

Epics & Ethics: Vital Biblical Principles for Interpreting Scripture Stories¹

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I sat riveted to the television screen as a Special Report suddenly interrupted the program I was watching. The *NBC News* anchor announced that the long-anticipated document prepared by the Office of the Independent Council had just been officially released for distribution to members of the United States Congress, and then to the general public as well. It was Friday afternoon, the 11th of September 1998, and news reporters wasted no time in reading and then revealing the detailed allegations of an extra-marital sexual affair between the President of the United States of America and a former White House intern. Incredulous, I wondered why the findings of the Special Prosecutor were being put on the Internet for everyone to read. At the rate of 300,000 hits per minute on the website, the public rushed to gloat over or blush over the appallingly pornographic 445-page report.² But, what was the purpose of making these obscene accounts known throughout the country, and indeed the whole world?

I lay awake long and late that Friday night, musing and meditating on many stories of the Bible. Why were they recorded? What was the purpose for including these narratives, especially such embarrassing tales as that of King David, the monarch with multiple wives, who sexually seduced the stunning spouse of one of his most admired military men, who “conveniently” happened

¹Throughout this document, the names of living SDA authors whose works I evaluate have been intentionally omitted. This has been done to help the reader focus on the perspectives being addressed, rather than on the proponents of these views. In other words, since scholarship requires it, specific references have been provided; however, the authors’ names have purposely been excluded so all vital concepts can be seriously considered without the reader being distracted by the personalities who promulgate these views.

²This document became the basis on which the United States House of Representatives voted on the 19th of December 1998, to impeach the president, the first time ever that an elected president has been impeached in the United States of America.

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to be away on official business? And what about Abraham, the “father of the faithful,” shading the facts so as to save his own skin? Or Samson, the Scripture’s superman, the politician who propositioned a prostitute? Or Rahab, a heathen harlot, who fabricated a string of falsehoods when concealing Israelite spies?

As I have, over the years, read and studied both the published and unpublished materials produced by Seventh-day Adventists (SDAs), I have become increasingly aware of some of the rather novel ways in which Bible narratives have been and are being interpreted. Though more subtle and less obvious than other current “hot potatoes” in the Adventist community, I believe that several of these procedures for understanding and applying Scripture stories³ are having a pernicious yet profound impact on our perception of ethical issues which will invariably influence the practice of morality in our personal lives.

Allow me to illustrate: In November 1998, I was pleasantly surprised to receive a long-distance call from a good friend of mine, a former student missionary who had been my roommate 20 years earlier. For an hour I listened as he told me about his personal perusal of the Scriptures, his investigation of stories of the marital practices of God-fearing men, and his conclusion that polygamy is permissible for a committed Christian. In fact, in subsequent e-mail communication, he has proposed that it might be “the moral duty of a godly man” to “take the responsibility of husbanding” and “providing for more than one wife.”⁴ Now, he has made it plain to me that, while he is not proposing that one should take any woman already married, one of his major concerns is the need to provide a direct father-figure and husband for the many less-than-ideal single-mother homes which exist today. In fact, he writes: “What if God has in mind, as a hitherto unrecognized part of the last days Elijah message,” a “resurgence of men” who “are willing to shoulder the responsibility of being husbands to more than one woman?”⁵

And, by the way, this is not an isolated incident among SDAs in the USA. Several years ago, while I was still researching and writing my project dissertation on polygamy in the Bible, someone from the General Conference of SDAs contacted me with a request to assist with a “problem” they were having with a person, who turned out to be an academy teacher, who had produced a lengthy document in which he concluded that plural marriage is a fully acceptable practice for contemporary Christians. In our subsequent communication this man indicated that he believed that this teaching was actually part of “present truth” for Adventists.

³In this article, the terms “story,” “narrative,” “chronicle,” etc., are used interchangeably. It is significant that the titles of three of Ellen White’s prominent books all start with the phrase “the story of”: *The Story of Redemption*, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets*, and *The Story of Prophets and Kings*.

⁴Personal e-mail received 3 November 1998.

⁵Personal e-mail received 2 November 1998.

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This issue of novel interpretations of Scripture stories is not confined simply to the manner in which people have dealt with the accounts of polygamy in the Bible, even though examples of plural marriage seem to be frequently utilized.⁶ On the contrary, it appears that numerous biblical narratives are now being retold in radical ways.⁷ Meticulous analysis of these materials reveals some significant trends. While critiquing some of these reinterpreted chronicles, I will briefly outline these strategies, together with their concomitant ethical ramifications. Since it is now being recognized that “stories are a key means by which scripture communicates,”⁸ I will present alternative Scripture-based principles which should provide a dependable, coherent interpretation for a practical application of biblical narratives.

Basic Biblical Presuppositions

Before proceeding with this task, however, one vital methodological matter needs urgent attention, and that is, to demonstrate that the Bible itself does furnish distinct strategies for reliably understanding and appropriately applying its narrative portions. Note this well-worded biblical concept: “No serious interpreter of the Bible can fail to recognize the significance of the principles by which the NT writers interpreted the OT. Although the principles are seldom explicitly stated, they can be derived by careful analysis.”⁹ Admittedly, even though an attempt has been made to “safeguard the importance of objectivity in

⁶See, for example, “A Christian Consideration of Polygamy” (D.Min. project report, Andrews U, 1981); “The Adventist Church’s Position and Response to Socio-Cultural Issues in Africa” (D.Min. project report, Andrews U, 1979); “Between the Ideal and the Actual,” *Adventist Review*, 29 May 1986, 4-5; *Marriage, Divorce, and . . .* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1987); “How Melanesia Shaped My Hermeneutics and Theology: Some Personal Reflections,” in *Avondale and the South Pacific: 100 Years of Mission* (Cooranbong, NSW, Australia: Avondale Academic P, 1997), 93-105.

⁷See, for example, the following materials in which narratives have been utilized, evidently in an attempt to prove or establish specific ethical theories or lifestyle standards: “It’s a Sin to Tell a Lie,” *Insight*, 24 November 1981, 5-8; “In Defense of Rahab,” *Adventist Review*, December 1997, 24-26; “Rahab Revisited,” *Adventist Review*, March 1998, 5; “When the Truth Is a Lie,” in *Lyrics of Love: God’s Top Ten* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1988), 79-86; *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991); *Samuel: From the Danger of Chaos to the Danger of Power*, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1995).

⁸John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 71.

⁹“Inspired Writers’ Interpretation of Inspired Writings,” in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Gordon M. Hyde (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Committee, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1974), 128. Several times in the New Testament, narratives from the Old Testament are told; see, for example, Acts 7; 13; Heb 11-13; 2 Pet 2; Jude. Furthermore, the proper method of interpreting inspired narratives was already evident in Old Testament times; see, for example, Deut 9; 10; Neh 9; Isa 7; Hos 12.

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interpretation,”¹⁰ there is no doubt that “different people can come to different legitimate interpretations of a story.”¹¹ Nevertheless, as this research will demonstrate, “there are limits to what can [authentically] be read out of a story.”¹²

Two of the most prominent New Testament passages that undergird the above declaration regarding the derivation of interpretational principles are found in the writings of the apostle Paul. Romans 15:4, which states that “whatever things were written before were written for our learning,”¹³ indicates that the moral truths of the Old Testament are of permanent value.¹⁴ The same basic truth is reiterated in 1 Corinthians 10:11, the first part of which reads: “Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition.” Based on this passage, some have claimed that the manner in which Old Testament people lived provides us with “God-approved examples of how He wants us to behave in similar moral conflicts.”¹⁵ Thus, it is concluded that stories such as those of Rahab and of the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah have been included in the Bible so that believers will know what to do under comparable circumstances. In other words, it is specifically argued that these stories demonstrate that lying to save life is not only perfectly legitimate but actually the morally right thing to do, without any need for repentance or forgiveness, since this kind of lying is purportedly not considered a sin by God.¹⁶

But is this what the Bible is really saying in 1 Corinthians 10:11? This verse is, in effect, the summary of the preceding passage, in which Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians, “Now these things became our examples, *to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted*” (1 Cor 10:6; emphasis added). Then Paul enumerates some of these evils, such as idolatry and sexual immorality (1 Cor 10:7, 8), together with some of the judgments meted out by God (1 Cor 10:8-10). Thus, rather than merely blindly following Scripture stories, the immediate and broader contexts need to be taken into account in order to distinguish between what the Bible actually teaches and what it simply

¹⁰*Models for Interpretation of Scripture*, 51. Goldingay indicates that the following factors help to explain the reasons for these divergent interpretations: the openness, ambiguity, and complexity of the texts, as well as the fact that there could be many applications of a story; *ibid.*, 51-53.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references in this document will be from the New King James Version (NKJV).

¹⁴“Inspired Writers’ Interpretation of Inspired Writings,” 129.

¹⁵Norman L. Geisler and Paul D. Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 417.

¹⁶See *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective*, 425; Norman L. Geisler, *The Christian Ethic of Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 75; Norman L. Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 136; Norman L. Geisler, “In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics,” *Trinity Journal* 4 (September 1975): 87. For a comprehensive response to these theories see my “A Critical Study of Norman L. Geisler’s Ethical Hierarchicalism” (Th.D. dissertation, University of South Africa, 1997), available at the James White Library, Andrews U, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

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reports so as to portray how far God's people drifted from Him and His holy law.¹⁷ In other words, there *are examples* in Scripture that we should *not follow*. Therefore, far from suggesting that the actions of Bible characters should be uncritically emulated, 1 Corinthians 10:11 is a summons to all believers to "avoid the evils recorded and imitate only the righteousness of those who served the Lord."¹⁸

Recognizing the dangers of simplistically imitating Scripture stories, the following two biblically sound cautions have been suggested:

- (1) Commendation of a person or notable action need not imply commendation of every element of the men and women cited.
- (2) Reporting or narrating an event in Scripture is not to be equated with approving, recommending, or making that action or characteristic normative for emulation by all subsequent readers.¹⁹

Hence, each narrative needs to be analyzed with regard to literary progression, dramatic structure, and stylistic features.

"Though their communication is indirect, narratives nevertheless speak God's truth powerfully when they are *properly interpreted*."²⁰ In brief then, a contextual reading of Scripture shows that "the NT writers saw in the OT a precious storehouse of materials for moral instruction in Christian living."²¹

However, it is not only the Old Testament that provides information and inspiration for moral transformation. The well-known passage in 2 Timothy 3:16, 17 indicates that "*all* Scripture is given by God and is useful" for "showing people what is wrong in their lives," and "for teaching how to live right" (NCV; emphasis added).²² Indeed, John the Beloved tells us the very reason he recorded the "story" of Jesus was so that "you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). This is ultimately the central purpose of all of the Bible, including the narrative portions—to point to Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, as well as the Lord of all life; One who not only reclaims and redeems from sin (John 1:29), but One

¹⁷Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 283.

¹⁸Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 4:12.

¹⁹*Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 283.

²⁰William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., with Kermit A. Eckleberger, consulting editor, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1993), 261 (emphasis added). These authors state that narratives are the most common type of literature in the Bible, the most familiar forms being: reports (anecdotes, battle reports, construction reports, dream reports, epiphany reports, historical stories, and memoirs); heroic narratives (cosmic epics and ancestral epics); prophet stories; comedies; and farewell speeches; *ibid.*, 261-271.

²¹"Inspired Writers' Interpretation of Inspired Writings," 139.

²²When Paul uses the term "Scripture" we know that he includes both Old and New Testament material, since this is the way he uses the term in his earlier letter to Timothy; see 1 Timothy 5:18, where he quotes from both Deuteronomy 25:4 (the Old Testament), and Luke 10:7 (the New Testament).

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who also reforms and transforms the sinner (2 Cor 5:17). Thus, only when the stories of Scripture are seen as focusing on the Savior can they be appropriately understood and correctly applied.

One more component of these chronicles needs to be highlighted: the irrefutable fact that “biblical narrative is replete with realistic figures seen in all their human frailty.”²³ For example:

Literary scholars have long noted the amazing transparency of biblical portraits. Samson’s carnality, David’s lust, Solomon’s political and religious compromise or Elijah’s cowardice in running from Jezebel are all presented with remarkable forthrightness. . . . There was no attempt to hide the human frailty of biblical heroes.²⁴

While it is true that characters such as Elisha and Daniel model perseverance and faithfulness in the face of tremendous pressure,²⁵ “God, not the biblical heroes, is magnified throughout.”²⁶ This adoration is nowhere better exhibited than in the book of Judges. “Every victory wrought is a triumph of God and of the faith of those who place their trust in Him.”²⁷ Thus, rightly understood, Bible stories are to bring praise and honor to the God of the universe.

Six Interpretational Strategies

Now that we have established and highlighted vital fundamental truths of Scripture, we can proceed to catalog the kinds of problematic procedures utilized by some in their explication of biblical narratives, as well as to recommend an alternative methodology which is scripturally sound.

A. Contradictory Reinterpretations or Consistent Renderings. An eloquent and compelling article was recently published concerning the subject of deception. Attempting to prove that “the Old Testament is saturated with examples of [allegedly appropriate deceptive] undercover activities in the accomplishment of the divine purpose,”²⁸ it states:

Jochebed’s strategy to protect the baby Moses might be cited as a case in point. One can argue that every day the lad was kept concealed, Jochebed lived a lie as she went about her regular duties in the community. For, in effect, she was representing herself as standing in compliance with the Egyptian edict when, in fact, she was not.²⁹

²³Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 159.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 267.

²⁶*The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 160.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸“In Defense of Rahab,” 25.

²⁹*Ibid.*

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A simple reading of the actual narrative in the Bible, one which is consistent with the record itself, quickly dispels the unsubstantiated assumptions advanced in the above assertion. Exodus 1:22 notes that after the failure of his plans to exterminate the Israelites, both through brutal taskmasters and God-fearing midwives, “Pharaoh commanded all his people,”³⁰ i.e., “the whole nation”³¹ of Egyptians,³² to drown every newborn Israelite boy in the Nile river. Thus, when it is rightly recognized that the command was given specifically to the Egyptians and not to any Israelites, it becomes obvious that the characterization of Jochebed as one who “lived a lie”³³ clearly contradicts the Word of God, which indicates that she was not violating any command at all. Incidentally, there is nothing innately immoral in the simple act of hiding. This can be observed from a consideration of the various times when Jesus Christ, our sinless Savior, and one in whom there is no “deceit” (1 Peter 2:22), concealed Himself. This includes an occasion when His life was at stake (John 8:59), as well as when He simply wanted to hide away in a house in order to rest and recuperate (Mark 6:30-7:24).³⁴ Since there does not appear to be a shred of evidence that Jochebed, this devout mother in Israel, was involved in any deceptive activity in protecting Moses’ life, it would be unfair and illogical to suggest that this case study supports the hypothesis that it is justifiable to utilize deception “in the accomplishment of the divine purpose.”³⁵ This is especially true in light of Jeremiah’s statement: “Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord deceitfully” (Jer 48:10a).³⁶ While the above-mentioned imaginative, but erroneous, reinterpretation emerges as *contradictory* to the inspired record, the facts that are *consistent* with the biblical narrative exonerate Jochebed and show how God worked through her to attain His divine plan.³⁷ This narrative, rather than offering an excuse to deceive when under distress, inspires us to discover discrete, yet ethically appropriate, ways of obeying God’s absolute moral norms even while living in a hostile environment.³⁸

³⁰Emphasis added.

³¹Ellen G. White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 242.

³²J. Cheryl Exum, “‘You Shall Let Every Daughter Live’: A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10,” *Se-meia* 28 (1983): 75, concurs, noting that “‘all his people,’ v. 22, appears to mean only the Egyptians.”

³³“In Defense of Rahab,” 25.

³⁴See Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898), 399.

³⁵“In Defense of Rahab,” 25.

³⁶The second part of this verse must be understood in light of the fact that at that time Israel was a theocracy, under the command of God, the Creator of all life.

³⁷This is the kind of thing that happened in the early Christian church: “God used Paul to do powerful special works” (Acts 19:11 NLV).

³⁸Commenting on the parables told by Jesus, it has been observed that “He told true-to-life stories to make clear to His hearers the true meaning of life,” with the primary purpose of getting “a commitment from His hearers to a new life experience;” “Interpretation of Symbols, Types, Allego-

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Another illustration of discrepant renderings of the biblical record can be seen in the writings that promote the propriety of practicing polygamy under certain circumstances. For example, completely misreading the genealogical listings, it is asserted that the God-fearing Lamech, “the father of Noah, had two wives (Gen 4:19).”³⁹ Then, further misrepresenting the scriptural data, it is claimed that “Abraham had a principal wife Sarah and two lesser wives (Gen 16:3; 25:1).”⁴⁰ Based on life histories as reinterpreted here, it is then concluded that “polygamy was accepted as a legal form of marriage by most of the Old Testament writers.”⁴¹ A quick look at the Bible itself, including the specific references provided in these statements, reveals that the above information *contradicts* the plain facts on record. For example, Genesis 4:16-19 indicates that the man named “Lamech,” the world’s first polygamist, was a descendant of Cain, and not the father of Noah in the godly line of Seth, as claimed above. Also, contrary to the charge that Abraham had three wives at the same time, the Genesis account indicates that, at God’s instruction, he terminated his relationship with Hagar (Gen 21:12), and then married Keturah only subsequent to the death of Sarah (Gen 23:1, 2; cf. 25:1). Thus, when this narrative of Abraham is interpreted in a manner *consistent* with the inspired account, it becomes obvious that the above allegation, that Abraham had a “principal wife” and “two lesser wives” simultaneously, cannot be corroborated by the Scriptures.

Adventists are not unique in this kind of narrative manipulation. Consider for a moment the perspective of a prolific evangelical who holds that it is morally right to violate one of the Ten Commandments as long as in so doing one keeps a so-called “higher law.”⁴² As part of the vindication for this view, the following statement is made: “David and his men who *broke* into the temple and *stole* the consecrated bread were declared guiltless by Christ (Matt. 12:3-4).”⁴³ Then, based on this comment, the following moral tenet is suggested: “Perhaps ‘stealing’ bread from the temple (that is, taking it without permission of the proper authority) is not morally wrong when starvation of God’s servant is the other alternative.”⁴⁴ The original story, found in 1 Samuel 21, illuminates the brief comment made by Jesus in the New Testament. David had been fleeing for his

ries, and Parables,” in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics* (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Committee, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1974), 219.

³⁹“The Church and Polygamy in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 1981, TMs [photocopy], p. 24, Adventist Heritage Center, James White Library, Andrews U, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 24-25.

⁴²Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 119.

⁴³*Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*, 120 (emphasis added). See also, *ibid.*, 109; Norman L. Geisler, *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 78-79, 88; Norman L. Geisler, “Conflicting Absolutism,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society* 2 (1979): 6.

⁴⁴*Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*, 107.

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life from Saul when he arrived at Nob. Hungry, he asked the priest, Ahimelech, for some food. Even though the only available food was the consecrated bread that was to be eaten by the priests exclusively, David requested this bread for himself and his men. Ahimelech, after receiving guidance from God (1 Sam 22:10), decided to give them the bread because they were ceremonially clean.

In the entire story, as recorded in both Old and New Testaments, there is no indication that David “broke into the temple,” as has been alleged. Rather, as Jesus says, “he entered the house of God” (Matt 12:4). Moreover, *consistent* with the biblical account, there is no evidence that David “stole the consecrated bread,” as charged above. Instead, he was given the bread by the priest who had consulted God on the matter. Clearly, only by flatly *contradicting* the scriptural account can David be inaccurately cast in the role of one who “broke” into God’s temple to “steal” food in order to survive. Accordingly, this inaccurately rendered incident cannot rightly be used to sustain the unbiblical theory that certain moral laws can be broken without any moral culpability. Incidentally, this matter of who was allowed to eat the consecrated bread was not a moral, but merely a ceremonial law, which was “overturned by Christ showing it is not absolute in application.”⁴⁵ As has been recognized: “In the instance of David and his men, a ritualistic law was being violated for the sake of maintaining human life. These laws of the cultus obviously were temporal in nature.”⁴⁶ Thus, when this chronicle of the consumption of the consecrated bread is comprehended in a manner *consistent* with the complete scriptural account, it becomes clear that “this incident cannot be used to show that Christ approved of breaking Old Testament [moral] laws because of expediency.”⁴⁷ Hence, this incident serves to reinforce the concept that, while ceremonial regulations were of limited scope and restricted duration, God’s moral laws are eternal, immutable, and applicable in all situations.

B. Conjectural Interpretation or Contextual Implications. One of the more perilous strategies employed by some in the retelling of stories, especially of brief narratives that seem to omit some details,⁴⁸ is the method of conjectural interpretation. Take, for example, the “frightful and delightful”⁴⁹ account of Elisha and the Syrian army (2 Kgs 6:8-20). Speculating that the prophet must

⁴⁵Chris Brown, “A Brief Analysis of Geisler’s Hierarchical Proof Texts,” 1985, TMs [photocopy], p. 15, Center for Research and Scholarship, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia.

⁴⁶O. Palmer Robertson, “Reflections on the New Testament Testimony Concerning Civil Disobedience,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (September 1990): 334. For biblical evidence of this, see for example, Col 2:14-17.

⁴⁷Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1972), 77.

⁴⁸It has been noted that in all narratives there “are the gaps, the things left unsaid,” for “one never receives a step by step, sequential presentation of everything;” Terrance O. Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York, NY: Paulist, 1985), 102-103.

⁴⁹“When the Truth Is a Lie,” 84.

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surely have known that the enemy were out to capture him, it has been alleged that Elisha misled the troops. Based on such *conjecturing* it is then submitted that this is one of the “incidents that illustrate how God’s people understood the limits and proper application of the ninth commandment.”⁵⁰ Put plainly, it is posited that this Scripture story teaches that it is not only legitimate to lie to save life, but that this is what it means to live ethically in God’s kingdom.⁵¹

Others too have charged that “Elisha deceived his would-be captors in order to save his life,”⁵² and that this narrative proves that there is “divine approval of falsification for life-saving.”⁵³ While on the surface it might appear that Elisha was involved in deception, the question must be asked as to what can be learned from the actual text and surrounding context. In brief, the narrative is about an attempt by the Syrians to kill the king of Israel. Their efforts failed when God informed Elisha, who then warned the Israelite king. When the Syrians discovered the reason for their failure, they changed their plans and set out to capture Elisha. Though the reader of the Bible story obviously knows about this new development, there is no evidence that Elisha himself was aware of this. Thus, fearless of the foe, and with confidence in his Creator’s protection, Elisha asked God to temporarily blind these military forces. Then, still apparently under the impression that these Syrians wanted the Israelite king as previously, Elisha took them as captives to the capital, presented them to the king, and treated them with incredible hospitality. If the story is interpreted on the weight of internal evidence, Elisha stands out in this incident as a man of truthfulness; as one who operated non-deceptively within the limits and boundaries of the information at his disposal. There is no proof at all that Elisha deceived his foes in order to save his own life.⁵⁴ Rather, this chronicle teaches that Elisha believed in loving

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 83-86.

⁵² *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective*, 417. See also Richard Higginson, *Dilemmas: A Christian Approach to Moral Decision Making* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1988), 64.

⁵³ *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective*, 417.

⁵⁴ In fact, when one studies the entire story and realizes how close to God Elisha was and how much he trusted in His divine power and protection, it seems rather unreasonable to assume that Elisha knew the enemy was after him and that therefore he stooped to using deception to protect himself. However, if one insists on assuming that Elisha did know that the Syrian king was now after him, and that he therefore actually did lie, this still does not “prove” that deception is acceptable to God. What it would show is that, even after God had provided superior supernatural forces to protect him, and after God had miraculously blinded the enemy, Elisha’s faith somehow faltered when facing a blinded and essentially conquered foe. Obviously this does not make much sense at all. But, if this is what happened, it must be remembered that no human being is to be held up as an example. The only example to be unquestioningly followed is Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:21). Other biblical characters are to be emulated only as they imitated Jesus, and acted in faithfulness and loving loyalty to God’s clearly revealed will in Scripture. As Paul states: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1 NCV). For those who contend that we do not know whether or not Elisha knew that the Syrians were now after him, the most that can then be concluded from this incident is nothing about truth-telling or deception, but rather that kindness is more powerful than the sword.

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and doing good to his enemies (see Luke 6:27, 28). Solomon put it this way: “If the one who hates you is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him water. If you do that, you will be making him more ashamed of himself, and the Lord will pay you” (Prov 25:21, 22 NLV). And this is the lesson for us as well: To treat those who hate us with kindness and love.

Another example of this type of speculative interpretation appears in an article dealing with evangelizing polygamous peoples. Without any supportive scriptural evidence, it is *conjectured* that in the Bible the levirate custom “was a major cause of polygamy.” It is alleged that the biblical “levirate is a binding obligation,” which makes polygamy “inevitable.”⁵⁵ Based on this unprovable postulation, it is then categorically concluded that the Old Testament levirate law “was one of the two major foundation pillars of polygamy.”⁵⁶

Admittedly, there are few examples in Scripture of the custom outlined in Deuteronomy 25:5-10,⁵⁷ in which the dead man’s brother or nearest relative actually marries his widow. Careful *contextual* analysis of this actual legislation indicates that the levirate was established as a regular marriage, for the purpose of raising up a male heir to perpetuate the lineage of the childless, deceased man. According to the implication of the text, this optional custom was to be practiced only if the brother were not already married, thus excluding the possibility of coercing anyone into polygamy. Furthermore, an examination of every case of the practice of the levirate in its immediate and broader *contexts* in Scripture,⁵⁸ demonstrates that there is no proof whatsoever that this convention ever caused or resulted in polygamy.⁵⁹ As has been concisely stated: “The interpretation of a story thus emerges from the story itself.”⁶⁰ Thus, while *conjectured* assumptions about the levirate practice may appear to promote polygamy, a proper *contextual* approach to biblical accounts indicates that this divine regulation “harmonized well with the model of monogamous marriage as instituted by God at creation.”⁶¹

As an additional attempt to bolster this argument of accepting practicing polygamists into the church, suppositions connected with Elkanah’s marital practice have been indulged in. After hypothesizing that Elkanah was “apparently an ordinary peasant farmer,” it is then contended that “it can be inferred from this story that most ordinary households in Israel were probably monoga-

⁵⁵“Must Polygamists Divorce?” *Spectrum* 13 (September 1982): 47.

⁵⁶“The Church and Polygamy in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 28.

⁵⁷See my *Polygamy in the Bible* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1998), 97-112.

⁵⁸See Gen 38; Ruth 1-4; Matt 22:23-38 (cf. Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-33).

⁵⁹See my “Does Levirate Law Promote Polygamy?” in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea*, ed. David Merling (Berrien Springs, MI: Institute of Archaeology/Horn Archaeological Museum, 1997), 271-289.

⁶⁰*Models for Interpretation of Scripture*, 22.

⁶¹“Does Levirate Law Promote Polygamy?” 284.

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mous but that quite a few may have been bigamous or even polygamous.”⁶² Based on this *conjecture*, among other factors, it is presumptuously concluded that “polygamy was clearly accepted as a valid form of marriage.”⁶³ The *context* of the biblical narrative suggests that, in contrast to the above speculation, Elkanah was not simply one of the common people.⁶⁴ When his son, Samuel, had been weaned, he was taken to be dedicated to serve in the house of the Lord. Part of the sacrifice consisted of “three bulls” (1 Sam 1:24).⁶⁵ This “very expensive offering”⁶⁶ indicates that Elkanah had resources not generally available to a common Israelite.⁶⁷ In the words of Ellen White, Elkanah “was a man of wealth and influence.”⁶⁸ Furthermore, there might be some significance to the fact that, in the text immediately following the mention of Elkanah’s polygamy, the two sexually immoral priests, Hophni and Phinehas, are introduced (1 Sam 2:22). Recognizing that even the spiritual leaders of the Israelites were promiscuous, it comes as no surprise to learn that the wealthy and influential Elkanah chose to become polygamous in those days when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 21:25b).⁶⁹ Ellen White observes that Elkanah’s choice of taking in a second wife was “prompted by a lack of faith in God,”⁷⁰ and was “a

⁶²The Church and Polygamy in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 24.

⁶³Ibid., 27; see also, *ibid.*, 24-25.

⁶⁴According to 1 Chronicles 6:33-38 Elkanah was a Levite, though not of the Aaronic priestly line.

⁶⁵Compare this with the sacrifice the poor were permitted to bring, “two turtle-doves or two pigeons” (Lev 12:8), which is what the poverty-stricken parents of Jesus brought to the temple (see Luke 2:22-24).

⁶⁶Kenneth L. Chafin, *1, 2 Samuel*, The Communicator’s Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 32.

⁶⁷David Michael Hall, “Polygamy in the Bible and the Ancient Near East: A Comparative Study” (M.Th. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984), 30.

⁶⁸White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 569. Elkanah is included as one of the “wealthy individuals” who were polygamists, according to *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (1986), s.v. “Polygamy.”

⁶⁹The existence of similarities between the books of Samuel and Judges is well recognized. “A reading of the Books of Samuel shows that they are the same type of literature as that found in the Book of Judges. The same motifs are to be found;” Eric Charles Rust, *The Book of Judges; The Book of Ruth; The First and Second Books of Samuel*, The Layman’s Bible Commentary (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1982), 77. See also Francis D. Nichol, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. 7 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976-1980), 2:448; James Conper Gray and George M. Adams, eds., *The Biblical Encyclopedia*, 5 vols. (Cleveland, OH: F. M. Barton, 1903), 1:693; David F. Payne, *I & II Samuel*, The Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1982), 1; Henry Preserved Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1899), xii. It has been rightly recognized that “the conditions reflected in the opening chapters of Samuel are those of the period of the Judges;” S. Goldman, *Samuel*, Soncino Books of the Bible Series (London, England: Soncino, 1951), x. Bearing in mind the similarities between these books, the final statement of the book of Judges (ch. 21:25b) is thus significant. Such was the environment in which Elkanah lived.

⁷⁰White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 569.

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course which God did not sanction.”⁷¹ Thus, when understood in its appropriate scriptural *context* the story of Elkanah’s violation of God’s monogamous marital standards fails to provide a positive model for the Christian to emulate. When correctly rendered, according to the actual biblical *contexts*, these examples of the practice of polygamy become a summons for all to live life in accord with the Creator’s monogamous marital norms.

This type of *conjecturing* in connection with biblical narratives surfaces in other ethical literature. As part of the attempt to prove that lying to save life is right, it is asserted: “No doubt Obadiah the prophet engaged in some deceptive activity to save the lives of one hundred prophets of God (1 Kings 18:13).”⁷² Thorough investigation of the entire biblical record indicates that there is no evidence whatsoever that Obadiah was involved in any “deceptive activity,” as has been alleged.⁷³ The passage, in light of its *context*, reports that during the time that Jezebel was murdering the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah “hid one hundred men of the Lord’s prophets, fifty to a cave, and fed them with bread and water.”⁷⁴ If one is to assume, as has been proposed above, that Obadiah doubtless engaged in some type of deception in order to protect the lives of these men, then one could also surmise that he most likely stole the bread and water for these innocent victims, since commodities were certainly in short supply during the famine. But all this groundless groping beyond the textual testimony is a reading into the account of one’s own suppositions, rather than accepting the passage just as it reads. This type of distorted eisegesis seems to be a desperate bid to find support for a non-scriptural theory. The chronicle itself reveals how God worked through the courageous efforts of a self-sacrificing servant to provide protection for His own prophets, and by implication it challenges all to be willing to selflessly support legitimate leaders in the Lord’s work (see 2 Chr 20:20; cf. Matt 5:12; 23:29-35).

By way of summary, while avoiding the construction of theories upon mere *conjecture*, the careful student of Scripture will take into account all *contextual implications* and relevant factors before drawing any conclusions.

C. Convoluted Descriptions or Conventional Definitions. Recently, a new trend seems to be emerging in the interpretation of Scripture stories: the construction of novel meanings for well-known terms. Consider for a few moments the following rationalistic reasoning in response to the question, “What should the Christian do, when telling the naked truth can result in the direct loss

⁷¹Ellen G. White, “The Birth of Samuel,” *Signs of the Times*, 27 October 1881, 469.

⁷²*The Christian Ethic of Love*, 79.

⁷³Moreover, there is no textual evidence that Obadiah was a “prophet,” as alleged. It appears as though Obadiah is referred to as a “prophet” in an attempt to further bolster the case about the supposed rightness of lying to save life.

⁷⁴1 Kgs 18:13. While the issue considered above is whether or not it is ever right to lie, it must be noted that Obadiah’s action can be seen as an act of biblically-justifiable civil disobedience (see, for example, Dan 1; 3; 6; cf. Acts 5:29).

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of innocent human life?”⁷⁵ First, the following subtly sarcastic statement is made: “If a lie is the simple utterance of an untruth, then the student who writes on a test paper that London is the capital of Japan is lying.”⁷⁶ Quickly crushing this creative caricature, it is alternatively proposed that, “Common sense would dictate that *intent* and *motive* must come into the equation.”⁷⁷ Finally, in place of the fraudulent formulation of a “lie” given above, the following concept is then promulgated: “To lie, as I see it, *is to make a false statement, with wicked or malicious or selfish intent to [impress,] deceive or mislead.*”⁷⁸

On the surface, this description might appear appropriate and even accurate. But careful consideration reveals at least the following three serious problems:

1. Contrary to the Biblical Definition. To begin with, let’s consider the Bible’s own definition of deception. There has been some debate as to the actual meaning of the ninth commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod 20:16). It has been stated that the language of this law “is clearly legal, forbidding malicious perjury.”⁷⁹ Consequently, it is concluded that “this commandment by itself, strictly interpreted, hardly constitutes a prohibition of any and every kind of deception.”⁸⁰ Accordingly, at times any type of deception has been promoted in order to preserve human life.⁸¹ While some

⁷⁵“In Defense of Rahab,” 26.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid. The word “impress” was added in a subsequent article, in which an attempt was made to clarify the position taken in the earlier article. See “Rahab Revisited,” 5. A similar emphasis on “motives” is seen in *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*, 130; and *Samuel: From the Danger of Chaos to the Danger of Power*, 200, 255 (in this latter passage it is claimed that “intention becomes crucial for a correct understanding and application of the command against bearing false testimony [Exod. 20:16; Deut. 5:20]”).

⁷⁹“The Ten Commandments and Ethical Dilemmas,” in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea*, ed. David Merling (Berrien Springs, MI: Institute of Archaeology/Horn Archaeological Museum, 1997), 269. That this is not necessarily so, is evident from the way in which the term is used in various passages (see, for example, 2 Kgs 9:12; Isa 9:15; Jer 14:14), to prohibit deception in general, and not merely in court. The Hebrew lexicon confirms that this word means “deception” in a more general sense; see *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 1055.

⁸⁰“The Ten Commandments and Ethical Dilemmas,” 269. In basic agreement with the above concept, it has been stated: “The command against bearing false witness, when we ‘narrow the letter’ [i.e., ‘look rigorously at the letter of the law in its original context’], clearly refers to the telling of falsehoods with the *intent to injure* innocent people;” *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*, 117. After “broadening the spirit” to include the “heart,” the conclusion is drawn that “circumstances may arise when telling the truth . . . could mean disobeying the letter of God’s law;” *ibid.*, 118. This reasoning is understood as follows, in a supportive way: “Depending on the context, he [i.e., the author of *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*] considers that circumstances might arise where lying or killing would constitute obedience to God;” “A Practical Theological Perspective on Adventist Theology and Contextualisation,” *Journal of Adventist Thought in Africa* 1 (November 1995): 142.

⁸¹See “The Ten Commandments and Ethical Dilemmas,” 271.

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modern linguists may endorse and promote this restricted view of the so-called literal meaning of the ninth commandment,⁸² it is profoundly more significant to determine how the divinely inspired Bible writers themselves understood and interpreted this moral requirement.

While a superficial reading of Exodus 20:16 may admittedly appear to prohibit only lying in court, Leviticus 19 paints a much broader picture. Even a casual look at this levitical legislation reveals that virtually every one of the Ten Commandments is reiterated here, though in a different format.⁸³ Verse 11, which contains both the eighth and the ninth commandments, states: “You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another.” The Hebrew term used here, *kāḥaš*, is an expression found throughout Old Testament writings that encompasses and prohibits different types of deception, and is not simply restricted to legal issues.⁸⁴ Indeed, it has been recognized that “this text in Leviticus does prohibit ‘any form of lying or deception.’”⁸⁵ This is the identical word found in the charges of law-breaking brought against the people of Israel by Hosea, the mid-eighth century B.C. prophet. Hosea 4:2 notes that the Israelites were “lying (*kāḥaš*), killing and stealing and committing adultery.” The Hebrew terms employed here for “killing,” “stealing,” and “committing adultery,” are identical to the ones in the Ten Commandments. However, in connection with the ninth commandment, instead of using the supposedly limited expression found in the Decalogue, Hosea selected the word *kāḥaš*, which includes deception in general.⁸⁶ Thus, it becomes evident that the divinely-inspired Old Testament writers understood the ninth commandment as prohibiting perjury as well as all other kinds of deceit.

An analogous situation emerges from an overview of the manner in which New Testament writers perceived the meaning of this law. Perhaps best known of these references to the Decalogue are the statements made by Jesus. In His response to the rich young ruler’s question as to which commandments he needed to observe, Jesus said, in part: “‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness’” (Matt

⁸²Not all agree on this restricted view; see, for example, Martin A. Klopfenstein, *Die Luge Nach dem Alten Testament* (Zurich & Frankfurt: Gotthelf, 1964), 17, quoted in Ora Horn Prouser, “The Phenomenology of the Lie in Biblical Narrative” (Ph.D. dissertation, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1991), 24.

⁸³In brief, here is how the first nine of the ten commandments are outlined: The first, in vs. 2, 14; the second, in v. 4; the third, in v. 12; the fourth, in vs. 3, 30; the fifth, in v. 3; the sixth, in v. 16; the seventh, in vs. 20, 29; the eighth, in vs. 11, 13, 35; and the ninth, in v. 11.

⁸⁴See, for example, its use when people lie to other people: 1 Kings 13:18; Jeremiah 5:12; and when people try to deceive God: Genesis 18:15; Joshua 7:11.

⁸⁵T. Barr, “Women Who Lied for the Faith,” in *Justice and the Holy: Essays in Honor of Walter Harrelson* (USA: Scholars Press, 1989), 35.

⁸⁶Interestingly, when Jeremiah, the late seventh century B.C. prophet of Judah, similarly castigates God’s people for violating His laws, he uses all four of the same terms as found in the decalogue, including *šeqer*, the word for bearing false witness: “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely?” (Jer 7:9a).

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19:18; cf. Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30). The Greek expression, *pseudomartureō*, which the lexicon defines as to “bear false witness,” or to “give false testimony,”⁸⁷ is the term used for the ninth commandment, and it appears to approximate the same sense of the original Hebrew expression. This is the identical word used in Matthew 15:19, where Jesus comments: “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.” Interestingly, when Mark records the same story in his gospel account (7:22), he utilizes a different Greek expression, *dolos*, one which includes deception of every shape and form.⁸⁸ A comparable example of the interchangeability of these two terms is seen in Paul’s writings. While he uses *pseudomartureō* in Romans 13:9, where he enumerates several of the commandments, in Romans 1:28-32 he uses *dolos* in a long catalog of vices. And it is this expression which is employed in 1 Peter 2:22 to describe an evil trait not found in our “example,” Jesus Christ: “Nor was deceit (*dolos*) found in His mouth.”⁸⁹ Thus, similar to their Old Testament counterparts, New Testament writers viewed the ninth commandment as including more than merely a prohibition against perjury in a legal setting.

Furthermore, examination of the ninth commandment, in its original setting in Exodus as well as in its multiple occurrences throughout Scripture,⁹⁰ reveals that this ethical obligation is always stated in a categorical manner, without any exceptions, exemptions, or reservations: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod 20:16); “And do not lie to each other” (Col 3:9 NJB). None of the texts forbidding falsehood suggests that lying is justifiable or at least excusable depending on the predicament one might be in, or the motive for telling the lie. All of these passages simply prohibit deception without any qualification whatsoever! As succinctly summarized in a doctoral dissertation on deceivers in Scripture: “The motivation of the liar, positive or negative, is not relevant.”⁹¹

It seems quite significant, then, that under divine inspiration, Bible writers of both Testaments understood this moral law as forbidding all forms of falsehood, under all possible conditions, irrespective of projected consequences, and regardless of purportedly pure motives. Ellen White’s extensive explication of this ethical norm comports favorably with the scriptural definition delineated above. She comments:

⁸⁷William F. Arndt & F. Wilber Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th ed. (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1952), 900.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 202. Note the use of this term in this manner in Acts 13:10.

⁸⁹Since “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt 12:34), it is clear that not only did Jesus never speak a deceptive word, but He also never acted deceitfully either. Interestingly, this identical term, *dolos* (deception), is used in Revelation 14:5 to describe an evil trait completely absent from the redeemed ones who “follow the Lamb wherever He goes.”

⁹⁰See Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20; Matt 19:18; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20; Rom 13:9; cf. Matt 15:19.

⁹¹“The Phenomenology of the Lie in Biblical Narrative,” 19.

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False speaking in any matter, every attempt or purpose to deceive our neighbor, is here included. An intention to deceive is what constitutes falsehood. By a glance of the eye, a motion of the hand, an expression of the countenance, a falsehood may be told as effectually as by words. All intentional overstatement, every hint or insinuation, even the statement of facts in such a manner so as to mislead, is falsehood.⁹² This precept forbids every effort to injure our neighbor's reputation by misrepresentation or evil surmising, by slander or tale-bearing.⁹³

As Ellen White astutely notes: "Truth is of God; deception in every one of its myriad forms, is of Satan."⁹⁴ And, according to Ellen White, this includes lying to save life: "Even life itself should not be purchased with the price of falsehood."⁹⁵ Hence, instead of adopting a fallacious, humanly formulated view of falsehood, it would be prudent and the only safe course for the committed Christian to embrace the divinely designed definition of deception, for only in so doing will there be opportunity for an accurate understanding and an appropriate application of God's royal law of liberty (Jas 2:8-12).

2. *Conflict with the Dictionary Definition.* The novel concept that a "lie" is "a false statement, with wicked or malicious or selfish intent to [impress,] deceive or mislead,"⁹⁶ does not correspond with the conventional understanding of the word. A painstaking investigation of three major English dictionaries covering the last century, from 1897 through 1997,⁹⁷ reveals an amazing unanimity regarding the essence of words which address the issue of misleading someone. Whether it be "deceit," "deceive," "falsehood," "lie," or "prevaricate," the same basic idea emerges: It is a deliberate distortion of the truth, by word or deed, with the objective of misleading. Thus, there are two, and only two, essential elements in this dictionary definition relating to any kind of deception: (1) an action perverting the truth; and (2) an aim to purposely misinform. Significantly, for at least the past one hundred years, there has never been even the remotest

⁹²Consider, for example, the following anecdote of an automobile race held in the former Soviet Union. Only two cars participated—one made in the USA, the other in the USSR. The American car won. The next day the official press briefly reported: "Yesterday, there was a car race, in which a Russian car came in second, and an American car second to last." Now, while the facts were technically correct, they were told in such a way as to deceive.

⁹³White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 309.

⁹⁴Ellen G. White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1956), 68 (emphasis added). Notice that Ellen White also holds to the biblical view of obedience regardless of circumstances, reasons, or results: "We should not follow impulse, nor rely on the judgment of men; we should look to the revealed will of God, and walk according to His definite commandment, no matter what circumstances surround us. God will take care of the results;" White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 622.

⁹⁵White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:336.

⁹⁶"In Defense of Rahab," 26.

⁹⁷See the *New Revised Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, 1897; the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged Edition*, 1966; and the *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, 2d ed., 1997.

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hint that the idea of “motive” forms a part of the proper meaning of terms describing deception. Concurring, it has quite correctly been recognized that Christian behavior cannot really be judged “by motive (which is truly known only to God) or by end result (which can humanly never be foreseen with complete accuracy and completeness), but [only] by conformity to precepts that Christians believe came from God.”⁹⁸

Thus, rather than accepting the above *convoluted description* of a “lie,” which was apparently devised to justify some form of deception, it is best to utilize the *conventional definition*, which accords well with the true biblical meaning of these terms.

3. *Confusion of Other Moral Regulations.* The above phrase “with wicked or malicious or selfish intent” implies, by contrast, that a false statement, told with benevolent, altruistic, or compassionate motives, is not a lie, even though its purpose is to deceive or mislead. If any of the other Ten Commandments are modified in this manner, the results would be ludicrous and morally catastrophic. For example, the eighth commandment would then read: “Stealing is to take another person’s possessions, with wicked or malicious or selfish intent, without their permission;” meaning, by contrast, that you may swipe someone’s goods, as long as it is done with noble intentions! Or consider a similarly revised seventh commandment: “Adultery is when one is motivated by wicked or malicious or selfish desires to have sex outside of marriage;” meaning that extramarital sex is justifiable, if done “lovingly,” “kindly,” or “magnanimously.” This is sometimes euphemistically labeled “sacrificial adultery.” Obviously, since the Decalogue simply calls for loving, loyal obedience to its absolute imperatives, irrespective of so-called virtuous motives, we need to observe them faithfully “even unto death” (Rev 2:10b KJV).

Frankly, there are several other instances of convoluted descriptions being used to dazzle and disorient people. For instance, apparently uncomfortable with using direct language to describe deception, various individuals have employed subtle, “user-friendly” phrases such as “a diversionary tactic,”⁹⁹ an “imaginative strategy,”¹⁰⁰ a “playful trick,”¹⁰¹ or “a very practical solution.”¹⁰² Whatever happened to the challenge to “call a spade a spade”? Ellen White charges us: “Call sin by its right name. Declare what God has said in regard to *lying*, Sabbathbreaking, stealing, idolatry, and every other evil.”¹⁰³ Indeed, while there might be a tendency to euphemize expressions as a way of excusing actions,

⁹⁸“The Ten Commandments and Ethical Dilemmas,” 266.

⁹⁹“Letters,” *Adventist Review*, May 1998, 3.

¹⁰⁰“Rahab Revisited,” 5.

¹⁰¹“When the Truth Is a Lie,” 84.

¹⁰²“Letters,” *Adventist Review*, 11 September 1997, 3.

¹⁰³White, *The Desire of Ages*, 806 (emphasis added); see also Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 57.

“this is a time for Christians to stand tall for truth—in the midst of a forest of lies.”¹⁰⁴

In Colossians 2:8 (NIV) Paul cautions: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”¹⁰⁵ That’s the choice: “Human tradition” or “Christ.” In fact, in this same book, Paul stresses the vital necessity of a dynamic relationship with our Creator, Jesus Christ, as the key to the issue of truth-telling in any Christian’s life (see Col 3:9, 10).¹⁰⁶ Similarly, recognizing that “it is not a light or an easy thing to speak the exact truth,” Ellen White says that “we cannot speak the truth unless our minds are continually guided by Him who is truth.”¹⁰⁷ All of us must make a pivotal decision: Either we will choose to follow Satan, “the father of lies” (John 8:44 ICB), or we will elect to emulate Jesus Christ, who declares of Himself: “I am the truth” (John 14:6 ICB)!

D. Conflationary Reconstructions or Chronological Readings. Scholars who have carefully studied the Scriptures have rightly pointed out that biblical narratives are not complete stories, recording every detail. Rather, what we find in the Bible are “selective, emphasized, and interpreted accounts of historical events.”¹⁰⁸ For instance, John explicitly admits that his gospel does not include “many other things that Jesus did” (John 21:25). Nevertheless, he “indicates that the selective nature of his account did not impinge on its truthfulness.”¹⁰⁹

Unfortunately, some have conflated various Scripture stories in such a manner that crucial information is distorted. Take the case history of David. Frequently, in the discussion on polygamy one hears the argument: “David had many wives; yet, the Bible records that he was a man after God’s own heart.”

According to 1 Samuel 13:8-14, it was immediately after Saul had presumptuously officiated as priest in offering up a burnt sacrifice at Gilgal that Samuel informed him that he would lose his kingdom. In this context Samuel stated: “The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart” (1 Sam 13:14). This young shepherd David, selected by God to replace Saul, was handsome, healthy, and living in harmony with the will of God (1 Sam 16:7, 12). The narrative, when read chronologically, indicates that it was while David was yet an unmarried man, and before he became embroiled in polygamy, that God

¹⁰⁴“A Forest of Lies,” *Adventist Review*, 16 April 1998, 20.

¹⁰⁵Peter also sounds a caution about those who “will exploit you with deceptive words” (2 Pet 2:3).

¹⁰⁶“And do not lie to each other. You have stripped off your old behaviour with your old self, and you have put on a new self which will progress toward true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of its Creator” (Col 3:9, 10 NJB).

¹⁰⁷White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, 68.

¹⁰⁸V. Philips Long, *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 149. See also *ibid.*, 154, for more on the phenomenon of “omission” in narratives.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 149. See John 21:24.

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called him “a man after His own heart.” Concurring with the biblical data, Ellen White comments at length:

Skeptics have assailed [C]hristianity, and ridiculed the Bible, because David gave them occasion. They bring up to Christians the case of David, his sin in the case of Uriah and Bathsheba, his polygamy, and then assert that David is called a man after God’s own heart, and if the Bible record is correct, God justified David in his crimes.

I was shown that it was when David was pure, and walking in the counsel of God, that God called him a man after his own heart. When David departed from God, and stained his virtuous character by his crimes, he was no longer a man after God’s own heart.¹¹⁰

In other words, David was chosen by God as the next king of Israel when he was living within God’s will. It was clearly at this time, and not when David departed from following God’s moral requirements, and started indulging in polygamy and other sins, that God considered him “a man after His own heart.”¹¹¹

A similar conflation of scriptural data is evident in the manner in which Acts 15 has been used in connection with the issue of women’s ordination.¹¹² In an otherwise excellent presentation on the importance of unity in the church, the crucial fact that the Jerusalem Council decision was founded upon a solid biblical rationale, rather than merely cultural considerations, has been omitted.¹¹³

¹¹⁰Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 4 vols. (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press of the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1864; reprint, Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1945), 4a:87. See also Lewis Grout, *A Reply to Bishop Colenso’s Remarks on the Proper Treatment of Cases of Polygamy as Found Already Existing in Converts from Heathenism* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: May & Davis, 1855), 11.

¹¹¹A similar caution needs to be sounded about the use of other passages of Scripture. Some may point out that 1 Kings 15:5 says that, “except in the case of Uriah,” David “did what was right in the sight of the Lord.” This seems to imply that his polygamy was accepted by God. However, this verse also overlooks David’s sin of numbering Israel, which cost the lives of 70,000 men (1 Chr 21:1-27). As one writer noted concerning this text and 2 Chronicles 24:2: “The phrase, therefore, means only, that their conduct was generally acceptable to God; but furnishes no evidence of the lawfulness of any one specific act;” Sereno Edwards Dwight, *The Hebrew Wife: Or, the Law of Marriage Examined in Relation to the Lawfulness of Polygamy and to the Extent of the Law of Incest* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1836), 28. Interestingly, 1 Kings 14:8 says that David did “only that which was right,” completely ignoring any of his sins. The context of these passages reveals that these statements were made in order to contrast David with Jeroboam, who led the Israelites into idolatry (see 1 Kgs 12:26-33). Moreover, generalized eulogistic statements must not be taken as fully explaining the whole life of a Bible character. See Samuel Ellis Wishard, *The Divine Law of Marriage, Or, The Bible Against Polygamy* (New York: American Tract Society, 1816), 36-39.

¹¹²Incidentally, I am not personally opposed to the ordination of women to the gospel ministry if the arguments for this practice can be shown to be based upon sound biblical principles. But I am concerned about the misuse of scriptural materials to prove this or any other issue.

¹¹³See “United in His Salvation,” *Adventist Review*, 3 July 1995, 5-7. While it is not readily apparent, merely from the reading of this article, what the real thrust of this presentation was, an awareness of the significance of women’s ordination at the 1995 General Conference session, an understanding of the strategy of the North American Division to obtain permission to ordain women

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When all the complete chronological information is considered, it becomes clear that this passage cannot rightly be used to promote or prohibit the ordination of women to the gospel ministry. Instead, just like the early church, we need to utilize reliable principles of biblical interpretation to address this matter, as well as any other contemporary issues not directly mentioned in Scripture.

E. Conspiracy Theories or Character Themes. Not only does the story of King David occupy a pivotal place in the corpus of Scripture, but, as already observed above, it appears to be one that has often been reinterpreted in a variety of ways. For instance, arguing that “God was not in the business of breaking up polygamous marriages,”¹¹⁴ it has been asserted that it was actually God Himself who was responsible for David’s multiple wives.¹¹⁵ This claim is based on the prophet Nathan’s words to David in 2 Samuel 12:7, 8:

“Thus says the Lord God of Israel: ‘I appointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul.
‘I gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your keeping, and gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if that had been too little, I also would have given you much more!’”

Based on this passage, others have similarly claimed that “the Lord had given David the wives of Saul,”¹¹⁶ and that the Bible speaks of David’s “polygamy as sanctioned by God.”¹¹⁷ This type of conspiracy theory, in which God is blamed for the questionable actions of Bible characters, is becoming more and more prevalent among Christians. Admittedly, on the surface, the above passage does appear to say that God was responsible for David’s plural marriages. However, when studied in its direct and wider contexts such a conclusion proves to be untenable.

First, it must be recognized that Scripture sometimes uses “active” terms to express that which God merely allows to happen. A clear illustration of this appears during the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, where it is said that “the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh” (Exod 9:12; cf. 4:21; 7:3; 7:13; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). However, in the same story, the text also says that “Pharaoh hardened his [own] heart” (Exod 8:32; cf. 8:15; 9:34), and simply that “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened” (Exod 7:22; cf. 7:14; 8:19; 9:12, 35). From an examination of passages such as these, careful Bible students have rightly realized that, since God is ultimately in control of the universe, the Scriptures

in its own division, together with a personal knowledge of the writer’s own convictions, make it plain that this approach to Acts 15 was aimed at promoting the ordination of women to the gospel ministry.

¹¹⁴“How Melanesia Shaped My Hermeneutics and Theology: Some Personal Reflections,” 99.

¹¹⁵Ibid. This is the same view espoused by my former roommate, mentioned at the start of this article.

¹¹⁶“Polygamy in the Bible, and the Ancient Near East: A Comparative Study,” 32.

¹¹⁷Trygvve Kronholm, “Polygami och Monogami i Gamla Testamentet: Med en Utblick over den Antika Judendomen och Nya Testamentet,” *Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok* 47 (1982): 60.

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sometimes ascribe to God the choices made and actions taken by human beings. However, recognizing that human beings have been created as free moral agents (see, for example, Gen 2:15-17; cf. Deut 30:19; Josh 24:15; 1 Kgs 18:21), it has been rightly concluded that Pharaoh, of his own free will, chose to harden his heart against God's directions.

A serious investigation of the 2 Samuel 12 passage indicates that a similar utilization of language occurs here, this time with the word "gave" or "give." Part of the judgment from God stated: ""I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor"" (2 Sam 12:11). Since it is clear that this prophecy was fulfilled when David's son Absalom had sexual relations with his father's wives (2 Sam 21, 22),¹¹⁸ it is obvious that the term "give" does not here indicate that God prompted these acts of wickedness.¹¹⁹ Rather, since Absalom's was clearly an incestuous act according to Leviticus 18:8, the word "give" must be understood here as the permissive will of God. When it is remembered that God originally established monogamous, heterosexual marriage as the standard for all humanity (Gen 1:27, 28; 2:21-24), and that He prohibited the practice of polygamy (eg., Lev 18:18 YLT; Deut 17:17),¹²⁰ it becomes plain that He would not have violated these norms by actually "giving" David these wives. David, following the custom of the kings of other nations, personally chose to take as many wives as he wanted, since he had the freedom of choice. As a result, God displayed His "displeasure at David's having a plurality of wives by visiting him with judgments, and permitting evils to rise up against him from his own house."¹²¹

In short, a careful study of the passage, together with a correct understanding of the character of a God who tempts no one (Jas 1:13), indicates that when these verses are examined in context,¹²² it becomes clear that it is inaccurate and even blasphemous to blame God for David's immoral choices.

A second example of an apparently God-endorsed controversial action is recorded in 1 Samuel 16:1-4a (NASB):

Now the Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons."

¹¹⁸White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 739.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰See Angelo Tosato, "The Law of Leviticus 18:18: A Reexamination," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984): 199-214; Ron du Preez, "Does Leviticus 18:18 Deal with Incest or Polygamy?" *Journal of Adventist Thought in Africa* 3 (November 1997): 7-19. The NASB alternate rendering, more in accord with the original Hebrew, expresses Leviticus 18:18 as follows: "And you shall not take a wife in addition to another to be a rival while she is alive, to uncover her nakedness."

¹²¹White, *Spiritual Gifts*, 4a:87.

¹²²See, for example, *Polygamy in the Bible*, 190-192.

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But Samuel said, “How can I go? When Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And the Lord said, “Take a heifer with you, and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.’

“And you shall invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for Me the one whom I designate to you.”

So Samuel did what the Lord said.

The story of the anointing of David as the new Israelite king has quite frequently been discussed and debated in connection with the issues of truth-telling and deception. It is a pericope which does not appear to have an easy resolution. As has been challenged:

Don’t jump around this story—face it. Don’t charge “situation ethics”—this is Bible. Don’t suggest heathenism—this is God talking. Don’t cry “Old Testament” —the Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Jesus of the New. Would we have the temerity to accuse God Himself of lying? What are we to make of this story?¹²³

While not directly accusing God of lying, this story is presented as an acceptable “practical” method of using deception to resolve the problem that Samuel faced. The statement made by God in verse 2 has been called “God’s command to Samuel to mislead Saul.”¹²⁴ Others have been more direct, labeling this as “clearly an authorized deception,”¹²⁵ or “at best a half-truth” which had “divine authorization.”¹²⁶ Is it true that “God guides people even in human intrigues,”¹²⁷ and that “Yahweh will lie, if necessary”?¹²⁸ In fact, in more contemporary language, God’s response to Samuel has been paraphrased as follows: “‘Good grief, man, lie a little. Tell them something to divert their attention.’”¹²⁹ What are we to make of this story?

The passage immediately preceding 1 Samuel 16 contains the sad record of how Saul “rejected the word of the Lord” (1 Sam 15:26), and of how God had subsequently “torn the kingdom of Israel” from him (1 Sam 15:28). Describing God as consistent and trustworthy, Samuel then says: “And also the Glory of Israel will not lie” (1 Sam 15:29a NASB). It is significant that this affirmation of the total truthfulness of God comes a mere seven verses before the problematic passage under consideration. Thus, it forms the proper contextual background

¹²³“Rahab Revisited,” 5. See also, “Letters,” *Adventist Review*, 11 September 1997, 3.

¹²⁴*Samuel: From the Danger of Chaos to the Danger of Power*, 159.

¹²⁵Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), 121.

¹²⁶*Dilemmas: A Christian Approach to Moral Decision Making*, 64.

¹²⁷Gnana Robinson, *Let Us Be Like the Nations: A Commentary on the Books of 1 and 2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 95.

¹²⁸*First and Second Samuel*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 121.

¹²⁹Walter Brueggemann, *David’s Truth In Israel’s Imagination & Memory* (USA: Fortress, 1985), 26.

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for correctly interpreting what has been dubbed a “divinely directed deception.” Furthermore, the fact that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2; cf. Heb 6:18) and does not deceive (Num 23:19) must be taken into account when dealing with the unchanging character (Mal 3:6) of the God whose “words are truth” (2 Sam 7:28).

One of the solutions proposed relates to the manner in which the first king had been anointed. According to 1 Samuel 9:22-10:1, Saul’s anointing had been done in secret by Samuel.¹³⁰ Likewise, since it was apparently not in the public interest that the anointing of the next king be known at once, God told Samuel to withhold this information from all except Jesse’s family. Moreover, it was customary for Samuel to offer sacrifices on his visits (see 1 Sam 9:11-14; cf. 11:14, 15).¹³¹ “The Lord therefore reminded Samuel of an accompanying (if secondary) reason for making the journey: to sacrifice a heifer.”¹³² Thus, though it is held that there is “explicit authorization of the Lord as to the method of concealment,”¹³³ it is maintained that “there was no untruth in what the Lord authorized.”¹³⁴

Further analysis of this chronicle has revealed a rather unusual, and auspiciously more satisfactory, solution to this perplexing passage. Is it possible that the first part of verse 2, which reads: “But Samuel said, ‘How can I go? When Saul hears of it, he will kill me’” (NASB), is actually an interruption by Samuel in the middle of God’s instructions? When one recognizes that Samuel was not averse to interrupting someone (see 1 Sam 15:15-17), and when one removes this apparent interjection, the entire set of divine directions forms a cohesive unit. This is precisely what Ellen White, under divine inspiration, has done:

“And the Lord said unto Samuel, How long wilt thou mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? fill thine horn with oil, and go, I will send thee to Jesse the Bethlehemite: for I have provided Me a king among his sons. . . . Take an heifer with thee, and say, I am come to sacrifice to the Lord. And call Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show thee what thou shalt do: and thou shalt anoint unto Me him whom I name unto thee. And Samuel did that which the Lord spake.”¹³⁵

When the narrative is thus understood, after the removal of Samuel’s interruption, the list of instructions from God can be seen to naturally flow quite smoothly from one point to the next. In summary, when *character themes*, such

¹³⁰See *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 2:529.

¹³¹See Charles R. Wilson, *Wesleyan Bible Commentary, Joshua-Esther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 166; *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 2:529.

¹³²Frank E. Gaebel, ed., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 3:683.

¹³³John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 140.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*

¹³⁵White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 637. The ellipsis noted above “. . .” is just as recorded in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 637, the only place Ellen White deals in depth with this story.

as the veracity and trustworthiness of God, are appropriately considered, the *conspiracy theory* that God fosters falsehood is shown to be both unbiblical and even sacrilegious.

F. Consequential Speculation or Commandment Substantiation. One final time we need to return to that persuasive article on the controversial case of Rahab, who lied while hiding two Israelite spies. In setting the framework for this story, note was made of the strategic importance of Jericho, a fortress city, which happened to be the first challenge the Israelites had to face as they prepared to enter Canaan. It was then alleged that “a failure here *would* spell psychological disaster for the invading forces. But a decisive victory *would* send shock waves throughout the entire area, unnerving less-protected leaders.”¹³⁶ Later on, expressing a similar concern for avoiding undesirable results, it was argued that, had Rahab remained silent when asked about the spies, such refusal to speak “*would* have been fatal to the spies, for it *would* have triggered an exhaustive search of the premises.”¹³⁷ Then it is contended: “On the other hand, to have disclosed the whereabouts of her visitors *would* have led to their certain imprisonment or death at an exceedingly critical time in Israel’s history.”¹³⁸ Accordingly, reasoning that these consequences had to be rigorously avoided, Rahab is applauded for her daring deception.¹³⁹

This type of consequential speculation is evident in the debate surrounding whether or not practicing polygamists should be baptized and permitted to continue their plural marriage as members of the Christian community. Arguing in favor of this, it has been claimed that “fatherless children, destitute women, prostitution and suicide”¹⁴⁰ have resulted from a church policy which requires the polygamist to become monogamous before baptism. Asserting that “in most of the existing tribal structures they [i.e., the women who have been set aside] would be left without any ties or protection whatsoever and in most cases delivered over to prostitution,”¹⁴¹ it has been proposed that “existing polygamous marriages may be allowed to continue when a person is baptized.”¹⁴²

¹³⁶“In Defense of Rahab,” 24 (emphasis added).

¹³⁷Ibid., 26 (emphasis added).

¹³⁸Ibid., (emphasis added).

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Joseph Adebisi Ola, “Polygamy and Seventh-day Adventists in West Nigeria,” 1978, TMs [photocopy], p. 1, Document File 2211, Ellen G. White Research Center, James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

¹⁴¹Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, vol. 3, *Sex* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 181.

¹⁴²Ibid. Responding to this view, it has been stated: “You can’t preach against polygamy and at the same time accept polygamists into your midst. It is a contradiction. You can’t be for and against at the same time. Neither do I believe a temporary attitude of tolerance will lead to the disappearance of polygamy. Such a policy would, on the contrary, serve to perpetuate it. . . . The church can no longer make exceptions and special cases. If it does, Christians and non-Christians alike will be confused.” Mavumilusa Makanzu, *Can the Church Accept Polygamy?* (Accra, Ghana: Asempa Publishers, 1983), 74.

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While it is not possible to enter into a detailed investigation of the biblical view of polygamy in this study,¹⁴³ the important issue to note here is the manner in which the decision to baptize practicing polygamists is arrived at—essentially by means of what I have termed *consequential speculation*. To make it more relevant for American Adventists, consider a different marital matter that may all too soon confront the SDA Church in North America. In December 1997, in a landmark court case, Jon Holden and Michael Galluccio won a settlement giving homosexual couples in New Jersey the right to jointly adopt children, just like married couples.¹⁴⁴ If, similar to polygamists, this gay couple had gotten into their relationship ignorant of the SDA understanding of the Bible’s marital standards, should they upon conversion to Adventism be baptized as practicing homosexuals, so as to avoid the trauma of breaking up the family, or in order to prevent the discarded partner from suffering “cruel hardship”¹⁴⁵ and entering into a life of crime and misery?

That seems to be the problem with so many of us when confronted with perplexing ethical difficulties or life-or-death dilemmas—we attempt to project “what would happen if . . .”; and then we make decisions based on these *consequential speculations*. However, Jesus Christ plainly states: “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. . . . But be faithful, even if you have to die, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev 2:10 NCV). This identical principle is evident in Ellen White’s admonition, that “Christ’s ambassadors have nothing to do with consequences. They must perform their duty and leave results with God.”¹⁴⁶ How then should we make moral decisions? Essentially echoing Revelation 2:10, Ellen White reminds us: “In deciding upon any course of action we are not to ask whether we can see that harm will result from it, but whether it is in keeping with the will of God.”¹⁴⁷ *Consequences* or *commandments*, that is the question!

This was the choice that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, had to make. When faced with either the fiery furnace or forsaking their heavenly Father, they bravely, yet politely, informed Nebuchadnezzar: “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king” (Dan 3:17 NIV). Then they added: “But even if He does not, . . . we are not going to serve your gods” (Dan 3:18 NIV). Commenting on such unswerving allegiance, Ellen White observes: “True Christian principle will not stop to weigh consequences.”¹⁴⁸ These were men who acted out of supreme love

¹⁴³Those interested in this issue should see my *Polygamy in the Bible*, as footnoted above.

¹⁴⁴See Letter from “Concerned Women for America,” (1998), 3.

¹⁴⁵*Theological Ethics*, 3:118. This is the statement regarding what is believed to happen when the additional wives of a polygamist are set aside.

¹⁴⁶Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1939), 609-610.

¹⁴⁷White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 634.

¹⁴⁸Ellen G. White, *The Sanctified Life* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1937), 39.

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for God, and therefore, they were radically obedient to His *commandments*, regardless of *consequences*.¹⁴⁹

Admittedly, statements such as these run counter to a culturally-conditioned, results-oriented, rationalistic mind. As has been astutely noted: “We want to be like the most High, subject to none.”¹⁵⁰ Then this challenge is made: “But can we calculate the eternal results or the rightness of our actions? We cannot predict even the next five minutes, much less the future.”¹⁵¹ Thus, instead of speculating about possible *consequences*, we are to live our lives in complete conformity to the *commandments* of the Creator of the universe.

Incidentally, some have noted that the Bible nowhere directly condemns Rahab for her falsehoods. However, it is equally true that throughout the Word of God these lies are never commended either. Careful study of the Scriptures reveals that a lack of any direct commendation or condemnation of actions is no indication of the rightness or wrongness of the deeds performed. For example,

¹⁴⁹Besides biblical narratives there are several 20th century stories of Christians who have acted out of faith in God the Father when faced with life-threatening circumstances. Note the following: Living in Austria during the Nazi occupation, Mrs. Hasel and her son Gerhard were looking after a 12-year-old Jewish boy, when the Gestapo showed up at her door. When asked whether she had Fritz in her house, she looked the soldier straight in the eye and, trusting in God to bring about the best results, said: “As an officer of the German army you know what your responsibility is, and you are welcome to carry it out.” With the culpability of the evil of his action now fully on his shoulders (where it rightly belonged), the Nazi turned on his heel and left that home undisturbed. A second story comes from Poland, also during World War II. Mrs. Knapiuk and her daughter Marion were living in a room in a two-story apartment, when a Jewish girl being chased by German soldiers ran into their place and hid under the bed. Now, they were well aware of how dangerous this could be; for in the adjacent house a bakery owner and his daughter had been arrested and taken to a concentration camp simply because he had sold bread to a Jew. Mrs. Knapiuk was a woman of great faith, but since things had happened so fast, she had had no time to figure out what to do. So she sat down at the table, opened her Bible, and started to pray and read. When a German soldier entered their room, he immediately recognized what she was reading. He uttered only two words—“good woman”—and promptly left the room. A more recent incident, which occurred in the mid-1990s, was indirectly obtained from a former classmate of mine, Dr. Robert Wong. With some editorial adjustments, let me share the story, as it came via e-mail: “In China, the people work under the watchful eye of the government. On one occasion quite a large number of people were to be baptized, so they hired two trucks as transportation. Since they had never been to the lake before, they stopped at an intersection to ask for directions. Too late they realized that they had actually asked for information from the state security forces. Before they could leave, the officer in charge asked: ‘What are you going to do at the lake?’ Now, what should they say, since conducting a baptismal service was strictly illegal? Because they trusted in God, and did not want to lie, they honestly replied that they were on their way to have a baptism. As soon as they left, three police motorcycles swung in after them to make arrests when the time came. But just then, a sudden rainstorm erupted; miraculously the rain fell only behind the trucks soaking the motorcyclists, and making the road muddy and insurpassable for the police. The result? The people got to the lake unmolested, were baptized without further incident, and went home safely.” Yes, indeed, we still serve a miracle working God!

¹⁵⁰Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes*, Christian Free University Curriculum Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 75.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

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nowhere is there any condemnation of the rape and incest of the daughters of Lot with their father, as recorded in Genesis 19. Since the oldest daughter had a son named Moab, who became the ancestor of Ruth, and ultimately of Jesus,¹⁵² should one conclude that this incestuous rape was actually a good thing? Obviously, just as in this case, so the deception practiced by Rahab “violates a clear commandment of God”¹⁵³ and needs to be assessed on this basis.

Let’s return briefly to the argument used above, which says that Rahab’s use of deception was justifiable, for without it the spies *would* certainly have been captured or killed, resulting in disaster for the Israelites. This type of logic contradicts Romans 3:8, which “warns us not to say ‘Let us do evil that good may result.’”¹⁵⁴ Incredibly, the article on Rahab never once mentions that it was at God’s direct command that the Israelites were to cross the Jordan River, “to the land which I am giving to them—the children of Israel” (Josh 1:2).¹⁵⁵ Thus, totally ignoring God’s pivotal role in the lives of His people, the Rahab incident was approached from a thoroughly humanistic perspective.

Instead of adopting such a godless or “atheistic” view of life, Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that “God is faithful,” and that He “will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” In other words, God will never permit anyone to be in a situation where that person is forced to practice deception; there will always be a morally correct way out of the problem. Ellen White informs us that, as a free moral agent, mankind’s loyalty must be tested, “but *he is never brought into such a position that yielding to evil becomes a matter of necessity*. No temptation or trial is permitted to come to him which he is unable to resist.”¹⁵⁶ Indeed, “God requires of all His subjects obedience, entire obedience to all His commandments,”¹⁵⁷ as He states in Deuteronomy 5:29: “*Always keep all My commandments*,” from the “heart” (emphasis added). Furthermore, “His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3), for the Christian “can do all things through Christ” (Phil 4:13). Jesus Christ—He is really the “secret” to this entire issue of truth-telling! For “those who have the mind of Christ will keep all of God’s commandments, irrespective of circumstances.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵²Compare Gen 19:37, Ruth 1:4, 4:13-22, and Matt 1:5, 16.

¹⁵³Walter C. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 97.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁵⁵See, for example, the following passages that talk about the “promised” land: Exod 12:25; Deut 6:3; 9:28; 27:3.

¹⁵⁶White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 331-332 (emphasis added).

¹⁵⁷Ellen G. White, in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., 7 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976-1980), 6:1072.

¹⁵⁸White, *The Sanctified Life*, 67.

Postscript: The Alteration of Adventist History

Unfortunately, a tendency similar to the fallacious reinterpretation of Bible narratives has begun to show up in published materials on SDA history (i.e., the “story” of our denomination). Generally, this trend to creatively reconstruct the past seems to center on controversial contemporary concerns.

I. The Ordination of Women and the 1881 General Conference. Consider, for example, the debate over whether or not women should be ordained to the gospel ministry. Referring to this issue in the Adventist church in the nineteenth century, it has been argued:

Did you know that the General Conference in session actually voted the ordination of women back in 1881? Unfortunately, the officers neglected to implement this official action of the church body. Now, more than a century later, the time may be ripe to move forward.¹⁵⁹

Is this claim correct? A careful reading of the published report of the business proceedings of the 1881 General Conference session, reveals that on December 5, seven matters were brought up for discussion.¹⁶⁰ Issues were dealt with generally in the following manner: First, a resolution was put forward; then, this proposal was discussed; and finally, a vote was taken.¹⁶¹ While most of the recommendations were adopted, none were directly denied. Those that were not approved were either deferred to a later date, or referred to another committee, an action that appears to have been an indirect manner of turning down a proposal. This seems to be the case concerning women’s ordination: It was proposed, discussed by several, and then referred to a committee, from whence it never appeared again. As correctly noted in another book: “That resolution [i.e., the recommendation to ordain women] was referred to the General Conference Committee and never came to a vote.”¹⁶² And what do we learn from this? That, especially on controversial issues, it can be dangerous to rely on secondary sources. So, wherever possible, the best thing to do is to go back to the original records, study them personally, and then draw conclusions.

II. German Adventists and World War I Military Service. A second contentious question that has come under the influence of historical revisionism has to do with the SDA perspective on war. An intriguing article about the life of L. R. Conradi, the controversial leader of the Adventist church in Germany in the early 20th century, was recently produced. In this article, the following statement appears:

¹⁵⁹*Wrestling with Reality* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 102.

¹⁶⁰See “General Conference,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 20 December 1881, 392.

¹⁶¹Investigation of other subsequent meetings at this same session reveals essentially the identical process.

¹⁶²George R. Knight, *Anticipating the Advent: A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993), 87 (emphasis added). Interestingly, this book was published the same year by the same publishing establishment that produced *Wrestling with Reality*, in which the history of this event has been distorted.

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Informed in 1915 that some believers were choosing death over bearing arms, Ellen White told her son Willie, "I do not think they ought to do that." In March Conradi and other German leaders wrote to the commanding general of the Seventh Army, stating that all Adventist inductees would indeed bear arms and do Sabbath duties.¹⁶³

Did Ellen White really speak out against those who would rather die than kill others in warfare? And was this statement, as attributed to her, the reason Conradi and others promoted killing and Sabbath-breaking, as so clearly implied in this article? The original documents on which this article was based reveal that Conradi had officially informed the German army of his pro-combatant, anti-Sabbath views¹⁶⁴ more than 11 weeks before Ellen White was even reported to have made the statement which supposedly authorized Conradi's action. In fact, it was in August 1914, fully nine months earlier,¹⁶⁵ that Conradi had first publicly promoted his personal view, that killing and Sabbath-breaking were acceptable for Adventists because it was wartime. But what did that statement, "I do not think they ought to do that," as attributed to Ellen White, have to do with Conradi's aberrant views? Here are the facts: Ellen White was 87 years old and very feeble at this time. She was so weak that she herself wrote no letters at all that year. The above statement is part of a discussion that her son, Willie, himself 60 years old,¹⁶⁶ wrote down as best he could recall, the day after they had talked. Furthermore, this short sentence is so unclear and ambiguous, that in 1962 the Board of Trustees of the Ellen G. White Estate took the following official action:

We take the position that this report, representing a recollection of a conversation with Ellen White on May 24 [1915] and presenting fragments of her statement in response to certain information relative to the situation of our brethren in the war *should not be put in the category of testimony material or that which has come to us from the inspired pen of Ellen G. White presented under the compelling influence of the Spirit of God.* The statement is obscure and it is difficult to know just what the true meaning of Ellen White was. We must recognize that the conversation took place within just a few weeks of her death, and the statement appears in a framework indicative of the

¹⁶³"The Amazing Life of L. R. Conradi," *Adventist Review*, 18 January 1996, 11.

¹⁶⁴See copy of manuscript letter written to the War Ministry, Berlin, Germany, August 4, 1914, Advent Source Collection, p. 38. quoted in "The History of the Advent Movement in Germany" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1958), 258; part of this dissertation is available from the Ellen G. White Research Center, Document File DF 320, James White Library, Andrews U, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

¹⁶⁵"The History of the Advent Movement in Germany" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford U, 1958), 257.

¹⁶⁶He was born August 29, 1854.

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fact that her mind passed readily from periods of clearness to periods of confusion.¹⁶⁷

So, instead of quoting an ambiguous, obscure, fragmentary, second-hand statement, something that Ellen White is simply reported to have orally made during her final illness when her mind alternated between clarity and chaos, the people entrusted with preserving and promoting her work recommend utilizing the voluminous material on the matter of military service, documents which have been verified as written and produced by Ellen White herself while under the influence of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶⁸

III. James White's Original Position on Participation in War. Ironically, while Ellen White has been erroneously caricatured as the one responsible for the fateful pro-combatant position that was at least partly to blame for the later split in the church from which the SDA Reform Movement developed, historical revisionism has inaccurately credited James White with the prudent early Adventist position on warfare. Toward the end of 1998 a rather informative article on Operation Whitecoat was published. In briefly recapping the Adventist church's initial years, it was observed that during the US Civil War "different perspectives about military service" were being taken.¹⁶⁹ On the one side "abolitionist Adventists maintained that compulsory military service would aid a righteous cause—the destruction of slavery."¹⁷⁰ On the other side Adventist pacifists pointed out "that any participation with the military constituted a violation of the sixth commandment—'thou shalt not kill' (Ex. 20:13)."¹⁷¹ Then, the following comment is made: "James White, editor of the weekly *Review*, suggested a third and middle way in a landmark editorial in August 1862."¹⁷² Though this article does not directly state what this "middle way" was that James White purportedly proposed, in the following paragraph a "middle way" is defined as "refusing to bear arms but participating in the military as noncombatant medical personnel when legally required to do so."¹⁷³ As any knowledgeable Adventist is aware, this did become the official SDA position in the mid-1860s. But, was this the position taken by James White in that "landmark editorial," as the article suggested? Let's go back to that 1862 article. In it, James White first reminded his readers that,

¹⁶⁷W. C. White Statement to Guy Dail, May 25, 1915," Document File DF 320, Ellen G. White Research Center, James White Library, Andrews U, Berrien Springs, Michigan (emphasis added).

¹⁶⁸Ibid.

¹⁶⁹"A Coat of Many Colors: Looking Back at Operation Whitecoat," *Adventist Review*, 24 September 1998, 8.

¹⁷⁰Ibid.

¹⁷¹Ibid.

¹⁷²Ibid.

¹⁷³Ibid., 9.

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The position which our people have taken relative to the perpetuity of the law of God contained in the ten commandments, is not in harmony with all the requirements of war. The fourth precept of that law says, "Remember the Sabbath-day to keep it holy;" the sixth says, "Thou shalt not kill."¹⁷⁴

Then, James White made this bombshell assertion: "But, in the case of drafting, *the government assumes the responsibility of the violation of the law of God.*"¹⁷⁵ This explosive editorial sent shockwaves throughout the fledgling denomination. A barrage of letters to the editor flooded in, some of which, as James White himself admitted, "virtually charge us with teaching Sabbath-breaking and murder."¹⁷⁶ In response to the request for "well-written articles"¹⁷⁷ on this subject, Henry Carver submitted a lengthy letter, in which he addressed, among other things, James White's idea of blaming the government for any killing or Sabbath-breaking an Adventist draftee might be called on to do in time of war. Carver reasoned:

This seems to me to be untenable and dangerous ground; for if the government can assume the responsibility now for the violation of two of these holy precepts, and we go clear, why may not the same government assume the responsibility for the violation of the Sabbath law and we go clear when the edict goes forth that all shall observe the first day of the week?¹⁷⁸

As one reviews the historical records, it becomes blatantly obvious that the perspective proposed by James White was not the moderate "middle way" of a medic, a compassionate conscientious cooperator, as intimated in the Operation Whitecoat article. Rather, it was an extreme opinion, a radical departure from the basic biblical view of accepting blame for our own actions, even decisions made under duress or distress.¹⁷⁹ Thankfully, in time James White apparently moved away from this perilous proposal toward what soon became the historic official noncombatant position of the SDA Church.

What do we learn from all this? Just as Scripture stories have been and are being radically reinterpreted, our own Adventist history is at times being imaginatively rewritten. Instead of merely bemoaning this disturbing distortion of sacred stories and denominational documents, we can take the following steps: (1) Personally search the Scriptures and our church's historical records as far as possible, instead of simply relying on others to do our reading and thinking for us; (2) Encourage diligent, intelligent, and committed Adventists, young and old, male and female, to get involved in reading, researching, and reliably writ-

¹⁷⁴"The Nation," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 12 August 1862, 84.

¹⁷⁵*Ibid.*, (emphasis added).

¹⁷⁶"The Nation," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 26 August 1862, 100.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸"The War," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 21 October 1862, 166 (emphasis added).

¹⁷⁹See, for example, 1 Sam 15:10-26, esp. v. 24; Exod 32:7-35, esp. vs. 22-24; cf. Josh 24:15.

ing up relevant materials that will make a positive contribution, as we carry out Christ's commission of sharing the Good News of His second coming with people all around us and throughout the world; and (3) Pray for those who have been blessed with writing abilities, that they may produce truth-filled articles and books, which will help people to live, not out of fear of the future, but by faith in our Heavenly Father.

In Conclusion: Distorting Scripture Stories Can Be Deadly

David had just returned from a successful battle against the Amalekites, when he was brought news about his old nemesis, King Saul (see 2 Sam 1). A young man who had managed to escape from Saul's camp, eagerly, yet with appropriate humility, reported the death of Saul. Now, according to the immediately preceding chapter, 1 Samuel 31, and as confirmed in 1 Chronicles 10, Saul had been badly wounded while fighting against the Philistines. When his armor-bearer refused to kill him, Saul ended his life by throwing himself on his own sword.

Notwithstanding these facts, and apparently hoping to secure special favors from the new monarch, the young Amalekite escapee gave Saul's crown and bracelet to David, and then distorted the story. He claimed he had come across the injured Saul on the battlefield, who had then said to him: "Please come here and kill me. I am badly hurt and am almost dead already" (2 Sam 1:9 NCV). Concluding this fabricated account, he then said: "So I went over and killed him" (2 Sam 1:10 NCV). David's response was to have the young man killed. So, instead of being lauded, he lost his life; in place of being exalted, he was executed. Yes, *distorting Scripture stories can indeed be deadly!*¹⁸⁰

While the Amalekite's falsifying of the facts resulted in his own physical death, the cunning reconstruction of biblical narratives will have devastating and debilitating ethical, moral, and spiritual implications. Therefore, the challenge to every committed Bible believer is to always be "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15), for it is these "Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15). In other words, while distorting Scripture stories can be deadly, a Christ-centered, consistent, contextual, and chronologically coherent interpretation of the chronicles of the Bible will contribute to the development of a Christlike character, a personal ethical transformation essential for life in God's kingdom.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰This story of Saul's death has been misconstrued in yet another way, this time in an attempt to find guiding principles regarding euthanasia: "Although the Bible does not specifically speak to the issue of euthanasia, the story of the death of King Saul (2 Sam. 1:9-16) is instructive. Saul asked that a soldier put him to death as he lay dying on the battlefield. When David heard of this act, he ordered the soldier put to death for 'destroying the Lord's anointed.' Though the context is not euthanasia per se, it does show the respect we must show for a human life even in such tragic circumstances;" J. Kerby Anderson, *Moral Dilemmas: Biblical Perspectives on Contemporary Ethical Issues*, Swindoll Leadership Library (Nashville, TN: Word, 1998), 29.

¹⁸¹See, for example, 2 Tim 3:16, 17.

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