

# As It Is Written

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The 8<sup>th</sup> commandment, as it is often taught to generations of young Christians - "Thou shalt not lie" - is a particularly awful translation. In original language of the Old Testament (biblical Hebrew) God is commanding us not to [gossip](#). Notwithstanding the misinterpretation, the LORD's feelings about lying (false words), deception (false acts), or empty promises (false oaths) is unambiguous; for example,

*Deut 23:24: "You must fulfill what has crossed your lips, and perform what you have vowed."*

*Exodus 23:7: "From words of deception you will be distant..."*

*Leviticus 19:11: "You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another".*

*Proverbs 12:22: "Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD"*

*Zechariah 8:16-17: These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, " do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, says the LORD."*

Curiously, while lying is unambiguously offensive to God, God Himself teaches that, under certain circumstances, lying is acceptable. For example, in 1 Samuel, God actually instructs Samuel to deceive king Saul. Appointed at God's behest, king Saul had disobeyed a divine command. God thereupon instructs Samuel to go and anoint David in His stead. This the prophet fears to do -- correctly believing that Saul will kill him.

Surprisingly, God does not promise to protect Samuel. Instead,

God tells him to lie about his real reason for coming into Saul's presence. But, why tell Samuel to lie when God could simply protect him instead?

The answer, according to the interpretation of the Sages of [and before] Jesus's day, is that one does not owe would-be murderers the truth. Thus, God reveals that He values [innocent] life above that of truthfulness<sup>1</sup>. God also prioritizes the sexual sanctity of women over and above that of truthfulness. In Judges, the Bible relates how *Ya'el*, a Kenite woman, murdered the Canaanite general Sisera. However, the text emphasizes that the general and his soldiers were not only cruel, they also had a practice of raping the women of the men they had vanquished (Judges 5:30). Thus, the prophetess Deborah, praises *Ya'el* for her deception (Judges 5:24-26).

The Bible also teaches that truth is of less value than God's demand that He alone commands the worship of mankind. In II Kings chapter 10:18-28, we read that King Jehu pretends to be a follower of Baal in order to lure the priests of Baal to a religious gathering. When the priests arrive, the Bible tells us that "Jehu acted with guile in order to exterminate the worshippers of Baal". The first recorded sting operation.

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<sup>1</sup> In another famous story, God rewards two midwives who disobey then lie to pharaoh in order to protect newborn male infants born to Hebrew mothers (Exodus 1:15-21)

There are numerous stories in Holy Scripture in which lies told for a higher purpose are portrayed as righteous. However, the real question is what are those higher purposes? Asked another way, what exactly are our LORD's priorities as applied to the biblical values of life, truth, justice, and so forth? How do we make trade-offs when situations arise in which these values are in conflict?

In the meantime reflect on David's song to God (2 Samuel 22) for having saved him from his enemies, but particularly from the hand of Saul. Pay special attention to verses 24-27 (RSV):

I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from guilt. <sup>25</sup> Therefore the LORD has recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to my cleanness in his sight. <sup>26</sup> "With the loyal thou dost show thyself loyal; with the blameless man thou dost show thyself blameless; <sup>27</sup> with the pure thou dost show thyself pure, but with the crooked thou dost show thyself perverse.

Now, go and study.