

“WHY, O LORD, DO YOU LEAD
US ASTRAY?”

GOD’S INVOLVEMENT IN LYING AND
DECEPTION IN THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

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English Abstract

Chapter One: Introduction

People tell lies! This fact not only corresponds to our life experiences, but also to the narratives of the Bible. The heroes of the Bible, from the vilest scoundrels to the greatest saints, resort to lying and deception with remarkable regularity.

The question is: is this a phenomenon which solely characterizes humans, or does God also take part in it? Biblical commentators and scholars tend to the view that God ‘whose seal is Truth’, always insists on the unadulterated truth and never tells a lie. This view, whose philosophical and theological significance is hard to overstate, is based on a host of lyrical Biblical verses that connect God to the attribute of truth and distance Him from falsehood, as well as theological and ethical attitudes regarding the ‘correct’ image of God.

From the 20th century on (and particularly since the 1980’s) more and more voices have maintained that God is portrayed in Biblical narrative as one who sometimes deviates from the truth. This surprising view is based on a significant number of stories in which God is depicted as one who deceives His creatures. And while some of these scholars suggest that God deviates only on rare occasions and for a clear need, others exaggerate to the point of seeing lies and deception as one of the defining characteristics of His identity.

This dissertation is devoted to a comprehensive analysis of the question of God’s involvement in lies and deception in Biblical narrative, both as the initiator of the fraud or as its object. This question will be examined not from the perspective of the ideal (what would be the proper thing for God to do) nor from a realist perspective (what does God actually do) but rather from the literary perspective (how is God portrayed in the narrative). This will be accomplished by means of collating and studying narratives in which God is either the initiator of a deceit, a partner in its creation, or its object.

Chapter Two: Why, O Lord, Do You Make Us Stray from Your Ways? (Isaiah 63:17): Does God Deceive His Creatures?

The first chapter is devoted to a number of serious questions: Is God portrayed as the instigator of fraud in the Biblical narrative? And if so, what are the characteristics of this deception? In what circumstances does it occur? For what purposes? And what are the consequences of the deception on the relationship between God and humans?

God’s Credibility is Put to the Test for the First Time: A Study of the Story of the Sin in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3)

The Lord commands Adam (2:17) “But as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die,”¹ nevertheless the serpent convinces the woman that God is lying out of disgraceful motives (3:4-5). The woman believes the serpent instead of God, and the story seemingly justifies her decision: the narrator informs us that the eyes of Adam and his wife indeed were opened (3:7); God informs us that they attained knowledge ‘as one of us’ (22); and from their long life spans it can be inferred that they did not die on that very day (see 5:5).

A closer analysis reveals, however, that God did not lie to Adam. His statement (3:17) that: “for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die” is not expressed as an automatic consequence of eating from the Tree, but rather as a punishment that will at some point befall the perpetrator. In response to the accusation of ‘incitement’ that is raised by Adam and his wife (3:12-13), God decides to show mercy and only partially carry out the punishment (by depriving them of eternal life instead of executing them on the spot). Nevertheless, from the story of early humanity one can conclude that doubting God’s sincerity, while fraught with danger, is not the sole province of Bible scholars.

In this case God does not deceive His creatures, but the rest of the chapter contains an analysis of seven narratives in which the deception is self evident.

God’s Deception as a Punishment: A Pair of Deceptions in the Story of the War Between the Tribes of Israel and the Tribe of Benjamin (Judges 20-21)

The Israelites ask God (20:18): “Who of us shall advance first to fight the Benjaminites?” God responds “Judah first.” Surprisingly the Benjaminites successfully overwhelm the Israelites. The Israelites again pose the question to God (23): “Shall we again join battle with our kinsmen the Benjaminites?” And God responds: “March against them.” And again the Israelite forces suffer defeat. While God’s instructions do not in and of themselves constitute lying, for the outcome of the battles is not disclosed, it is likely that they were intended to mislead the Israelites into thinking that their victory was assured. The Israelites did not carefully scrutinize what they were told, and thus erred in their understanding of God’s word.

God punishes Israel measure for measure, which might be termed ‘punishment of the deceived by deception.’ The Israelites, who were deceived by the rogue Levite, the husband of the concubine, with regard to the circumstances which led to the terrible fraternal war, are likewise deceived by God with regard to its outcome.

This story demonstrates the ‘price’ of God’s deception. In chapter 21, it is recounted how the elders of Israel ‘construe’ their oaths in such a way that dispenses with their original intention, so that it follows that if God himself is bound solely by the literal meaning of his words to people, then people are likewise bound only by the literal meaning of their words as well.

¹ All quotes from the Bible are taken from the JPST unless stated otherwise.

God's Deception as an Altruistic Act: God Deceives Jacob on his Going Down to Egypt (Genesis 46:1-7)

Jacob, who is afraid to go down to Egypt, receives God's guarantee from which it seems that there is nothing to fear.

1. "Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation." Not only will the migration not be harmful, but it will even be of great benefit, for there the blessing of progeny will be fulfilled.
2. "I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I myself will also bring you back." Jacob's return will mirror his descent. In both journeys, God will accompany him and protect him from all misfortune. The comparison of the descent to the ascent implies that God will be with Jacob in the intervening period as well.
3. "And Joseph's hand shall close your eyes." Jacob's return from Egypt to Canaan will not require him to separate himself from his beloved son. Joseph will return with him to the land and will remain by his side until his death.

However, not one of these implications is fulfilled as expected:

1. Jacob's descendants do multiply in Egypt, but this becomes the chief cause for the suffering they are to endure.
2. God indeed does go down with Jacob to Egypt, but Jacob dies in an alien land. His children are doomed to generations of slavery, after which 'Jacob' (i.e. the people) will return to the land.
3. Joseph is indeed with his father when he dies and takes care of the funeral arrangements, but not because the family returned to Canaan, but rather because they stayed in Egypt.

In this instance as well, there is not one lie in God's promise, but it is full of deceptions. These deceptions are intended to comfort Jacob and to allay his fear of going down to Egypt. And while the advantages of the migration are revealed during Jacob's lifetime, the terrors of the servitude will not begin until after his demise. And even if it becomes clear to Jacob before he dies that he will not return to his homeland again, the happiness of his last years is not in vain.

God's Deception as a Test: God Deceives Abraham in the Story of the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22)

On occasion God deviates from the truth in order to test His creatures. The story of the Binding of Isaac is a case in point. God commands Abraham to offer Isaac as an offering, and Abraham is misled into thinking that God wants him to actually sacrifice his son. In reality, God is not interested in human sacrifice, but rather in measuring Abraham's faithfulness.

Saving Isaac creates a difficulty. How can one believe in a God Who misleads His creatures? The price of the Divine deception in the narrative is expressed by the fact that God no longer expects Abraham to believe His words without reservation. In order to restore His trustworthiness, God is now required to reinforce His earlier commitments by means of taking an oath.

God’s Deception as a Military Stratagem

From time to time we find that God adopts military strategies that allow him to trick one army and thus support the victory of the other.

God Deceives the Army of Moab (II Kings 3)

In the course of the military campaign of the Kingdoms of Israel, Judah, and Edom against Moab, God causes water to flow in the dry river bed without any sign of rain. And since on the previous night the river bed had been dry, the vision of (22): “the water appeared as red as blood,” is mistakenly perceived by the Moabites (23) as: “That’s blood!” From there they jump to the conclusion that: “The Kings must have fought among themselves and killed each other.” This Divine deception causes the Moabites to relinquish their defensive positions and rush to plunder the spoils of their ‘dead’ enemies, only to be vanquished without resistance by those very enemies.

God Deceives the Army of Aram (II Kings 6:24-7:20)

When the famine in Samaria reaches catastrophic proportions, God is called to the aid of Israel and uses the darkness of night in order to trick the Arameans (II Kings 7:6): “For the Lord had caused the Aramean camp to hear a sound of chariots, a sound of horses—the din of a huge army.”

The Arameans hear the sounds of an army approaching, and interpret them in a way that seems to fit the circumstances (6): “They said to one another: the King of Israel must have hired the Kings of the Hittites and the Kings of Egypt to attack us!” The Divine ruse succeeds, and the Arameans flee hurriedly, leaving all their possessions behind.

This ruse was intended not only to save Israel from their dire situation, but also to punish the Arameans for their lack of gratitude, in light of the good relationship they enjoyed in Samaria in the previous story (II Kings 6:8-23).

Divine Deception for the Sake of Peace: An Angel of God Stands between a Man and his Wife

When an Angel of God descends from his dwelling on High and becomes involved with the family life of mortals, he finds himself in a typical ‘human’ situation in which the ways of truth and falsehood operate in disorder, and he has to choose between the two.

An Angel Conceals Abraham’s Disgrace (Genesis 18)

As a result of Abraham’s generous hospitality, God, or alternatively an Angel who is called by God’s name (10), informs him that “I will return to you next year and your wife Sarah shall have a son!” Sarah’s reaction to the ‘absurd’ news is silent laughter (12): “And Sarah laughed to herself, saying ‘Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?’” The messenger turns to Abraham and reproaches him (13): “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’” The words of the messenger are rendered as a direct quote, and they purposely do not include Sarah’s insult of Abraham. It is reasonable to assume that the reason for the omission was: ‘for the sake of peace... so as not to cause him to hate her.’ (Tanhuma [Warsaw ed.] Shoftim 18)

An Angel Collaborates in the Partial Report Given by Manoah's Wife to her Husband (Judges 13)

The wife of Manoah receives the good news about the approaching birth of Samson, but chooses to report only part of it to her husband and thus omits a number of details, among them the restrictions that will affect the boy and nature of his future mission. Manoah, who suspects that the report is not complete, turns to God in prayer (8): "Oh my Lord, please let the man of God that you sent come to us again, and let him instruct us how to act with the child that is to be born."

God sends his messenger a second time, but when Manoah asks him (12): "what is to be the child's manner of life, and what is his mission?"² the latter chooses to deceive him. After hearing the Angel repeat his wife's version, Manoah mistakenly believes that the report was exact. Since the Angel is oblivious to questions about the boy, Manoah believes that he was assigned no special mission.

Chapter Three: God and His creatures Collaborate in Deception in Biblical Narrative

There are stories which describe God and man joining forces in carrying out acts of deceit. At times God initiates the action and man aids in its execution, and at other times man is the initiator, and God assists in the implementation. Since most of the time God's partner in deception is a prophet, this discussion will touch upon the involvement of the prophets in deception and lying.

Four Deceptions in the Exodus Narrative

The story of the Exodus from Egypt praises the power and miracles of God. To our great surprise, the story also reveals another side of God's actions, a series of lies and deceptions. Why does God choose to incorporate so many deceptions into the story?

To What Extent was Deception Used in the Appeal to Celebrate in the Wilderness? (Exodus 3: 15-18)

At the vision of the Burning Bush, God commands Moses to tell Pharaoh (18): "Now, therefore, let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God." This request contains two deceitful items: the exodus from slavery to freedom is not requested, only permission for a journey into the wilderness for three days; and the objective of the conquest of Canaan is also absent, they just want to offer sacrifices to God. The first item is easily accounted for as a simple deception (we will go for three days, but we will not return), but it is almost certain that the second point is an outright lie (they are not leaving to sacrifice to God, and in fact they do not sacrifice at all).

² I have chosen to use the English Standard Version translation for this verse.

To What Extent was Deception Used in Borrowing the Valuables? (Exodus 3:21-22)

God commands Moses to instruct the Israelites to request valuable objects from their Egyptian neighbors. The Egyptians understand this to mean that the objects will be returned at the end of the festival, but the Israelites never explicitly promise to return the objects, and of course they are not returned.

Apparently this is straightforward deception, but judging this matter becomes more complicated in light of God's declaration (21): "And I will dispose the Egyptians favorably toward this people." This fact carries with it considerable weight in assessing the deception, in that one of the essential differences between lying and deception is in the division of responsibility between the deceiver and the deceived: while with an outright lie the perpetrator alone bears the responsibility for the consequences, with deception there is a measure of responsibility on the part of the victim as well.

To What Extent was Deception Used in Wandering through the Wilderness? (Exodus 14: 1-8)

After the Israelites embarked upon their escape from Egypt, God commands Moses (2): "Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea." This route was intended to mislead the Egyptians into thinking that the Israelites were lost and would arrive at an area where they could be easily destroyed.

Presumably this is a straightforward case of deception, but here also God hardens the heart of the Egyptians, and, as was argued earlier, impairing the judgment of the one who is deceived makes deception closer lying.

To What Extent was Deception Used in Entering the Red Sea? (Exodus 14:15-31)

The final stage in this series of deceptions occurred when the Israelites fled into the sea. The Egyptians were given over to believe that if they could catch up to the Israelites, they would be able to overcome them. This deception was also predicated on the fact that God hardened the hearts of the Egyptians (Exodus 14:17), and as indicated earlier, impairing the judgment of the one who is deceived makes the deception closer to lying.

What was the Objective of this Series of Deceptions?

The subjugation of the Israelites in Egypt was based on deviousness and deception. Beginning from Pharaoh's exclamation (1:10): "Let us deal shrewdly with them"; continuing to the notion that the servitude was intended to fill the coffers of Pharaoh; to Pharaoh's order to the midwives to murder the newborn male Israelites through the use of deception; and ending with the assumption that the underlying purpose of this action was the desire of the Egyptians to take the Israelite women for themselves.

God punishes the Egyptians measure for measure, addressing both their evil actions and the manner in which they were implemented: taking their property as compensation for the unpaid wages of slavery, drowning their males in the sea in return for the decree to drown the

newborn males in the Nile, deviousness and deception matched by deviousness and deception.

The lies in the narrative are meant to be evident to Pharaoh, because an indispensable part of the punishment for the deceived is the knowledge he himself has been deceived. The use of human intermediaries enabled God to engage in substantial lying, without affecting His own truthfulness.

Two Prophetic Lies for Ahab

A Prophet is Disguised as a Wounded Warrior and Lies to Ahab (I Kings 20:35-43)

After the rout of the Arameans at Afek, the servants of Ben-Haddad approach Ahab dressed as slaves or captives, intending to convince him not to harm their King. Ahab decides to believe their disguise and their pure intentions, and makes a covenant with Ben-Haddad.

God takes advantage of the superficial attitude of Ahab against Him, and, based on the principle of ‘punishing the deceiver with deceit,’ sends one of his prophets disguised as a wounded warrior, as a means to punish Ahab. The prophet tells Ahab a fabricated story, and the latter, who did not see through the deceitful story of the servants of Ben-Haddad, is similarly not able to penetrate the disguise of this ‘warrior’ either. And thus Ahab condemns himself and his people to death.

A Lying Spirit Speaks in the Mouth of the Four Hundred Prophets of Ahab (I Kings 22)

Ahab asks four hundred of his prophets if he will be successful in conquering Ramot-Gilead, and they respond (6): “March, and the Lord will deliver it into your Majesty’s hands.” Micaiah, who is also called upon to prophesy, first repeats the optimistic prediction of victory, and only after Ahab makes him take an oath to tell the truth, foretells that Ahab is doomed to die in battle, and even discloses that God himself wants him to die and therefore sent a ‘lying spirit’ to confound his prophets. If so, this false report has two recipients: Ahab and his prophets.

The deception of Ahab has its roots in the preceding chapter (21), in which Ahab desires the patrimony of Naboth, and Jezebel obtains it for him using intermediaries who lie for her and thus lead Naboth to his death. Based on the principle of ‘punish the deceiver through deception,’ God achieves the death of Ahab while the latter tries to regain his patrimony and uses intermediaries who lie for him. Ahab was aware of this lie, for this lie was not only a means to bring about his death, but also constituted part of his punishment.

The price of divine deceptions is herein exposed, for Ahab’s ordeal of having to disguise himself in order to avoid the effect of the prophecy (his disguise corresponding to the disguise of the prophet mentioned earlier), could have brought about the death of Micaiah as a false prophet. Here we have a true example of measure for measure: the prophet uses a disguise in order to fool the king and to bring about his death, and concomitantly the King employs a disguise to expose the prophet as a liar and bring about his death.

The reason for deceiving Ahab’s four hundred prophets is the fact that they allowed their loyalty to their king to supersede their loyalty to God. A prophet, who attempts to have his

prophecies match what is acceptable to his king at the cost of impairing divine truth, should likewise not be surprised if God makes his authentic prophecies match what that prophet prefers, thus likewise impugning the integrity of the prophecy. Some are of the opinion that the price for this deception is the appearance of false prophets, for if God can send lies using His prophets, they will feel free to lie in His name.

Lying that is Truer than the Truth: God Assists Elisha to Deceive the Aramean Battalion (II Kings 6:8-23)

An example of an instance in which God cooperates with deceit from a human source can be found in the confrontation between Elisha and the Aramean force that was sent to seize him. Elisha does not ask God to help him smite the force, but rather to help him deceive them. God agrees to his request, and thus implicitly approves it. The deception is executed by combining the misleading words of Elisha with the spiritual blinding of the Arameans, and as previously mentioned, deception which adversely affects the decision-making ability of the victim borders on lying.

The prophet's use of deceit was meant to increase their respect for his hidden power, and thus strengthen his efforts to bring peace between them and the Kingdom of Israel.

Chapter Four: “Will You Fool Him as One Fool Men?” (Job 13:9): Attempts to Deceive God in Biblical Narrative

This chapter is devoted to God's role as the target of deception, and will deal with the following questions: Do mortals attempt to deceive God? For what purpose? Do they succeed?

The answer to the last question depends on the scope of divine knowledge. In prophetic, poetic, and wisdom literature, God is presented as omniscient. On the other hand, in Biblical narrative His representation is less one-sided, and depends largely on the assumptions of the reader.

Adam Attempts to Lie to God (Genesis 3:9-10)

The first attempt to lie to God already appears in the first 'documented' sentence that man speaks to God. After Adam and the woman eat from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam attempts to lie to God by saying (10): “I heard the sound of You in the Garden, and I was afraid because I was naked so I hid.” The truth is that Adam was not at all afraid of his nakedness, but rather of the foretold punishment, and in fact he was not really naked.

Adam's childish lie revealed exactly what it was intended to cover up, and God notices it accordingly (11): “Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?”

Cain Attempts to Lie to God (Genesis 4:9-10)

When God asks Cain (9): “Where is your brother Abel?” he responds with a bold-faced lie: “I do not know!” and then adds with sarcastic innocence: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” This attempt to lie also fails, as emerges from God’s subsequent rebuke (10): “What have you done? Hark, you brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground!”

Abraham Attempts to Deceive God (Genesis 17:17-18)

God informs Abraham that he will be blessed with a son from his wife Sarah, but Abraham is not able to believe him. While he falls on his face in thanks for the good news, he laughs to himself in doubt. His response (18): “O that Ishmael might live by Your favor!” is intended perhaps to be interpreted in a way that shows his thanks and not his doubts. Abraham fails in his attempt to deceive God, as can be discerned from the fact that God responds to Abraham’s inner thoughts as well as his verbal expression.

Sarah Attempts to Lie to the Angel of God (Genesis 18:12-15)

Sarah is unable to believe that she and Abraham, in their extreme old age, will merit having a son. When the messenger informs her of the impending birth, she laughs to herself. The messenger, who knows her thoughts while she was concealed in the tent full well, turns to Abraham and reprimands him (13): “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’” Sarah lies in her reply (15): “I did not laugh,” but the messenger, who knows what is in her heart, insists: “You did laugh.”

Moses Attempts to Deceive God (Exodus 3-4)

God reveals himself to Moses and commands him to take Israel out of Egypt, and Moses raises four objections to his mission. Even after God has responded to his arguments, Moses continues his refusal, and it becomes evident that these objections were not the real reasons for his refusal to undertake the mission.

The real reason which Moses hides in his heart is revealed in God’s reaction (4:14): “The Lord became angry with Moses, and He said. ‘There is your brother Aaron the Levite, he, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will happy to see you.’” It becomes evident that Moses thinks that Aaron is better suited for the task, both because he ‘speaks readily,’ and because he is already God’s prophet, and Moses doesn’t want his brother to be offended.

Samuel Attempts to Deceive God (I Samuel 16:1-3)

God commands Samuel to anoint a replacement for Saul, but the prophet endeavors to avoid the mission by using a fictitious argument (2): “How can I go? If Saul hears of it, He will kill me.” In response, God instructs Samuel to make use of deceit: “Take a heifer with you, and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.’”

The comparison between the deceit that God initiates as a response to Samuel’s refusal, and the lie that Saul utilizes in the previous story in order to cover up his insubordination (15: 15-21), teaches that the said directive has two purposes: first, to punish Saul by means of the principle ‘punish the deceiver through deceit;’ and second, to warn Samuel with regard to the step that he has taken by adopting the insubordination and deception of Saul. While God

offers Samuel a practical way to be saved from Saul's wrath, he intimates to him how much he needs to be saved on a spiritual level. The prophet, who distances himself from his God to the extent of identifying with the fate of the sinful king, is liable to find himself identifying not only with the king but with the sin as well.

Balaam Attempts to Deceive God in the Baal-Peor Narrative (Numbers 25; 31)

The story of the sin at Baal-Peor contains one of the most sophisticated deceptions in the Bible. Balaam concocts a plot whose intention is to triumph over both God and Israel. The daughters of Midian are sent to seduce the Israelites, using sexual prostitution that will lead to cultic prostitution, so as to cause God to destroy them. The narrator plays along with the plot of Balaam and does not reveal its parameters in advance, thus turning the readers into victims of deceit as well.

Balaam succeeds in deceiving the Israelites, causing them to sin, and apparently also succeeds in manipulating God who begins to destroy Israel. Careful attention to the development of the narrative and to the scattering of its details reveals that God's decision to kill in Israel does not stem from the fact that He was deceived, but rather from the gravity of the sin itself. God does not typically save a person from a sin about which he has been explicitly forewarned (see Exodus 34, 14-16). Therefore God punishes the Israelites for their sin, the Midianites because they made them sin, and Balaam because he advised them how to accomplish it.

Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions

The main conclusions of this study can be summarized in eight short points:

1. God does not always use truthful means, only most of the time.
2. When God engages in deception He avoids telling an outright lie, either by means of converting it into deception, or (in rare cases and in response to human lies) by employing an intermediary (usually a prophet) to lie as His surrogate.
3. The variety of reasons for deception indicates that we should not try to pin the phenomenon on any one factor. Deception is a tool in God's hands, which He uses when He deems appropriate.
4. God's deceptions are always successful, and even when they are exposed, this does not spoil His purposes, but rather promotes them.
5. God's choice to use deceitful ways is not without its price. Where a 'damaging' divine deception is directed to His people, the deep bond of trust which exists between them can be undermined, and occasionally even causes the victims to use deception towards God.
6. It is not possible to deceive God; nevertheless mere mortals, and even prophets, try to do so.
7. In the early stories any person who speaks with God is prone to attempt to deceive Him. In stories which reflect later generations, deceptions of this sort are the province of the prophets alone, and thus appear more infrequently.
8. Attempts to deceive God are usually linked to God's own deceptions (sometimes as retribution).