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RIGHTEOUS DECEPTION:

AN APOLOGY FOR SCRIPTURE'S FAITHFUL LIARS

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Introduction

One Sunday afternoon after church, my father read me a letter from his former student who had become a missionary in Myanmar, where Christians are violently persecuted and international communications are constantly monitored. The letter read something like this, "Dear. Mr. Ryoo, thank you for your patronage. Our president has been a great help to our sector's success. We have gained more than a dozen new customers. We trained a handful of qualified managers who are now locals working to revitalize our neighboring city's franchise. There are increasingly stringent regulations surrounding our product. Regardless, our product sales are increasing, and the new opening sector in our neighboring city seems promising. Next time I visit, I will need more of our product manuals."

I remember feeling genuinely concerned and confused. Knowing the missionary personally, I thought he had stopped serving the Lord to become a businessman. Thankfully, before I misjudged this faithful missionary, my father explained the message. It was a cryptic message: 'President' referred to the Lord; 'product' referred to the gospel; 'managers' referred to the pastors; 'customers' referred to the converts; 'sectors' referred to the churches. As a naïve teenager who only knew that being openly honest was right, I asked my father if this was lying and if being untruthful was a sin. He replied, "This is not lying but hiding." He explained that gospelizing in countries hostile to the gospel sometimes requires concealing the truth. Hostility toward the truth justifies hiding it, like withholding holy things from lowly dogs and precious pearls from pernicious pigs.

Missionaries on the frontlines of Islam's, Hinduism's, Buddhism's, and the world's hostility are accustomed to this clandestine gospel operation. They are certainly not dishonest people. On the contrary, their integrity in working in some secular profession in disguise of their kingdom mission is so above reproach that many countries grant them long-term visas and access to their marketplace for economic contribution.

Not only modern missionaries but also some leading Reformers during the Romanists' great persecution of Protestants knew this tactic well. When one of the leading Protestant princes in Germany, Landgrave Philip of Hesse, got himself into the trouble of potentially losing all of his reputation and influence in uniting six princes and 10 towns and forming a defensive alliance for the Protestants by entering into a bigamous marriage, he sought advice from the leading Reformers; Luther, Melanchthon and Bucer. In a letter of July 18, 1540, Martin Bucer suggested that Philip employ 'holy lie' (*heilige lug*) like that of Rahab. Bucer said, "In fact, the Bible was full of such lies.¹" This idea was also supported by Luther and Melanchthon but was despicable to John Calvin, who took a hard line against all forms of deceptions. Yet, Calvin was not consistent with his stance when he readily wore disguises when he traveled, used Renaissance flattery where Calvin wrote in the preface to his Psalms commentary that Bucer wrote such excellent commentary that he dared publishing his, while he frankly believed Bucer was long-winded and full of digressions² and used a pseudonym when he published his 1539 Institutes under the pseudonym of 'Alcuin' for protection. While I do not concur with Philip's taking a second wife and Bucer's recommending a 'holy lie' for Philip, I acknowledge, along with the ancient Church Fathers including Jerome, Origen, John Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria, Hilary of Poitiers and John Cassian³, that there are many occasions of 'holy lies' or, in their words, 'dutiful lies' (*mendacium officiosum*) in Scripture. For this paper, I will make an apology for Scripture's faithful liars and argue that *righteous deception is an expression of shrewdness employed by God's people for God's covenant purposes*.re to discuss this matter of 'righteous deception' by establishing the setting that necessitates such deceptive tactics, surveying the Scriptural samples of such practices, and safeguarding the view from counterarguments. In this essay, I will make an apology for Scripture's

¹ Letter to the Langrave, July 18, 1540, in *Briefwechsel Landgraf Philipp's des Grossmuthigen von Hessen mit Bucer*, Publicationen aus den K. Preussischen Staatsarchiven, 5, edited by Max Lenz, vol. 1, 193

² Timothy J. Wengert, "We Will Feast Together in Heaven Forever":

³ Boniface Ramsey, 'Two Traditions on Lying and Deception in the Ancient Church,' *The Thomist* 49(4), (1985): 504-533

faithful liars and argue that *righteous deception is an expression of shrewdness employed by God's people for God's covenant purposes.*

Setting that Necessitates the Use of Deceptive Tactics

When it comes to the history of lies, the first lie dates back to the beginning of time in Genesis 3. Satan, disguised as a serpent, deceived the first woman, causing God's wonderful world of innocence and purity to plunge into a downward spiral of sin and death. Because of the Serpent's deceit, the LORD God declared enmity between the serpent and the woman and between their offspring. He determined that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent (Genesis 3:15). Given this promised destruction of Satan and the deliverance of man, the LORD God made covenants with men to fulfill this *protoevangelium* of the seed. At the same time, the Serpent waged war against man and launched endless assaults to devour any offspring of the woman. The imagery of the great red dragon, the old serpent waiting for the male child at the crouch of the woman in Revelation 12 summarizes human history before the Promised Seed enters the stage of redemption. A cosmic war broke out between the children of the covenant and the servants of the Serpent.

In this context of warfare, constant threats, and trials of the enemy seeking to overthrow God's covenant promises, God's covenant people were not obliged to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, as if they stood before a just judge. Rather, they were to be wise and withhold God's truth from an enemy who seeks only to steal, kill, and destroy, much like the wise Magi who deflected Herod's attention to protect the child Christ. Given the broken state of innocence and purity, when the wicked plot against the righteous and Satan schemes against the saints, the truth is not owed to them. No one is entitled to God's truth. The LORD God of truth determines to whom He reveals or conceals His truth. Likewise, God's people must be shrewd in knowing when and to whom to be truthful in this conflict.

This setting of violent threats against God's covenant purposes makes the use of deceptive tactics justifiable just as killing is justifiable in certain cases of self-defense (Exodus 22:2), capital punishment (Exodus 21:12-14), and warfare (Deut.20). When God's people had to decisively defer

from being truthful to deter hostile actions against God's covenant purposes, they resorted to deceptive tactics, rather than giving themselves in naivety. Their examples will be discussed in the next section. In warfare, deception is a strategic operation aimed at deliberately misleading, manipulating, frustrating, confusing, and eluding the adversary.

While deception seems tantamount to lying since it involves intentionally misleading moral agents, wartime deception is not equivalent to dealing falsely for selfish gain, risking other's welfare, nor bearing false witness against your neighbor (Exodus 20:16). God's moral laws were given to establish justice and order among His people, enabling them to walk in His ways and represent the LORD their God institutionally. Therefore, within the community of individuals who fear the LORD and are careful to obey God's commands to honor the Golden Rule for one another, being truthful to one another, upholding a high standard of truth, and avoiding deception are expected and encouraged in good faith. Lying, deliberately distorting, and unjustly handling the truth would be offenses against a neighbor and lying lips are abomination to the LORD (Proverbs 12:22). Having put away falsehood, people of God are to speak the truth, for they are members of one another (Ephesians 4:25). However, to those outside of that covenant community and those who are hostile against God's truth and threaten to overthrow His purposes, being truthful is not owed to them because they are identified as enemies of God.

Against the enemies of God, the LORD of Hosts, who is a man of war (Exodus 15:3), employed deceptive tactics to subdue and subvert them. For instance, in Joshua 8, during the battle of Ai, the LORD commands Joshua to lie in ambush and feign a retreat, deceiving the enemy into pursuing Israel out of the city. Additionally, in Judges 7, Gideon and his three hundred men are instructed in a dream to take a ram's horn and a torch to create the illusion of a large army with loud sounds and light to defeat over a hundred thousand Midianites. Furthermore, in 2 Kings 7, during the Syrian siege of Samaria, the LORD made the Syrians hear loud sounds of chariots and horses, causing them to flee in panic. These tactics of feints, ruses, and simulated forces employed by the LORD are deceptive techniques.

Given the LORD's own use of such tactics, rather than examining each instance of these tactics used by God's people merely through an ethical lens, it is more profitable to acknowledge that expression of righteousness and justice in this fallen world ruled by Satan will not appear purely moral. For example, God's righteous judgment of Ahab in 1 King 22 does not seem so neatly moral. For Ahab's persistent disobedience and disbelief, the LORD God of truth deliberately sends out a lying spirit to Ahab's false prophets to allure him to his death in battle. While one can rightly highlight God's sovereign control over good and evil, no one can deny that God chose to use deception to accomplish his righteous judgment. This is what would happen to all those who persistently oppose the truth. God will hand them over to a lie, hardening them in their sin (Romans 1:18-32). Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:11 speaks of God's judgement against those who refuse to love the truth in this way, "Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." It is a rightful eye-to-eye retribution against the Serpent who brought destruction into God's world with deceit. While the servants of the Serpent would use deception to pervert the truth, the people of the covenant would do to preserve and protect the truth.

Our Lord Jesus himself acknowledges this hostile setting where the truth is despised and rejected. When Jesus sent out his twelve disciples into the world for the first time in Matthew 10, he said, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be *wise as serpents* and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). First, Jesus warns the disciples by highlighting the present hostility in the world. His imagery of sheep amidst wolves suggests the disciples' defenselessness and the danger of being preyed upon. Given such a vulnerable setting where sheep, as prey, would never successfully defend themselves against the predator wolves' fangs and claws, Jesus commands his disciples to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Regarding Jesus' perplexing statement, most commentators emphasize the difficulty of balancing prudence and purity, explaining that prudence is associated with serpents, following the proverbs of the ancient Near Eastern culture, and purity is associated with doves. They add that prudence can easily

degenerate into cheap cunning unless it accompanies innocence⁴. The commentators seem to be attempting to soften Jesus' surprising analogy of serpents by focusing solely on being innocently wise and not elaborating on what it means to be serpent-like. Their hesitancy is likely because serpents are associated with the devil, the father of lies.

Yet, Jesus the Master Sage deliberately chose 'serpents' to exhort his disciples to be shrewd and even cunning (Genesis 3:1). When the sages of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes taught their students to learn from ants, badgers, locusts, and lizards (Proverbs 6:6-8;30:24-28, Ecclesiastes 10:27-28), their lessons were to be learned from naturally observing the behaviors of those creatures. Likewise, if one can observe the natural ways of serpents, their most notable characteristic is their deceptive tactics in offense and defense. Most serpents employ aggressive mimicry, using their tails or tongues to lure the prey. They are well-camouflaged by God's design, and their attacks are often done in ambush. They dramatically play dead in defense, and some species even deliberately bleed from their mouth. Then, serpent-likeness means being tactically deceptive.

While Jesus' juxtaposition of the shrewdness of serpents and the innocence of doves seem paradoxical, when one acknowledges that there is a way to be righteously deceptive, the innocence of doves can be ascribed to serpent-likeness. Perhaps this is how the LORD holds his enemies in derision and lets ruin overtake them by surprise, the net they hid entangle them and the wicked fall into the pit they dug for the righteous (Psalm 35:8), by confounding the Deceiver by righteous deception.

Samples of Righteous Deception in the Scripture

Now that I have established the setting that necessitates deceptive tactics, I will survey various examples of righteous deception used by God's covenant people throughout redemptive history. Since God promised that the seed of the woman, a male child, would one day crush the serpent's head, God determined that His Messiah would be a descendant of Abraham and David. To ensure

⁴ Carson, D.A. "Matthew." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelein. Vol.8. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984.

this, God graciously made a covenant with Abram, promising him a great son, a great nation, a great land, and great blessings, and with David, promising him an everlasting throne, an eternal kingdom. Satan's primary goal then became the destruction of the lineage of this promised seed. Therefore, his violent assassination attempts were constantly being made on Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the people of Israel, David, and their offspring. The Deceiver, the devil's greatest desire had become to kill the great Son who would form a godly nation, grant an eternal inheritance of the earth, bestow God's blessing to the faithful children of Abraham, and rule over God's eternal kingdom. Hence, God's covenant people suffered great assaults and His covenant purposes faced various crises and conflicts, even during when they were being consummated by Christ. Regarding the covenant crisis, I will examine the incidents in which threats were imposed on the continuation of the seed through Abraham and David. I will discuss the covenant conflicts that arose during the conquest of Canaan and the exile from the promised land. Lastly, on the covenant consummation, I will discuss how Christ employs deceptive tactics to fulfill God's ultimate purpose of redemption.

Covenant Crisis

In Genesis 12, after Abram is selected by God and receives the conditions of God's covenant, he faces a great famine that inevitably made him go down to Egypt to sojourn there. When Abram goes down to Egypt, sensing a threat to his own life because of the common practice of the Egyptians of killing the husband for a beautiful wife to add to their harem, he tells his wife, Sarai, to say that Abram is her brother. Most commentators see Abram as a coward and a liar, not trusting God and exposing his wife to harm and God regardless protecting and blessing Abram and Sarai. And they repeat the same conclusion when Abram repeats the same sister-wife trickery on Abimelech of Gerar in Genesis 20, and when Isaac adopts the same practice from his father and applies it against the son of Abimelech of Gerar in Genesis 26. Their moral judgment makes Abraham, a father of lies, and Isaac, like father, like son, cowards who use their wives as shields to protect themselves. Often, they would go on to say, even the patriarchs, the heroes of faith, fail

and fall, and yet our faithful God blesses us with the better Abraham, Jesus, so we must look to him. Those commentators' interpretations likely result from approaching the narrative with a simple moral grid of not lying and standing up for his wife.

However, throughout Genesis, Abram is not portrayed as some coward fearful for his life, neither is Abraham rebuked or corrected by God but is commended by biblical authors as our exemplary father of faith (Romans 4:16, Galatians 3:9, James 2:23, Hebrews 11:17-19). The next chapter demonstrates Abram's boldness and shrewdness in war, as he takes only 318 men to go against a confederation of the world's greatest kings to rescue his nephew. Also, Abram's second sister-wife trick and Isaac's same tactic don't make Abram an unrepentant and unteachable sinner but a shrewd man of faith who is keenly aware of the threats of the serpentine world.

The narrator in Genesis 12:14-16 seems to affirm what Abram foresaw by recording the details of the Egyptians' forceful taking of Sarai according to what Abram said. Abram said that Egyptians will see Sarai beautiful and take her, and they saw her beautiful and took her. Abram said, "It may go well with me because of you," and Abram was "dealt well for her sake." Then, according to what exactly unfolded in the land of Egypt where there is no fear of God, Abram would've been killed immediately without his defensive trickery, Sarai taken to the serpent Pharaoh, and God's covenant purpose overthrown.

While the text doesn't reveal what Abram had planned for his wife, just as the Hebrew author concluded that he would reason by faith that God was able to bring Isaac from the dead to fulfill his covenant, Abram could've reasoned that God would bring Sarai back to him and entrusted her to God. And the LORD seems to honor Abram by striking Pharaoh with plagues to release Sarai. In this mini-Exodus for Abram, we see Abram dealing shrewdly with the serpentine Egyptians as the Pharaoh, who is described as a serpent, made an assault on God's covenant purpose. Abram received great blessings of plunder as a result.

In Genesis 20, when Abraham employs the same deceptive tactic against another pagan king, Abimelech argues with the LORD that he acted in integrity, for he believed what Abraham said about Sarah. Yet the fact that God justly afflict Abimelech and closed the wombs of his

household demonstrates that he was in the wrong and that Abraham's shrewd dealing with Abimelech and wise discerning of Gerar, having no fear of God, are vindicated in having Abraham once again spared of his life, blessed by Abimelech and even take a priestly role to heal the household of Abimelech.

In light of this, it's not surprising that Isaac followed in his father's footsteps. Abraham's deceptive tactic has become a proven defensive mechanism against the godless nations. In Genesis 26, the LORD refreshes his covenant with Abraham with Isaac and instructs him to go to Gerar for another famine had visited the land. There, whenever Isaac was asked about Rebekah, he said "She is my sister" because he knew that people in the land would kill him and take her away. In this case, Abimelech, most likely the son of the first Abimelech, finds Isaac laughing with Rebekah and accuses Isaac of being deceptive with the same self-justifying spirit Pharaoh and his father Abimelech had. Yet, Abimelech's defense in saying, "What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us" (Genesis 26:10), reveals what kind of wicked society Gerar was. It was a godless society where one could simply take away a beautiful woman and lay with her. Given such a hostile setting, Abraham and Isaac had to put on camouflage and look to God for protection of their wives as they were also crucial to God's covenant purposes.

Unfortunately, this kind of deceptive tactic was not used only against those of pagan nations who did not acknowledge God but also used against anyone who brought a threat against God's covenant purposes. For example, when Isaac grew old, his eyesight became dim. But it was not just Isaac's physical sight that grew dim, but also his eyes of faith seemed to have grown weary when he desired to bless Esau for a cup of meat stew. In Genesis 25:28, the narrator indicates this by saying how Isaac loved Esau "because he ate of his game." Isaac's appetite had become the governing and guiding factor of his decisions, perhaps even like that of Eli, whose eyesight also grew dim, getting fattened by his worthless sons' the stolen sacrifice meats. Esau is certainly likened to Eli's sons as he despised his birthright. When God's blessing of covenant inheritance is

outright disregarded as a common thing replaceable by a pot of stew, Rebekah and Jacob had to ensure that God's promised plan of having the older serve the younger (Genesis 25:23) is realized.

Most commentators would conclude that Rebekah and Jacob sinned in their deceit to bring good out of their evil, achieving an end that justified their means. However, one must acknowledge the seriousness of Isaac's hardened heart that had exalted his belly over the LORD God and realize that a drastic measure has to be taken against Isaac's desire to overthrow God's covenant promise of having Jacob as the recipient, the heir of God's covenant blessing. Isaac's blindness to God's plan is clearly displayed when he says to Jacob in Esau's clothing, "Be lord over your brothers" and "Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you" (Genesis 27:29). Isaac is attempting to reverse God's covenant order. And by repeating what the LORD said to Abraham in Genesis 12, Isaac attempts to make Esau the carrier of the blessing. In other words, Isaac attempts to make God's covenant name, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Esau. This great covenant crisis establishes the ground for wartime deceptive tactics.

What Rebekah does in her shrewdness—dressing Jacob in Esau's camouflage and deceiving her husband, who was acting foolishly against God's covenant purpose—shows her unwavering commitment to seeing God's promise through. Rebekah even assures Jacob that she will take the curse upon herself if Isaac finds out and turns against Jacob (Genesis 27:13). Rebekah's deception was a matter of virtuous faith and shrewd wisdom, likened to Abigail of 1 Samuel 25, deceiving her harsh and foolish husband Nabal that despised the LORD's anointed king David.

Furthermore, what happens to Isaac in the next chapters further proves that Rebekah and Jacob were righteous in their deception. When Isaac discovers he has been deceived, he first trembles while Esau turns his fury on Jacob, desiring to destroy him. Unlike Esau, Isaac seems to tremble upon a conviction leading him to change his mind. In Genesis 27, Rebekah, learning of Esau's rage, plans to send Jacob away for protection. Isaac also makes his final greeting to Jacob. In Genesis 28, Isaac's change of heart is revealed when he warns Jacob not to take a Canaanite woman for a wife but one from Rebekah's relative as Abraham also prohibited him to take a

Canaanite woman. Moreover, Isaac's final blessing to Jacob echoes what the LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob said to their father Abraham. In this, we see that Isaac had come around in repentance and realized his error of desiring to bless Esau. Rebekah and Jacob's righteous deception had begotten the righteous response of Isaac, returning his senses of submitting to God's covenant purposes.

After these covenant crises with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we find, once again, the serpent's great assault on God's covenant people in Exodus. First, we find the serpent Pharaoh calling for the destruction of Hebrew babies. In this covenant crisis, we are introduced in Exodus 1 to the heroines who fear the LORD- the Hebrew midwives: Shiphrah and Puah (Exodus 1:17). When Pharaoh orders the Shiphrah and Puah to kill any sons born to Hebrew women, they disobey and when they were inquired, distorted the fact and let the boys live. They did so because they feared God. And because of their disobedient deception to Pharaoh, God blessed them, and the Israelites also multiplied. In this case, the fruit of fearing God for the midwives was deception, and the result of the deception was God's blessing on them and His covenant purposes of preserving the line of the promised seed.

Unsatisfied and unsettled by the midwives, Pharaoh ordered all people to have every Hebrew baby boy cast into the Nile. All the seeds of the woman were to drown in the Nile. But another set of heroines is introduced immediately in Exodus 2. They are Moses's mother and sister. They defied Pharaoh's order and dispatched baby Moses on an ark into the arms of Pharaoh's daughter. Meanwhile, the sister was hiding by the reeds, watching his brother get taken. When Pharaoh's daughter showed compassion to the baby, the sister immediately suggested a Hebrew nursing mother and brought her own mother. Their calculated ambush-like infiltration into Pharaoh's own household not only spares the Hebrew child, Moses, but also prepares a savior who would soon lead Israel out of the bonds of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

Covenant Conflicts

As the covenant people of God entered into the Promised Land, more covenant conflicts occurred during the conquest of Canaan, the ruling of Judges, and the establishment of the Davidic kingdom. The first challenge of the conquest was the castle of Jericho, to which Joshua sent two spies. In Joshua 2, we are introduced to Rahab, the prostitute. She decided to hide the spies and deceive the king when he sought them out. She misdirected the king's men to pursue the spies. Meanwhile, when the pursuers left, she confessed her faith in the LORD, reassuring the spies that the land would be given to them, and received an oath from the spies, promising protection over her and her family from the coming destruction. This is a clear case where biblical warrants of commendation for her righteous deception exist. Hebrews 11:31 praises her for her faith, and James 2:25 affirms her work of deception as a result of her faith. Furthermore, in Matthew 1:5, Rahab's name is included in the honorable lineage of the Messiah as she contributed to the successful furtherance of God's covenant purposes.

After entering into the Promised Land, the conquest continued with Judges ruling over Israel, defeating the Canaanites and securing rest in the land. In this time of conflict, we have vivid examples of righteous deceptions by Jael against Sisera and Ehud against Eglon.

Jael, the wife of Heber, allured Sisera, the Canaanite commander of 900 iron chariots and cruel oppressor of Israelites (Judges 4:3), by promising him protection from death by hiding him in her tent. But instead, when Sisera fell asleep, Jael drove a peg through his head. The whole army of Canaanites was subsequently subdued, and she was praised as the "most blessed of woman" (Judges 5:24).

Ehud, the left-handed Benjaminite, allured Eglon, whose name עֲגֹלֹן meant calf and was described as fat, by telling him that he has a secret message from God. When Eglon moved himself to his private upper chamber, Ehud thrust Eglon the fattened calf with his hidden sword from the right thigh (as it was customary to be searched the left thigh for right-handed people). Consequently, the whole army of 10,000 Moabites was slaughtered. The narrative is written graphically to suggest imagery of animal sacrifice and a service unto the LORD.

After the days of Judges, God began establishing a kingdom for Himself. When Saul, a king after people's hearts, was rejected by God, Samuel was tasked with anointing a new king after God's heart, David. In 1 Samuel 16, God's prophet Samuel was perplexed to go anoint one of Jesse's sons in place of Saul. When Samuel confessed his fear of being killed by Saul if he discovered what his mission was, the LORD directed Samuel to disguise his true intentions and deceive Saul. The LORD said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, I have come to sacrifice to the Lord" (1 Samuel 16:2). Samuel obeyed God's instruction, was spared of his life, and successfully anointed King David. In this case, the LORD himself encouraged righteous deception for his fearful servant.

Now, King David's life is filled with examples of righteous deception, from him feigning insanity before Achish to fooling Achish to think that David was on his side while he went on defeating Amalekites, the enemies of Israel, but time would fail me to tell of Michal, Jonathan, Abigail, and Nathan.

Even in exile, we see the continuation of righteous deception: Elisha deceived the Syrian army whom the LORD had stricken with blindness by leading them into the hands of the king of Israel, and Esther hiding her ethnic identity until the right time to disclose it to her king for the protection of her covenant people and the punishment of her enemy Haman.

Covenant Consummation

Now that we have surveyed many examples of righteous deception in the Old Testament, we come to the time of God's covenant consummation when, in the fullness of time, Christ, the seed of the woman, appeared on the stage of redemption.

From the very beginning of Jesus' life on earth, we are confronted with a covenant crisis arising from Herod's death threat. Herod embodied the spirit of the serpentine Pharaoh and sought to kill the seed of the woman. Against the threat, Magi, being shrewd, deflect Herod by refusing to return to tell him where the child Jesus was. Magi's use of righteous deception earned Mary and Joseph some time to flee safely down to Egypt until the rage of Herod was over.

Then, we are puzzled with Jesus, the author of all truth, acting decisively discreet. In what is known as the Messianic Secret, Jesus seemed to keep his identity as the Messiah hidden and hushed up by those who recognized his messiahship. His strategic concealment of his identity was his way of controlling the time of his ultimate work.

On one occasion, Jesus' half-brothers, who didn't believe in him, urged Jesus to go into Judea and to the feast to reveal himself to his disciples (John 7:3-4). To them, Jesus said, "I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come" (John 7:8), but the following verse says, "But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not openly but in secret." Here, Jesus' reply to his brothers was given in an underhanded way. Jesus was going up to the feast as it was required of all Jewish males according to Deuteronomy 16:16-17, but he said he would not go, with hidden implication that he would not go in the manner his brothers challenged him to. Thus, the narrator adds, "not openly but in secret." I believe that Jesus answered in this concealing way so that his covenant purpose of timely going to the cross was in no ways hindered. His open identity would only bring unnecessary attention from the faithless Jews and premature attacks from Roman powers.

One can boldly claim that Jesus lied or gave a half-truth like Abraham did concerning his wife-sister Sarah and even call him a coward, a liar, or acknowledge that Jesus acts very shrewdly and tactically against any threatening enemies who desired to overthrow his covenant purposes. Perhaps the cross itself was the most confounding and shocking divine deception, the *pia fraus* ("pious fraud") Jesus used to overthrow his enemies. According to the hidden wisdom of God, the rulers of this age, even the king of death, the devil, did not understand the cross. If they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Corinthians 2:8). Roman and Jewish leaders did not know that hanging Jesus on the cross would bring them utter defeat by Jesus's rising. They did not know that by killing him, his everlasting kingdom would be established in his rising and conquer the world in his ruling. The devil, the deceiver, the death-thirsty destroyer was fooled by the cross that baited him to think that he had won a victory over Christ. When he took the bite on Christ's body by his choicest sting, death, he did not expect to be trapped by the surprise of Christ's

resurrection. Christ had disarmed him in rising, breaking the pangs of death, making a public spectacle of him, and triumphing over him (Colossians 2:15).

Lastly, we see Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Jesus disguised himself so that the two disciples would not recognize their risen Lord. When Jesus asked them what they were discussing on their way, they somewhat reproachfully explained how the Jesus of Nazareth had gone missing. Then Jesus explained that the Scriptures had to be fulfilled, showing how the Messiah would suffer and enter glory. The narrator notes Jesus' feign: "Jesus continued on *as if* he were going farther." The disciples beg him to stay with them. When Jesus went on with them to stay and break bread, their eyes were opened to recognize him. Then, Jesus disappeared. In this case, perhaps, Jesus righteously deceived his disciples to inspire greater faith and engrain in their hearts an unforgettable burning zeal, so they would go spread the good news of his resurrection.

Safeguarding the Use of Righteous Deception

For this section, I first attempt to safeguard my position from summoning some immoral spirits of deception contrary to the truthful character of our Wise God.

In the previous section regarding the setting, I employed the sixth commandment, "thou shalt not kill," to establish that there are exceptional circumstances when taking a life is justifiable and a righteous cause. While the commandment to not kill obligates us to protect life and honor its sanctity, Scripture also requires us to take a life in instances of self-defense (Exodus 22:2), capital punishment (Exodus 21:12-14), and warfare (Deut. 20). However, these instances do not nullify the general obligation to protect and honor life. Similarly, when I advocate for distinguishing between righteous and unrighteous deception, I do not suggest that we abandon the highest standard of truth and that we are now free to deceive our perceived enemies, enemies of our own choosing.

Even more so, now that the seed of the woman, Christ our Lord, had come in the fullness of time and consummated the most crucial part of God's covenant purposes, the redemption of our

souls through the cross, we are to speak the truth of the gospel in love to even our enemies. We are not to go around concealing the gospel from our personal enemies so that they would be damned. No, we are to be like the apostle Paul, who could say, “I am innocent of the blood of all.” And yet, when faced with great hostility against the gospel in the frontiers of the mission field and when God’s new covenant purposes face crises and conflicts, we must be wise as serpents and innocent as doves and shrewdly apply deceptive tactics to further His kingdom.

Regarding the hostile mission field, Sinclair Ferguson in his sermon of Psalm 34, spoke of a Cambodian intellectual written about in Cambodia's first church history book, *Killing Fields, Living Fields*. During the day, the man would run around in the refugee camp as though he had no control over his body, with spittle on his face, like David before Achish of Gath. But, at night, he would take out his little copy of the Word of God underneath his pillow and teach his fellow Cambodians about the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as David took refuge in God of his salvation by acting mad, deceiving his enemies, while tasting and seeing the goodness of God with spittle over his face, the man took refuge in God, and God blessed his mad ministry with many saved lives throughout the killing fields of Cambodia. There were great fruits of conversion through this man. The man was wise during the day, knowing whom to deceive for the preservation of the gospel, and was innocent at night to disclose the life-giving gospel to his fellow prisoners. The hostile setting required him to be discerning for God’s new covenant purposes to continue in fruition. Likewise, to espouse this view of righteous deception, wise discernment is required to know who the dogs and pigs are that would turn and attack you in turn for the precious truths of God.

Conclusion: Further Consideration

In closing, my primary exhortation is for pastors and teachers to carefully consider the ongoing wartime setting between the Serpent and the seed of the woman in redemptive history and incorporate necessary grounds for deceptive tactics when faced with hermeneutical challenges of the biblical narratives, so that no more faithful servants of the LORD are called liars and cowards. Even if it remains controversial, my conclusion is that there must be a distinction between

righteous deception, used by Christ's wise-as-serpent disciples, and unrighteous deception, abused by the Serpent and his servants who only distort God's truth.

Too often, our forefathers of the faith in the Scripture are rebuked by today's pastors and commentators who approach the text primarily in ethical analysis. We would all do well to pattern our hermeneutics after the apostle Peter when he comments on Lot of Genesis 19. Most commentators condemn Lot for his despicable sin of offering or even 'pimping out' his daughters when he is rescued from Sodom, but Peter in 2 Peter 2 doesn't seem to have anything against Lot. Peter uses "righteous" three times to describe Lot. Peter says, "If [God] rescued *righteous* Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that *righteous* man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his *righteous* soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard); then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly..." (2 Peter 2:7-9). Notice how Peter sharply contrasts the wicked and lawless men of Sodom and the righteous Lot. Peter does not speak of imputed righteousness in this text. Given that the whole chapter is about the evil deeds of the wicked, how could Peter use the example of God's people if they are only positionally righteous but practically unrighteous? Peter points out Lot's agonizing hatred against the evil deeds of Sodom. But in Genesis 19, if the threefold righteous Lot had only done condemnable evil against his own family as most commentators judge him so, how could Peter make such sharp distinction and conclude that God saves the godly?

Perhaps, Lot also used righteous deception against the Sodomites by offering his daughters. While I do not intend to develop an apologetic case for Lot fully, there is a great deal of ambiguity and a masterful use of unknown detail omission⁵ in Genesis 19. Genesis 19:14 surprisingly reveals that Lot's daughters were likely not even in his house but at the houses of their husbands, Lot's sons-in-law, for whom Lot went out into the city to rescue with the angels. Most Bible translators make an exegetical decision to add a parenthetical note "who were to marry" behind the "sons-in-

⁵ Athas George, "Has Lot Lost the Plot? Detail Omission and Reconsideration of Genesis 19," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* Vol.16.,2016.

law.” However, a literal translation of “לְקַהֵי בְנֵי־וְ” would be “his sons-in-law, who had married his daughters. Also, Genesis 19:15 adds “הַנִּמְצְאִים” to the two daughters, which literally translates to “who have been found.” Given these considerable details, Lot may have been wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove.

Lastly, I desire that this view of righteous deception would inform and help clarify the consciences of faithful liars like ten Booms who in their *Hiding Place* saved over eight hundred Jews against Nazi occupation of the Netherlands during World War II. The ten Booms had some family disagreements about ‘lying’. In Corrie ten Boom’s autobiographical book, *The Hiding Place*, she discusses the dilemma amongst the sisters. Nollie, Betsie, and Corrie would argue about whether they could lie to Nazis. Nollie and Betsie believed that no one should ever tell a lie. Meanwhile, Corrie justified herself thinking God would see her good intentions, even though lying was a sin. One day, because Nollie could only tell the truth, a Jewish girl who was hiding with them, Annaliese, got taken away to a concentration camp. By God’s grace, Annaliese was later rescued. While their question of lying didn’t hinder them from boldly serving and saving the innocent Jews, I wished that they were taught the category of righteous deception which is an expression of shrewdness employed by God’s people for God’s covenant purposes, so they could have more faithfully lied.

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