is not incurable, answers this specific question: "You will recover." However, he reveals to Hazael that, although the king's illness is not so severe, he will die from another cause.⁴¹ By urging Hazael to mislead his king, Elisha probably intends, as suggested by Ehrlich, "to reassure Ben-Hadad, so that he would not be on guard against Hazael when the latter came to slay him."⁴² My understanding of the story is that Elisha wishes to inspire Hazael to murder his king, Ben-Hadad, as part of the divine plan to appoint Hazael

39. We are following the reading of the *qere*, *לך אמר לו חיה תחיה*, in accordance with all the Targums. The reading of the Ketiv, *לך אמר לא חיה תחיה* (which must necessarily be translated: "Go and say, 'You will surely not recover,'" is a scribal emendation aiming to protect Elisha from the accusation that he induced Hazael to lie. See M. A. Klopfenstein, *Die Lüge nach dem Alten Testament—Ihr Begriff, ihre Bedeutung und ihre Beurteilung* (Zürich, 1964), 346; M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings, AB 11* (New York, 1988), 90.

40. One of the meanings of the root *חי* is indeed to recover from an illness, as in Josh. 5:8; Judg. 15:19; 2 Kgs. 20:7; and elsewhere.

41. See Ibn Ezra to Gen. 27:19, s.v. *אנכי*; D. N. Wood, *Elisha, the Neglected Prophet* (Stevenage, 1986), 98.

42. A. B. Ehrlich, *Miqrâ ki-Pheschutô* (Berlin, 1900), 2.351 [in Hebrew].

as one of the three avengers (one of them being Elisha himself) to strike Israel, as God commanded Elijah at Mount Horeb (1 Kgs. 19:15–18).⁴³ Elisha indeed succeeds in motivating Hazael to slay his master, both because he predicts that Hazael will succeed Ben-Hadad, and because he informs him that Ben-Hadad will not vacate his throne by dying a natural death, of his sickness.

F. “*I was presenting my petition to the king*” (Jer. 38:26)

The protagonist of my last example is Jeremiah—a representative of classical prophecy. Unlike Abraham and Elisha, who resort to misleading at their own initiative, and unlike Moses and Samuel, who mislead a king (Pharaoh, Saul) upon God’s instructions, Jeremiah is forced to deceive the officials on orders from King Zedekiah. After Jeremiah’s secret encounter with Zedekiah, on which occasion he tells the king in God’s name of the calamity that will befall him and Judah in general if he does not surrender to the Babylonians, Zedekiah advises the prophet that, for both their sakes,⁴⁴ should he be interrogated by the officials about the content of their conversation, he should tell them, “I was presenting my petition to the king not to send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there” (Jer. 38:24–26). And Jeremiah does indeed do “just as the king had instructed him” (v. 27). Eva Osswald, in her study of false prophets, cites this episode to support her thesis that the distinction between true and false prophets cannot be based on an ethical criterion. Even the canonical prophets, she writes, resorted at times to unethical deeds, such as Hosea’s marriage to a whore (Hos. 1:2–3) and Jeremiah’s lie to the officials.⁴⁵ Other scholars have defended Jeremiah, justifying the deceit in one way or another.⁴⁶ On the other hand, in the view of scholars who believe Jer. 38:14–28 to be a parallel tradition to the text of Jer. 37:17–21,⁴⁷ Jeremiah was telling the truth, for he did indeed entreat the king not to send him back to the house of the scribe Jonathan (37:20). As Jones writes, Jeremiah’s response to the officials “has the advantage of being both convincing and true.”⁴⁸ As to those scholars who suggest some kind of textual error and believe 38:14b–27 to be the immediate chronological sequel to 37:17–20, continuing the king’s conversation with the prophet, Jeremiah did not tell a lie, only concealing the

43. Cf. E. Ruprecht, “Entstehung und Zeitgeschichtlicher Bezug der Erzählung von der Designation Hazaels durch Elisa,” *VT* 28 (1978), 73–82, at 76; G. H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, NCB 9 (Grand Rapids, 1984), 2.445.

44. To my mind, Zedekiah, in his last words to Jeremiah, “that you may not die,” is not threatening to put the prophet to death if he disobeys, but warning him that if the officials discover the real content of the conversation they will kill him.

45. E. Osswald, *Falsche Prophetie im Alten Testament* (Tübingen, 1962), 15–16; her view is accepted by T. W. Overholt, *The Threat Falsehood—A Study in the Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (London, 1970), 40, n. 29; J. L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict* (Berlin, 1971), 56–59. Crenshaw (p. 59) adds that there are also instances of deception in earlier prophecy, citing Elisha’s lie to Ben-Hadad (2 Kgs. 8:10), discussed above.

46. For a survey of these attempts, see W. McKane, *Jeremiah*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1986), 2.967.

47. See, e.g., J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, AB 21 (New York, 1965), 233–34; D. R. Jones, *Jeremiah*, NCB 11 (London, 1992), 461.

48. Jones, *Jeremiah*, 462.

political portion of the encounter.⁴⁹ However, even if we accept the biblical text as it is, considering ch. 38 to be the chronological sequel to ch. 37, recounting an event other than (and later than) that described in ch. 37,⁵⁰ Jeremiah is not, formally speaking, telling an outright lie: he is simply telling the officials what he said to the king—albeit at a previous meeting.

Common to all these cases is that the prophet has not uttered an outright lie, but employed a technique of telling a half-truth (Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Jeremiah) or using ambiguity (Elisha). Formally speaking, therefore, one might say that he has not told a lie, although his intention was undoubtedly to mislead another person.

6. *Do only Prophets Employ this Technique of Lying?*

It is noteworthy that this technique of sophisticated deception, without explicitly lying, is not exclusive to prophets, although it is certainly characteristic of them. There are several examples in the Bible of other figures, not prophets, who employ the same technique when obliged to lie. Thus, we read of Abraham, in the episode of the binding of Isaac (in which Abraham is not referred to as a prophet), using such ambiguity when responding to Isaac's query, "but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" (Gen. 22:7) with the evasive answer: "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son" (v. 8). Ehud son of Gera employs ambiguity when he says to King Eglon of Moab, "I have a secret message for you" (Judg. 3:19)—the word here translated as "message" is *דבר*, which also has the meaning of "thing," referring to the dagger hidden under Ehud's cloak.⁵¹ While Nehemiah, realizing that Sanballat and Geshem the Arab are scheming against him, avoids meeting them four times, on the pretext that "I am engaged in a great work and cannot come down, for the work will stop if I leave it in order to come down to you" (Neh. 6:3). This is indeed an excuse, but one reflecting reality: Nehemiah is indeed up to his ears in work (Neh. 4:9–17).

Let us now return briefly to the question left open previously—whether one can find any way of mitigating the severity of God's distortions of the truth as described in Gen. 2:17; 18:13; and Exod. 3:22.

Before actually examining these cases, we can certainly answer on an intuitive level: it is only logical that, if the Bible avoids reporting outright lying on the part of prophets and sometimes other persons who, though not prophets, are considered exemplary and worthy of emulation, this should be true a fortiori with regard to the deity. Moreover, as we have already seen, it was by divine command that Moses and Samuel resorted to sophisticated falsifying which is not, formally speaking, lying (Exod. 3:18; 1 Sam. 16:2).

49. Thus, e.g., E. Auerbach, *Wüste und Gelobtes Land* (Berlin, 1936), 2.197, n. 2. Auerbach holds that 37:21 (Jeremiah released from the house of the scribe Jonathan and placed in the court of the guard) should properly follow 38:27. As vv. 1–13 of ch. 38 have been wrongly inserted into the conversation, it was necessary to add a new introduction in v. 14a, creating the impression of a second conversation.

50. M. Avioz, "Problems of Structure and Redaction in the Stories of the Siege of Jerusalem in the Book of Jeremiah and Their Theological and Historical Meaning" (M.A. thesis, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, 1996), 58–60 [in Hebrew].

51. See E. M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1965), 33–34.

It indeed seems clear that the same technique characteristic of prophetic lies is employed by God in the passages enumerated. In Gen. 2:17 God warns Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge, saying: “as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.” However, the text goes on to describe how Adam and Eve both eat from the tree and survive. Did God lie to Adam? One possible answer is that it was not a lie, but God is treating the offenders leniently, perhaps because of the special circumstances—the serpent’s deception.⁵² However, we may have here a case of a subtle lie, appealing to ambiguity: Adam believes, presumably, that death is to occur immediately, on the same day; but one can interpret God’s warning differently: as a consequence of his offense, Adam will become a mortal, and from then on death will reign in the world.⁵³

The text in Exod. 3:22 also makes use of ambiguity.⁵⁴ God instructs the Hebrew women: “Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold, and clothing, and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, thus stripping the Egyptians.” The Hebrew root here translated as “borrow” is ל’שא, one meaning of which is indeed “to borrow,” i.e., to take temporarily,⁵⁵ but another meaning is simply “to request.”⁵⁶ As far as the Egyptian women were concerned, they were lending the objects to the Hebrew women, expecting to have them returned (“they lent them” [וישאלום]—Exod. 12:36); however, judging at least from the divine directives—“ושאלה אשה משכנתה . . .”—and perhaps also from the manner of the Hebrew women’s request from the Egyptians, one might plausibly understand that the request was for a permanent gift, not a loan. God’s injunction to deceive the Egyptian women through ambiguity was designed to keep the promise to Abraham (Gen. 15:14) that the Israelites would “go free with great wealth.” It should be emphasized that, from a moral standpoint, it would be only just for the Israelites, having performed hard labor for several generations, to receive some recompense for their efforts, even if secured through deception.⁵⁷ This is in keeping with the biblical law requiring that a gratuity be paid to a Hebrew bound servant upon his manumission (Deut. 15:12–14).

As to God’s inaccurate quote of Sarah’s laughing remark (Gen. 18:13), this constitutes an instance of the use of a half-truth. There is no distortion of Sarah’s intention, for in saying “Now that I am withered . . .” she is also referring to her own advanced age. Nevertheless, God omits the reference to Abraham’s old age.

We see, then, that the Bible’s reluctance to ascribe formal lies to prophets, by employing a technique of ambiguity or half-truth, also applies to lies uttered by positive human figures other than prophets, but even more so to deceptive action taken by the deity oneself.

52. As interpreted by Skinner, *Genesis*, 67.

53. Thus, e.g., E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, AB 1 (New York, 1964), 17.

54. Cf. Prouser, “The Phenomenology of the Lie,” 170.

55. Exod. 22:13; 2 Kgs. 4:3; 6:3; etc.

56. Judg. 8:26; 1 Kgs. 3:11; 2 Kgs. 2:9–10; 4:28; Ps. 27:4; etc.

57. Cf. Gen. 30:31–43. Jacob attains great wealth by subterfuge, having worked many years for Laban and been defrauded by his uncle/father-in-law, without receiving proper payment for his devoted labor. This is hardly lying, but rather a cunning subterfuge, which we have no space to explain here. The important point for our present purposes is that, according to the underlying assumption of the narrative, Jacob has every moral right to trick his uncle out of what he should have received openly.

Conclusion

In contrast to those theologians and philosophers who reject any kind of lying, under any circumstances, the Bible recognizes that certain situations justify and even require deceptive measures. This is true even regarding God and God's prophets. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the Bible avoids ascribing outright, undisguised falsehood to the deity or to the prophets (and on occasion is equally reticent in regard to other positive figures).

We have examined a variety of episodes in which literary figures defined as prophets (Abraham, Samuel, Elisha, and even Jeremiah, a representative of classical prophecy) are guilty of prevarication, misleading their interlocutors. In most of these episodes the "target" of the deception is a king, whether of Israel (Samuel versus Saul) or otherwise (Abraham and Moses versus Pharaoh, the contemporary king of Egypt; Elisha versus the Aramean king Ben-Hadad). In another instance, Elisha misleads an Aramean military detachment (which was indeed sent by the king of Aram), while Jeremiah misleads the Babylonian officials on a king's orders! Three of the lies were meant to save the prophet's life (Abraham's lie to Pharaoh, Samuel's lie to Saul, Elisha's lie to the Aramean soldiers); another lie was designed to secure the Israelites' release from slavery (Moses' lie to Pharaoh); but there is also one lie whose purpose was to interfere in internal Aramean politics and bring about Hazael's accession to the throne as part of the divine plan to punish the Israelites. In most of the cases the deception is achieved by using half-truths and concealing relevant information, but in the two Elisha stories the same goal is achieved through ambiguity.

As a rule, the situation that compels the prophet to lie is associated with his role as a prophet, but that is not the case in regard to Abraham's lying to Pharaoh as to his kinship with Sarah. In only two instances is the lie attributed to God's instructions: Moses comes before Pharaoh as God's emissary and delivers the divine command (as he himself was instructed by the Lord); while Elisha predicts Ben-Hadad's future by virtue of his status as a "man of God." None of the texts considered implies any condemnation, direct or otherwise, of the falsehood, whether by the deity or by the biblical narrator; in fact, in two cases it is none other than God who instructs the prophet to stray from the truth. The common point in all instances is that the prophet, formally speaking, has not actually lied, i.e., uttered an outright falsehood,⁵⁸ although he has misled someone in a sophisticated manner, consciously and deliberately.

58. Different from all these instances is the lie of the old prophet of Bethel (1 Kgs. 13:18). Unlike Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Elisha and Jeremiah—all described as prophets (or men of God) who enjoy God's confidence—the anonymous prophet of Bethel knowingly acts against divine will. For that reason, the narrator has no intention of throwing any positive light on the action, and so pictures the prophet as uttering an outright lie, not just cleverly distorting (or concealing) the truth like the other prophets considered above. On this odd story, see D. Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah—Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta, Georgia, 1995), 67–91; Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, 130–54.

