A Holocaust of Deception:
Lying to Save Life and Biblical Morality

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> Imagine yourself a Christian in Nazi Germany in the 1940s. Against
> the law, you've decided to give asylum in your home to an innocent
> Jewish family fleeing death. Without warning gestapo agents arrive at
> your door and confront you with a direct question: "Are there any
> Jews on your premises?" What would you say? What would you do?[1]

Thus begins a captivating but controversial article in a recent Seventh-day
Adventist (SDA) magazine. "In Defense of Rahab" stirred up a passionate de-
bate on the virtues and vices of lying to save life. While there were some letters
expressing concern,[2] others showed strong support.[3] As a now retired professor
of religion stated: "In one brief article [the author] laid out the big picture of
Rahab's 'lie'—not only with common sense but with a biblical setting that should
put to rest the porcelain argument that no one should lie under any condition."[4]

Though some may feel that these issues have no relevance for life in the
"real world," our magazine author rightly reminds us that "the issue is far from
theoretical."[5] Exploring the story of Rahab in Joshua 2, he comes to the fol-
lowing conclusions:

1. Morality can be learned from Scripture stories where the Bible does not
directly condemn the activities engaged in in the actual narrative.[6]

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[1]"In Defense of Rahab," *Adventist Review*, December 1997, 24.

[2]See, for example, "Letters," *Adventist Review*, February 1998, 2-3.

[3]See, for example, "Letters," *Adventist Review*, February 1998, 2; "Letters," *Adventist Review*, May 1998, 2.

[4]"Letters," *Adventist Review*, February 1998, 2.

[5]"In Defense of Rahab," 24.

[6]After briefly introducing the topic of lying to save life, the author states: "In what follows, I want to explore what we might learn from an Old Testament incident, the story of Rahab"; "In Defense of Rahab," 24. In the retelling of this narrative, he querries, "How would Rahab respond? How should she respond?" Ibid., 25. After reminding us of her misleading response, he notes: "We

2. Motives are vital for determining an action's moral validity. In other words, misleading a potential murderer is in "perfect conformity" to the "spirit" of God's law.[7]

3. "Christians (and everyone else, for that matter) are sometimes forced to choose between two or more evils. In those cases [just as in Rahab's], we are not condemned by God for choosing the best of the bad options."[8]

4. Potential consequences of any action must be carefully considered, and rigorously avoided if life-threatening.[9] Since human life is considered most important, it needs to be protected even at the cost of truth.[10]

In a subsequent article, "Rahab Revisited," the author attempted to clarify some theories promulgated in the first document. Since these articles on Rahab

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find an almost exact parallel to this story in 2 Samuel 17:15-22, in which the wife of an Israelite farmer saved the lives of David's spies during Absalom's attempted coup, a critical decision that saved the day for David and his regime"; ibid., 26. Then, the writer says that this Israelite woman was "not culpable" of any wrongdoing; nor were "Pharaoh's midwives," "even though their report to the monarch was not in keeping with the facts of the case; nor was Rahab"; ibid. Toward the end of this article, the author declares: "The tacit condemnation of this great woman (as she turned out to be) is unwarranted. The Bible does not condemn her"; ibid.

[7]In order to demonstrate the importance of incorporating motive when discussing truth and falsehood, the author observes: "If a lie is the simple utterance of an untruth, then the student who writes on a test paper that London in the capital of Japan is lying"; "In Defense of Rahab," 26. Then, he declares that "Common sense would dictate that intent and motive must come into the equation"; ibid. Finally, he proposes the following: "To lie, as I see it, is to make a false statement, with wicked or malicious or selfish intent to [impress,] deceive or mislead"; ibid. (The word "impress" was added in a subsequent article: "Rahab Revisited," *Adventist Review*, March 1998, 5). Thus, deceptive "undercover activities in the accomplishment of the divine purpose" are considered morally right; "In Defense of Rahab," 25. The writer contends that only a "wooden interpretation of the [ninth] commandment" would call for telling the truth even when someone's life is at stake; ibid., 26. He concludes this article maintaining that those who saved lives by misleading their pursuers, "broke no valid law—human or divine. Indeed, so far as divine law was concerned, they acted in perfect conformity to its spirit"; ibid.

[8]"In Defense of Rahab," 26. The subtitle of the article reads: "Sometimes we're confronted with two or more bad options. When that happens, what should we do?" Ibid., 24. Finally, in connection with Rahab, he notes: "Rahab chose what she considered the best of the bad options facing her"; ibid., 26.

[9]In setting the framework for the story of Rahab, the author reminds us of the strategic importance of Jericho, the first challenge the Israelites faced as they prepared to enter Canaan. He insists 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"; "In Defense of Rahab," 24. Later, he argues 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. 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"; ibid., 26.

[10]Personal interview with the author of "In Defense of Rahab," 25 November 1998. The author asks: "What should the Christian do, when telling the naked truth can result in the direct loss of innocent human life?" "In Defense of Rahab," 26. After creatively reconstructing the definition of a "lie," he says that Rahab was not guilty of telling a lie, and should not be condemned, since the Bible purportedly does not do so; ibid.

have so well articulated the major concepts in this debate on lying to save life, they will become the main springboard for discussion in this study, though other works will be utilized and examined as needed.

But wait! Before going further, note this urgent caution:

> Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit we shall be continually liable to wrest the Scriptures or to misinterpret them.[11]

> Never should the Bible be studied without prayer. Before opening its pages we should ask for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, and it will be given.[12]

In addition to the vital necessity of prayer (see Matt 7:7; John 16:13; James 1:5), one other warning needs to be contemplated: Articulate writers who are committed to bringing conviction to their readers, may be easily tempted to employ strongly emotive expressions which tend to manipulate the mind. However, in order to consider this contentious issue of lying to save life as open-mindedly and dispassionately as possible, a concerted effort will be made in this article to conscientiously avoid all forms of sarcasm,[13] any crafty caricatures,[14] blunt language,[15] harsh rhetoric,[16] or unkind remarks. Since God's word summons all believers to meditate on only that which is pure, true, lovely, and worthy of praise (Phil 4:8), and since we are called to faithfully "speak the truth with love" (Eph 4:15 ERV), it is vital that the "conversation" concerning truth and falsehood be done in a compassionate and Christlike manner.

Critical Biblical Principles

In 1997 one third of all adults in the United States of America believed that in our contemporary society "'lying is sometimes necessary.'"[17] Just the year

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[11]Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1908), 110.

[12]Ibid., 91.

[13]Unfortunately, rather sharp sarcasm appears in "In Defense of Rahab," 25: "What would you have done were you in Rahab's place? Would you have said to the agents: 'I'm devastated you asked, but as a Christian I have to tell the truth. They're on the rooftop. Look under the flax; you'll find them there.'"

[14]A typical example of this type of caricature appears in "In Defense of Rahab," 26: "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."

[15]Those who hold a view opposing the author's are said to "go berserk over [Rahab's] misdirection of the Jericho police"; "In Defense of Rahab," 25. They are accused of offering "simplistic solutions to complex issues," and of having "a wooden interpretation of the [ninth] commandment"; ibid., 26.

[16]Those who disagree with the author's view are charged with "irrational overenthusiasm," and "extreme positions"; "In Defense of Rahab," 25. In a follow-up article, he named someone who pointed out the "dire eschatological consequences" of what he'd written, and then added: "Such incredible leaps of logic always take me by surprise"; "Rahab Revisited," 5. He continued: "Let's do a little thinking for a change"; ibid., implying that those who disagree with his view do not think.

[17]See a report of some of the findings of the Barna Research Group in "Awash in a Sea of Relativism," *Adventist Review*, August 1997, 5.

before it was reported that "'ninety-one percent confess that they regularly don't tell the truth."[18] As a result of a nationwide survey, a well-respected researcher concluded that, "'America appears to be drowning in a sea of relativistic, non-biblical theology. We are living amid the dilution of traditional, Bible-based Christian faith.'"[19] It is against this backdrop of living in a non-absolutistic culture, that the Scriptures portray a community of believers "who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev 14:12).[20]

Therefore, if we are to accurately ascertain whether or not it is ever appropriate to lie to save life, it is absolutely imperative that a hermeneutically reliable investigation be done of this issue in the Bible. The Psalmist says that, as a "lamp on my path" (Ps 119:105 CJB), God's Word provides guidance for making correct ethical decisions. In parallel fashion, 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).[21] As Ellen White observed: "God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms."[22]

Furthermore, while all doctrinal truths are to be found in Scripture, its central focus is Jesus Christ; for as He Himself noted, the "Scriptures tell about me!" (John 5:39 ERV). Indeed, John the Beloved reminds us that 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, who is 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 who also reforms and transforms the sinner (2 Cor 5:17). Thus, only when all of Scripture is seen as focusing on the Savior can it be appropriately understood and correctly applied.

In almost every discussion of ethical issues the question of "legalism" is raised. Thus, we must briefly consider the matter of obedience here. In his theological treatise to the Christians in Rome, Paul categorically declares that human beings are "justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Rom 3:28). Then, he asks: "Does this mean that we do away with the Law when we put our trust in Christ?" (Rom 3:31a NLV). Compellingly Paul states: "Not at

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[18]Laura Schlessinger, *The Ten Commandments: The Significance of God's Laws in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1998), 268, quoting a June 7, 1996, *New York Times* article.

[19]"Awash in a Sea of Relativism," 5.

[20]See ibid. All Scripture references in this study are from the New King James Version (NKJV), unless otherwise indicated.

[21]When 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), as well as Luke 10:7 (the New Testament).

[22]Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1939), 595.

all! Rather, we uphold the law" (Rom 3:31b NIV). This identical concept can be recognized from the manner in which the Ten Commandments are articulated in the book of Exodus. First, and foremost, God reminded His people: "I am the Lord your God. I led you out of the land of Egypt where you were slaves" (Exod 20:2 ERV). Only then, after God had established that it was He who had freed them from bondage, did He lay down His ethical expectations. Thus, God first redeems, then He requires; He saves people, then tells them how to serve Him and others. Clearly, this is not legalism! The one who has been delivered from sin will live in conformity to God's moral mandates. As Jesus noted in John 14:15 (NIV): "If you love me, you will obey what I command." This precise sequence of "love" preceding obedience is already evident in the Decalogue itself, where God promises to show mercy to those "who love Me and keep My commandments" (Exod 20:6). Ellen White concurs, saying:

> We do not earn salvation by our obedience, for salvation is the free gift of God, to be received by faith. But obedience is the fruit of faith. . . . If we abide in Christ, if the love of God dwells in us, our feelings, our thoughts, our purposes, our actions, will be in harmony with the will of God as expressed in the precepts of His holy law.[23]

Before addressing the specific concern of truthtelling in exceptional situations, one other vital element needs to be highlighted, and that is the issue of Scripture stories. Even a casual review of the Old and New Testaments reveals irrefutably that "biblical narrative is replete with realistic figures seen in all their human frailty."[24] 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.[25]

While it is true that characters such as Elisha and Daniel model perseverance and faithfulness in the face of tremendous pressure,[26] "God, not the biblical heroes, is magnified throughout."[27] This adoration is nowhere better exhibited than in the book of Judges, where "every victory wrought is a triumph of God and of the faith of those who place their trust in Him."[28] Thus, rightly understood, Bible stories are to bring praise and honor to the God of the universe. In brief then, special care needs to be taken in the reading and interpretation of the

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[23]White, *Steps to Christ*, 61.

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

[25]Ibid.

[26]William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 267.

[27]*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 160.

[28]Ibid.

chronicles of the Word of God so that God is glorified, rather than frail and often faulty human beings.

Having thus established that all deliberations on moral matters must be thoroughly Christ-centered, solidly Bible-based, and appropriately applied, we will now proceed to examine the question of using deception in order to avert death.

An Analysis of Truth: The Spirit and the Specifics

While others have dealt in greater depth with the broad principles of honesty, integrity, and veracity,[29] this article will briefly reiterate the essential features of this issue. "What is truth?" asked Pilate (John 18:38).[30] The tragic irony of this question was that Jesus Christ, "the truth" according to John 14:6, stood right in front of him, and yet Pilate failed to recognize that. Moreover, the Holy Spirit, "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17), was sent to this world to bear witness about Jesus Christ, the essence of all truth (John 16:12-14; cf. Acts 2:1-4). Summarizing the biblical data on this subject, one scholar says:

> The Old Testament characterizes Yahweh as a God of truth (Ps 31:6) or faithfulness (Deut 32:4), who is just and right (Deut 32:4; Ps 92:16; 119:137; 145:17), and without iniquity (Deut 32:4; Ps 92:16). His word and judgements are straight (Ps 33:4) and true (Ps 19:10; 119:137, 151-160) and altogether righteous (Ps 19:10). He does not lie, because He is not a man that He should lie or change His mind (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29); what He says He will do, and what He promises He will bring to pass (Num 23:19). The New Testament also characterizes God's word as truth (John 17:17), denies that there is any unrighteousness in Him (Rom 9:14), and speaks of Him as *ho apseudeis Theos*, 'God who does not' or 'cannot lie' (Titus 1:2). Finally, the author of Hebrews claims that when the divine promise is confirmed by the divine oath, these two things make it impossible for God to prove false (Heb 6:18).[31]

In brief, "God does not lie; it is against his very nature."[32] Therefore, to speak of the sanctity of truth means to recognize the sanctity of the being of the Creator of the universe. "He is the God of all truth and all truth derives its sanctity from him."[33] This then is how the Scriptures describe the God of the uni-

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[29]See, for example, J. Daniel Hess, *Integrity: Let Your Yea Be Yea* (Scotdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978); Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983); John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1957).

[30]See *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics*, 123-125.

[31]J. J. M. Roberts, "Does God Lie? Divine Deceit as a Theological Problem in Israelite Prophetic Literature," *Congress Volume: Jerusalem 1986*, Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 211. Note: In this quotation, the punctuation has been modified for clarity and consistency with the rest of this article.

[32]Ibid.

[33]*Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics*, 125.

verse—as absolutely honest, totally trustworthy, and One in whom His created beings can have complete confidence! But the Bible goes beyond that, teaching that God made mankind in His own image (Gen 1:26-28), in order to reflect His character of truth and integrity (Matt 5:16; cf. John 17:10; 2 Cor 3:2, 18; 2 Pet 3:18). Making this summons to veracity more specific, the Old Testament dogmatically declares: "You must not lie to each other" (Lev 19:11 ERV), and "You must not tell lies about other people" (Exod 20:16 ERV), for "the Lord hates lying lips, but those who speak the truth are His joy" (Prov 12:22 NLV). Correspondingly, the New Testament charges: "So you must stop telling lies. You must always speak the truth to each other" (Eph 4:25 ERV), "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15). Furthermore, it unequivocally proclaims: "Never lie to one another; because you have stripped away the old self, with its ways, 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 [CJV], 10 [NJB]). Plainly, this is the pivotal point—that becoming a trustworthy and truthful person is only possible as we become more and more like Jesus Christ, One in whom there was no "deceit" (1 Pet 2:22), One who is classified as "the Truth" (John 14:6 NLV) in verity.

As we move from the broad principle of trustworthiness and integrity to the specific application of truthtelling, a significant point needs to be made. Based on Romans 7:6, "that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter," some have suggested that at times the literal interpretation of the ninth commandment contradicts the broad principle of honesty, at which point the letter should be ignored while the spirit is to be kept.[34] Careful study of this text indicates that it has been taken out of context, as the immediately following passage reveals: "What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet'" (Rom 7:7 NIV). The broader context shows that while Paul is rejecting a merely external obedience, he is calling for a genuine spirit-empowered allegiance to God's eternal law. It is similar to Jesus' condemnation of the proud religious leaders of His day: "'These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me'" (Mark 7:6 NLV). Rather than nullifying obedience to God's specific moral requirements, Paul affirms that "the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Rom 7:12). Evidently then, Scripture does not pose an either/or choice between the principle and the particular; instead, it calls for "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6 NLV), "for the love of Christ puts us into action" (2 Cor 5:14 NLV). Or, as John put it: "Let us not love with words or in talk only. Let us love by what we do and in truth" (1 John 3:18

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[34]See, for example, "In Defense of Rahab," 26; *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991), 117-118.

NLV). Disclosing precisely such a fitting blend of letter and spirit in relation to the issue of "truth," Ellen White says:

> Everything that Christians do should be as transparent as the sunlight. Truth is of God; deception, in every one of its myriad forms, is of Satan; and whoever in any way departs from the straight line of truth is betraying himself into the power of the wicked one. Yet it is not a light or an easy thing to speak the exact truth. We cannot speak the truth unless we know the truth; . . . We cannot speak the truth unless our minds are continually guided by Him who is truth.[35]

This perspective of Ellen White's, that truth derives from the Divine, while all deception is from the Devil, conspicuously conflicts with the assertion made at the start of this study that it is a "porcelain argument that no one should lie under any condition."[36]

A diligent investigation of the above Scripture passages on lying and truthtelling demonstrates that God has not made this matter merely optional; on the contrary, He has made this issue of truthful communication a binding moral obligation. So much so, that "people who tell lies" (Rev 21:8 ERV), and thus disregard this law, will go to hell (Rev 21:27)! This is not simply an arbitrary decision of the God of truth and verity, but is the only reasonable solution, since "everyone who loves and practices falsehood" (Rev 22:15 CJB) is in reality choosing to emulate Satan, "the father of lies" (John 8:44 ICB), while those who elect to follow Jesus, "the Truth," will inherit eternal life (John 3:16). Nevertheless, even though these basic biblical principles of honesty and the sanctity of truth are precise and plain, some have insisted that the central question must still be answered: What is the morally right thing to do, according to the Bible, when it seems that only falsehood will avert a fatality?

Deception or Death: A Challenging Choice

In order to adequately address this question, all the major points made above about Rahab's daring duplicity will now be painstakingly appraised.

Scripture Stories and Ethical Standards. To recap, the first point made was that, "Morality can be learned from Scripture stories where the Bible does not directly condemn the activities engaged in in the actual narrative." The same basic idea has been made in connection with 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."[37]

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[35]Ellen G. White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1956), 68.

[36]"Letters," *Adventist Review*, February 1998, 2.

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

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 brief, it is specifically argued that these stories demonstrate that lying to save life is perfectly legitimate, and actually the morally right thing to do, without any need for repentance or forgiveness, since this kind of lying is supposedly not considered a sin by God.[38]

This reasoning is similar to that of a high school teacher who produced a sizable document dealing with Christian marital relationships. Part of his research addressed plural marriage, especially as practiced in Bible times. He reasoned as follows:

> Premise One: God never changes His moral standards;
> Premise Two: David, a man that pleased God, had many wives;
> Conclusion: It is right for a Christian to be a polygamist!

Of course, this "logical" deduction raises some significant questions, such as: Are all the actions of Bible characters to be emulated? If not all, then should some actions be imitated? If so, which actions should be considered as models of morality? And, more importantly, how is a student of the Bible to know which actions to emulate and which to avoid? In other words, are there any clear scriptural guidelines for rightly interpreting and understanding the narrative portions of the Bible that will assist in the development of a sound strategy for proper ethical decision-making?

Hence, what does the Bible really mean in 1 Corinthians 10:11 about Scripture stories being "examples" for believers? This verse is in effect a 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). 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 reports so as to portray how far God's people drifted from Him and His holy law.[39] 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

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[38]See *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; "In Defense of Hierarchical Ethics," *Trinity Journal* 4 (September 1975): 87. For a comprehensive response to these theories see Ronald A. G. du Preez, "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 University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

[39]Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 283.

a summons to all believers to "avoid the evils recorded and imitate only the righteousness of those who served the Lord."[40]

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

> (a) Commendation of a person or notable action need not imply commendation of every element of the men and women cited.[41]
> (b) 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.[42]

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.*"[43]

That is the fundamental issue: Stories need to be "properly interpreted." Unfortunately, it appears that a variety of problematic strategies have recently been utilized, resulting in some dubious ethical theories.[44]

One of these methods is to twist the scriptural record so that a completely contradictory reinterpretation emerges. As a case in point, consider the ingenious (or is it disingenuous?) argument used in an attempt to strengthen the case on behalf of Rahab. Seeking to prove that "the Old Testament is saturated with examples of [allegedly appropriate deceptive] undercover activities in the accomplishment of the divine purpose,"[45] the writer 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.[46]

A simple reading of the Bible narrative quickly dispels the unsubstantiated assumptions advanced above. Exodus 1:22 notes that, after the failure of his

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

[41]Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 283.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Klein, et al, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 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.

[44]For a more thorough study of this issue, see my "Epics & Ethics: Vital Biblical Principles for Interpreting Scripture Stories," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* (forthcoming in the 1999 issue).

[45]"In Defense of Rahab," 25.

[46]Ibid.

plans to exterminate the Israelites through brutal taskmasters and God-fearing midwives, "Pharaoh commanded all his people," i.e., "the whole nation"[47] of Egyptians,[48] to drown every newborn Israelite boy in the Nile river. Thus, when it is correctly comprehended 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"[49] 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 (Mark 6:30-7:24; John 8:59).[50] Since there is no evidence that Jochebed 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,"[51] and that therefore Rahab's lies were similarly vindicated. This is especially true in light of Jeremiah's statement: "Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord deceitfully" (Jer 48:10a).[52] Thus, while the 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.[53] 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.[54]

Another strategy utilized by some is that of conjectural interpretation. This appears to be one of the more perilous approaches employed in the retelling of Bible stories, especially of brief narratives that seem to omit some details.[55] One

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

[48] J. Cheryl Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 75, concurs, noting that "'all his people,' v 22, appears to mean only the Egyptians."

[49]"In Defense of Rahab," 25.

[50]See Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 399.

[51]"In Defense of Rahab," 25.

[52]The 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.

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

[54]Commenting 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, Allegories, and Parables," in *A Symposium on Biblical Hermeneutics* (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Committee, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1974), 219.

[55]It 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"; Terence J. Keegan, *Interpreting*

of the most common assumptions about the Rahab incident is that she "lied to preserve the lives of Joshua's spies,"[56] and that her action, supposedly motivated by a magnanimous concern for others, is an excellent model of proper Christian compassion.[57]

Frankly, there is nothing in the biblical account that definitively states or even necessarily implies the above idea as the reason for her deception. The text merely reports that Rahab hid the men, and then, when asked, lied about the fact that they were on her premises (Josh 2:4-6). A correct contextual explication of Scripture necessitates an understanding of how exposed spies were treated in biblical times. An apparently classic case, occurring during the reign of David, details the manner in which the Ammonites treated some Israelite men whom they believed had come "to search the city, to spy it out, and to overthrow it" (2 Sam 10:3). Since they believed these Israelites were spies, they "shaved off half of their beards, cut off their garments in the middle, at their buttocks, and sent them away" (2 Sam 10:4). Thus, they deliberately disgraced the Israelites, but did not put them to death! Concurring, one scholar noted that these emissaries "were assumed to be spies by the Ammonites and were treated accordingly"[58]—not with execution, but with acute embarrassment.

Though the Pentateuch contains many regulations, there is no statute regarding what to do to a spy that has been discovered.[59] Perhaps a clue comes from the kind and compassionate manner in which even the animals belonging to an enemy are to be treated (Exod 23:5, 6). A similar lesson emerges in the story where Elisha calls for a banquet for, instead of bloodshed against the Syrian army he had captured (2 Kgs 6:8-23).[60]

the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics (New York, NY: Paulist, 1985), 102-103.

[56]Toni Craven, "Women Who Lied for the Faith," in *Justice and the Holy: Essays in Honor of Walter Harrelson* (USA: Scholar's, 1989), 41. See also "In Defense of Rahab," 24-26; "Rahab Revisited," 5; "It's a Sin to Tell a Lie," *Insight*, 24 November 1981, 6; Richard Higginson, *Dilemmas: A Christian Approach to Moral Decision Making*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1988), 64.

[57]See "In Defense of Rahab," 26; "Rahab Revisited."

[58]*Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 502.

[59]The Genesis 42 story of Joseph knowingly falsely accusing his own brothers of spying could give some insight into what the Egyptian practice may have been, approximately three centuries before the Israelite nation entered Canaan. Joseph imprisoned them for three days, and then warned them that if they could prove that they were not spies, "you shall not die" (Gen 42:20). Thus, it appears that Egyptian practice at this time was to execute captured spies.

[60]Unfortunately, this episode has also become the object of conjectural interpretation, from which the conclusion has been drawn that lying to save life is ethically permissible. But, a careful reading of the entire story reveals a rather different situation. The text records that the Syrians were trying to capture the king of Israel; but they repeatedly failed because God informed Elisha, who then told the king, who took evasive action. Then, the Syrians changed their plans and decided to get Elisha out of the way. Though the reader is aware of this new strategy, there is no evidence that Elisha knew this; in fact, it is implied that he did not know (because he failed to take any evasive

Ancient historical evidence sheds further light on this subject. The Babylonian Laws, as recorded in the famous Code of Hammurabi, include this legislation: "If conspirators assemble in the house of a tavern-keeper, who are not captured and delivered to the court, that tavern-keeper shall be put to death."[61] This regulation, promulgated shortly before the Israelite entrance into Canaan, has been recognized by some scholars as having a bearing on the Rahab incident: "She knew that anyone suspected of collaborating with the spies would be put to death."[62] Various thinkers have likewise concluded that, by keeping the Israelites hidden, Rahab incurred "a grave personal risk,"[63] and "endangered her own life."[64] In basic harmony with these views, Ellen White observes that Rahab preserved the two men "at the peril of her own life."[65]

The weight of evidence, based upon contextual implications, thus indicates that Rahab lied to save her own life. True, she did welcome the spies, hide them, and later help them to escape safely from Jericho. However, biblical, contemporaneous, and current information shows that her deception was essentially an act of self-preservation, not the highly-touted purportedly selfless, altruistic, and "exemplary" deception.[66]

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action, and only found out the next morning that the army was surrounding the city). So, fearless of the foe, confident of his Creator's protection, and evidently still convinced that they were after the Israelite king, he asked God to temporarily blind them, so he could take them to the capital, present them to the king, and treat them with incredible hospitality. If the account is interpreted on the weight of internal contextual implications, Elisha stands out 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 that Elisha deceived the Syrians in order to save his own life.

[61]W. W. Davies, *The Codes of Hammurabi and Moses* (Cincinnati, OH: Jennings and Graham, 1905), 54 (quoting law #109). See also, G. R. Driver & John C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws*, vol. II (Oxford, England: Clarendon, 1955), 45.

[62]*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 260. See also, *The Codes of Hammurabi and Moses*, 54.

[63]Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Literature* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1985), 79.

[64]*Bible Student's Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 44. See also, Richard S. Hess, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1996), 86; *Expositor's Bible, Book of Joshua* (New York, NY: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1908), 89-90.

[65]White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 483.

[66]Incidentally, in none of the Bible stories regarding "lying to save life" is there any clear example of someone who lied solely to save some other person's life. Every case can be shown to be about someone who lied simply for self-preservation. Incidentally, some have suggested that God personally endorses deception in 1 Samuel 16:1-4. See "Rahab Revisited," 5; *Samuel: From the Danger of Chaos to the Danger of Power*, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1995), 159. Painstaking analysis of this chronicle has revealed a rather unusual and 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,

To capture the essence of this section dealing with the relationship between Scripture stories and ethical standards, let's briefly review the tale of Tamar. Here is a woman, widowed due to a wicked husband (Gen 38:7), abused by her second spouse (Gen 38:8-10), and hoodwinked by her father-in-law Judah out of marrying his third son (Gen 38:11-14). So, taking matters into her own hands, she dresses like a prostitute to lure Judah into sex, without him knowing who it is. She becomes pregnant. When it is revealed that the pregnancy was due to "prostitution," Judah summarily sentences her: "Let her be burned" (Gen 38:24). But just before the execution she proves convincingly that the father-to-be is Judah. Chagrined, Judah responds: "'She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son'" (Gen 38:26). One of the twins born is named Perez, who becomes a direct ancestor of the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ.

What ethical imperatives are to be gleaned from this story, especially when it is recognized that not a single word of direct condemnation against Tamar can be found throughout the entire Bible? Does this narrative teach that incestuous sex with one's father-in-law is morally acceptable, since through this kind of action Tamar became one of Jesus' ancestors? Or does the record indicate that "prostitution" is permissible at times, when done to bring about justice, as Tamar succeeded in doing? Or does this narrative promote deceiving those who mistreat us, as Tamar did, with the result that she was classified "more righteous" than Judah?

Obviously, other than the gospel story of Jesus, who is our only true ethical example (1 Pet 2:21), no Bible narrative should be uncritically followed. The actions of these characters must be checked against the prescriptive propositional statements made in other parts of Scripture. Only if and when their actions coincide with God's clearly revealed moral requirements, as in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:2-17), and as exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus, should they be emulated. Which is why Paul could say: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1 ICB). Put plainly, Tamar's actions are explicitly condemned in Scripture because they violate specific divine moral laws which prohibit incest (Lev 18:6-17; 20:11-21), prostitution (Lev

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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;'" (White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 637. The ellipsis noted above ". . . ." is just as recorded, which is the only place Ellen White deals in depth with this story). 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 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 blasphemous.

19:29; 21:7; Deut 23:17, 18), and deception (Exod 20:16; Lev 19:11).[67] The fact that Tamar is mentioned in the genealogical record of Jesus (Matt 1:1-3), does not justify her immoral actions any more than does the listing of Judah promote deceit, prostitution, and a self-righteous judgmental attitude. Just as in the tale of Tamar, so in the record of Rahab, the conclusion is straightforward: She deliberately used deception. But Rahab's action should not be imitated since it is a violation of God's law (Exod 20:16; Lev 19:11) and contrary to His character (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Titus 1:2), as epitomized by Jesus our example, who never practiced deceit (1 Pet 2:21, 22).

Magnanimous Motives and Moral Action

To review, the second point "In Defense of Rahab" was that, "Motives are vital for determining an action's moral validity. In other words, misleading a potential murderer is in 'perfect conformity' to the 'spirit' of God's law." To analyze this statement two questions will be considered: What does the law of God really say? And, what part do motives play in obedience?

A new trend seems to be emerging in the interpretation of Scripture stories, and that is, the construction of novel meanings for well-known terms.[68] 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 of innocent human life?"[69] 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."[70] Quickly crushing this creative caricature, the writer then alternatively proposes that, "Common sense would dictate that intent and motive must come into the equation."[71] Finally, in place of the fraudulent formulation of a "lie" given above, he then asserts: "To lie, as I see it, is to make a false statement, with wicked or malicious or selfish intent to [impress,] deceive or mislead."[72]

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[67]Admittedly, all of these laws are contained in biblical materials that came many years after the time of Tamar and Jacob. However, the fact that God's moral expectations were already known from earliest times is evident from the entire book of Genesis; see *Toward Old Testament Ethics.* Ellen White observes that, "God has ever preserved a remnant to serve Him. Adam, Seth, Enoch, Methuselah, Noah, Shem, in unbroken line, had preserved from age to age the precious revealings of His will. The son of Terah [i.e., Abraham] became the inheritor of this holy trust. . . . [God] communicated His will to Abraham, and gave him a distinct knowledge of the requirements of His law and of the salvation that would be accomplished through Christ"; White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 125.

[68]With some revision, this section is borrowed from "Epics & Ethics: Vital Biblical Principles for Interpreting Scripture Stories," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, (forthcoming 1999).

[69]"In Defense of Rahab," 26.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Ibid. 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 the writer claims that

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

I. 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."[73] Consequently, it is concluded that "this commandment by itself, strictly interpreted, hardly constitutes a prohibition of any and every kind of deception."[74] Accordingly, at times any type of deception has been promoted in order to preserve human life.[75] While some modern linguists may endorse and promote this restricted view of the so-called literal meaning of the ninth commandment,[76] 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.[77] 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,

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"intention becomes crucial for a correct understanding and application of the command against bearing false testimony [Exod. 20:16; Deut. 5:20]").

[73]"The Ten Commandments and Ethical Dilemmas," in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea* (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 to prohibit deception in general and not merely in court (see, for example, 2 Kgs 9:12; Isa 9:15; Jer 14:14). 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.

[74]"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 writer concludes 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.

[75]See "The Ten Commandments and Ethical Dilemmas," 271.

[76]Not all agree with this restricted view; see, for example, *Die Luge Nach dem Alten Testament* (Zurich & Frankfurt: Gotthelf-Verlag, 1964), 17, quoted in "The Phenomenology of the Lie in Biblical Narrative" (Ph.D. dissertation, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1991), 24.

[77]In brief, here is how 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.

kāzāb, is an expression found throughout Old Testament writings that encompasses and prohibits different types of deception and is not simply restricted to legal issues.[78] Indeed, it has been recognized that "this text in Leviticus does prohibit 'any form of lying or deception.'"[79] 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 (*kāzāb*), 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 *kāzāb*, which includes deception in general.[80] 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 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,"[81] 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, he utilizes a different Greek expression, *dolos*, one which includes deception of every shape and form.[82] 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. It is also this expression which is employed in 1 Peter 2:22 to describe an evil trait of which our "example," Jesus Christ, was exempt: "Nor was deceit [*dolos*] found in His

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[78]See, 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.

[79]"Women Who Lied for the Faith," 35.

[80]Interestingly, 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 7:9).

[81]William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 900.

[82]Ibid., 202. Note the use of this term in this manner in Acts 13:10.

mouth."[83] 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,[84] 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, intention or purpose for which the lie is told. 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."[85]

What, then, is the role of motives, especially when Scripture pronounces a divine blessing on "the pure in heart" (Matt 5:8) and states that "the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7; cf. Ps 139:23)? A study of the Decalogue shows that while commandments one and ten address essentially internal matters, numbers two through nine deal directly with clearly quantifiable action: for example, idolatry, adultery, stealing, etc. However, evidence from both Old and New Testaments indicates that these laws were never limited to merely external actions. Consider, for instance, Exodus 20:14: "You shall not commit adultery." When Jesus explained that to lust after someone was to commit adultery in the "heart" (Matt 5:28), He was merely reminding the people of a moral concept already recognized and recorded in the oldest book of the Bible (see Job 31:1, 9). In other words, true obedience includes both an appropriate attitude as well as correct action; a "pure heart" (Matt 5:8 NLV) that produces "good works" (Matt 5:16); a transformed mind with a godly lifestyle (Rom 12:1, 2); a faith that works (Jas 2:14-26); for this is what it means to truly worship God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24 NLV). In other words, "Those who have the mind of Christ will keep all of God's commandments, irrespective of circumstances."[86] Just as "breath" plus "body" are the basic elements of a "living being" (Gen 2:7), so these two factors are absolutely essential and form the indispensable parts of genuine biblical morality, for, right action with wrong motive can result in any-

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[83]Since "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* (deceit), is used in Revelation 14:5 to describe an evil trait completely absent from the redeemed ones who "follow the Lamb wherever He goes."

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

[85]"The Phenomenology of the Lie in Biblical Narrative," 19.

[86]Ellen G. White, *The Sanctified Life* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1937), 67.

thing from a grudging submission to legalistic conformity.[87] A so-called "right" motive with wrong action, on the other hand, leads to things such as rationalism, relativism, humanism, situationism, and eventually blatant antinomianism—an overt rejection of God's eternal and immutable moral standards.[88]

By way of recapitulation, it seems quite significant, then, that under divine inspiration, Bible writers of both Testaments understood the ninth commandment 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:

> 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.[89] This precept forbids every effort to injure our neighbor's reputation by misrepresentation or evil surmising, by slander or talebearing. Even the intentional suppression of truth, by which injury may result to others, is a violation of the ninth commandment.[90]

As already noted above, Ellen White astutely declares that while "Truth is of God; deception in every one of its myriad forms, is of Satan."[91] And, according to Ellen White, this includes lying to save life: "Even life itself should not be purchased with the price of falsehood."[92] Hence, instead of adopting a fallacious, humanly formulated view of falsehood,[93] it would be prudent and the

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[87]Biblical examples of people who had right actions but wrong motives include: the Pharisee at the temple (Luke 18:10-14); some active churchgoers at the time of the end (Matt 7:21-27); and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).

[88]Biblical examples of people who had so-called "right" motives but wrong actions, include: Uzzah trying to stop the ark of the covenant from falling (2 Sam 6:3-7); Saul performing a sacrifice to keep the army together (1 Sam 13:5-14); and Jehu using deception to destroy idolators (2 Kgs 10:18-28).

[89]Consider, for example, the old anecdote—possibly apocryphal—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 the Russian car came in second, and the American car second to last." Now, while the facts were technically correct, they were told in such a way as to deceive.

[90]White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 309 (emphasis added).

[91]White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, 68 (emphasis added). 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.

[92]White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:336 (emphasis added).

[93]See, for example, "In Defense of Rahab," 24-26; "Rahab Revisited," 5; "When the Truth Is a Lie," in *Lyrics of Love: God's Top Ten* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1988), 79-86; *Inspiration: Hard*

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).

II. 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,"[94] does not correspond with the conventional, standard understanding of the word. A painstaking investigation of three major English dictionaries covering the last century, from 1897 through 1997,[95] 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 hint that the only time that intentionally misleading someone is a "lie" or a "deception" is if it is done "with wicked or malicious or selfish intent." Concurring, it has quite correctly been recognized that, from a human perspective, 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."[96]

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

III. 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 Command-

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Questions, Honest Answers, 116-118; *Samuel: From the Danger of Chaos to the Danger of Power*, 127-128, 148, 254-255. Several books containing 20th-century stories that unfortunately implicitly promote the use of deception when under distress have been published: *The Man Who Lived Twice* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1997); *The Man Who Couldn't Be Killed* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1995); *Shadow of Terror* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1990); and, *Flee the Captor* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1966). I recognize that these latter books may be true stories about people who suffered for and served God, but just as with the story of Rahab, this does not mean that we should present their lies as God's ideal for His people.

[94]"In Defense of Rahab," 26.

[95]See 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.

[96]"The Ten Commandments and Ethical Dilemmas," 266.

ments 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 motives! 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." 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).

There are several other illustrations of convoluted descriptions being used to dazzle and disorient people. For instance, apparently uncomfortable with using straightforward language to describe deception, various individuals have begun to employ subtly ambiguous, "user-friendly" phrases such as "a diversionary tactic,"[97] an "imaginative strategy,"[98] a "playful trick,"[99] or "a very practical solution."[100] 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."[101] Indeed, while there might be a tendency by some to euphemize expressions as a way of excusing actions, "this is a time for Christians to stand tall for truth—in the midst of a forest of lies."[102]

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."[103] 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 truthtelling in any Christian's life (see Col 3:9, 10).[104] 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."[105] All of us must make a pivotal deci-

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[97]"Letters," *Adventist Review*, May 1998, 3.

[98]"Rahab Revisited," 5.

[99]"When the Truth Is a Lie," 84.

[100]"Letters," *Adventist Review*, 11 September 1997, 3.

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

[102]"A Forest of Lies," *Adventist Review*, 16 April 1998, 20.

[103]Peter also sounds a caution about those who "will exploit you with deceptive words" (2 Pet 2:3).

[104]"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).

[105]White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, 68.

sion: 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)!

Opposing Obligations or Compatible Commandments?

By way of reminder, the third point made in defense of Rahab's deception was that "Christians (and everyone else, for that matter) are sometimes forced to choose between two or more evils. In those cases [just as in Rahab's], we are not condemned by God for choosing the best of the bad options."[106]

One scholar has aptly observed that "the problem of moral exceptions or necessary compromises with evil has apparently occupied Christians from the very beginning."[107] From a study of available historical evidence, it appears that, up to the time of the Protestant Reformation, major Roman Catholic thought-leaders held that absolute moral commands sometimes come into un-avoidable conflict. If there were no opportunity for avoiding one of two sins, the lesser evil should always be chosen.[108] Other than two notable exceptions,[109] it appears that up until the beginning of the twentieth century, most well-known Christian thinkers, in basic accord with the early Catholic perspective, believed that tragic circumstances in life at times force one into the position of having to choose between two moral evils.[110]

Disagreeing with most other thinkers, a late eighteenth century ethicist held that the possibility of genuine moral conflicts must be ruled out on logical grounds:[111] "A conflict of duties and obligations is inconceivable (*obligationes non colliduntur*). For . . . two conflicting rules cannot both be necessary at the same time."[112] In other words, "if it is a duty, and hence a moral necessity, that a person do A, then it cannot also be a duty, and hence a moral necessity, that the person do something incompatible with A."[113] Specifically, this scholar held

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[106]"In Defense of Rahab," 26.

[107]J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Moral Judgment* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 106.

[108]See, for example, Augustine, *The City of God*, I, 21; Anthony J. Blasi, *Moral Conflict and Christian Religion*, American University Studies Series VII, Theology and Religion, vol. 35 (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1988), 2 (footnote #1); Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 168.

[109]See, for example, John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, reprint 1979), Gen 27:1ff; "Moral Duties," in *Moral Dilemmas*, ed. Christopher W. Gowans (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1987), 39.

[110]For an extensive survey of this data, see chapter two of my "A Critical Study of Norman L. Geisler's Ethical Hierarchicalism," as noted above.

[111]See Michael James Almeida, "The Impossibility of Moral Conflicts" (Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1988), 2.

[112]"Moral Duties," in *Moral Dilemmas*, 39.

[113]"The Debate on Moral Dilemmas," in *Moral Dilemmas* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1987), 6. The author was here commenting on the statement made by the ethicist that a conflict of duties is inconceivable.

that, even in the face of death, deception should never be practiced, because "a lie always harms another; if not some other particular man, still it harms mankind generally, for it vitiates [i.e., invalidates] the source of law itself."[114]

Some have felt that this focus on ethical conflicts is a misplaced emphasis.[115] Yet, they too must deal with the less than desirable borderline situations. Other thinkers have concluded that, in connection with conflicting moral norms, "the reasonable conclusion is that they are impossible."[116] Still others are firmly convinced of the reality of these situations of clashing ethical responsibilities.[117] Over the years, this issue of the apparently inescapable choice between two or more moral evils has given rise to various methodologies for decision making.

Essentially four different approaches to this problem have been developed by professing Christians. Perhaps the most controversial of these, Situationism, claims that conflicts between "law" and "love" can arise. Because it teaches that, in these cases, one is obligated to do "the most loving thing," irrespective of any God-given moral absolutes,[118] it must be rejected by committed Christians who believe that the Bible does completely prohibit actions such as adultery, theft, murder, etc. A relatively recent strategy, called Hierarchicalism or Graded Absolutism, claims to promote biblical morality.[119] However, since it holds that,

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[114]Immanuel Kant, "On the Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives," in Sisela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York, NY: Random House, 1978), 286.

[115]See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame P, 1983), 4, 128; Richard J. Mouw, *The God Who Commands* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame P, 1990), 116-120, 128.

[116]See, for example, "Against Moral Dilemmas," in *Moral Dilemmas* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1987), 247; "Ethical Consistency," in *Moral Dilemmas* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1987), 115-137; "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency in Ethics," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 8 (June 1978): 269-287.

[117]See, for example, Edward John Carnell, *Christian Commitment: An Apologetic* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1957), 223-229; "Moral Conflicts," in *Morals and Values: Readings in Theoretical and Practical Ethics*, ed. Marcus G. Singer (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 303-312; Joseph L. Allen, *Love & Conflict: A Covenantal Model of Christian Ethics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984), 86-87; *Moral Dilemmas* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 97-107; Charles Augustus Baylis, *Ethics: The Principles of Wise Choice* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1958), 130-133; "Moral Dilemmas," in *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, The Library of Philosophy and Theology Series, ed. Ian T. Ramsey (London: SCM Press, 1966), 262-279; "Remarks on the Conflict of Obligations," *Journal of Philosophy* 55 (11 September 1958): 811-819; Richard H. Bube, "Of Dominoes, Slippery Slopes, Thin Edges of Wedges, and Camels' Noses in Tents: Pitfalls in Christian Ethical Consistency," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 42 (September 1990): 162-172; "Der Kompromiss in der Moral: Zu seiner theologischen Bestimmung und Bewertung," *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 86 (1977): 99-118.

[118]See, for example, Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1966); Harvey Cox, "Reflection and Reply," in *The Situation Ethics Debate* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1968).

[119]See, for example, Norman L. Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971); Norman L. Geisler, *The Christian Ethic of Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973); Norman L. Geisler, *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981); and *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981).

other than God Himself, there are really no substantive absolute moral laws at all,[120] in the final analysis it turns out to be essentially the same as Situationism and must therefore also be repudiated.[121] A third scheme, Conflicting Absolutism, contends that in this fallen world moral absolutes do conflict, at which point one is morally obligated to do the immoral![122] Since it, in essence, champions the blasphemous view that God's law at times compels one to commit sin, it too needs to be set aside as unacceptable for faithful Bible-believing Christians.[123] Lastly, there is a system called Non-Conflicting Absolutism, which holds that when correctly defined and rightly understood, universal scriptural moral absolutes do not and cannot ever conflict. God requires loyal obedience under all circumstances, and guarantees to take care of the results.[124]

It is only this ethical procedure, that totally rejects the possibility of the conflict of absolute moral obligations, that needs further attention, in view of the allegation above that "Christians (and everyone else, for that matter) are sometimes forced to choose between two or more evils."[125] Since the Bible does not have any explicit statements directly addressing this matter, the basic principles and relevant passages need to be carefully considered. Notice the following lines of evidence:

A. To begin with, a comparison of the Decalogue with the Divine Lawgiver reveals that "the law of God, being a revelation of His will, [is] a transcript of His character."[126] For example, just as God is described as "holy" (Lev 19:2; Josh 24:19; Ps 99:9), so the law is "holy" (Rom 7:12); in the same way that His character is "perfect" (Deut 32:4), so is His moral law (Ps 19:7); just as He is "good" (Ps 25:8), so are His commandments (see Rom 7:12). Those who believe that divine moral absolutes conflict would in reality be pitting "part of God's nature against other parts of his nature."[127] And, "if God has given numerous moral absolutes, some of which genuinely conflict at times, it appears that there is conflict within the mind and moral will of God."[128] However, since Scripture declares that God's character is perfect and flawless, the expression of these at-

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[120]See Norman L. Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, 132.

[121]For a comprehensive elaboration of hierarchicalism, see chapter five of my doctoral dissertation, "A Critical Study of Norman L. Geisler's Ethical Hierarchicalism," as noted above.

[122]See, for example, *Theological Ethics*, vol. 1, *Foundations*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1966); Joseph Fletcher & John Warwick Montgomery, *Situation Ethics: True or False?* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1972).

[123]For excellent critiques of this system, see *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues; Christian Ethics: Options and Issues.*

[124]See, for example, Gordon Kainer, *Faith, Hope and Clarity: A Look at Situation Ethics and Biblical Ethics* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1977); *Toward Old Testament Ethics.*

[125]"In Defense of Rahab," 26.

[126]White, *The Great Controversy*, 634.

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

[128]Robert V. Rakestraw, "Ethical Choices: A Case for Non-Conflicting Absolutism," *Criswell Theological Review* 2 (Spring 1988): 255.

tributes in His moral laws will of necessity contain no conflicts or contradictions.

B. If genuine ethical conflicts exist, in which one must choose a so-called "lesser" moral evil, and if "Christ was tempted in every way we are tempted" (Heb 4:15 NLV), then of necessity, He had to have sinned! However, the rest of the passage just quoted, categorically states, "but He did not sin." The fact of the sinlessness of Jesus is repeatedly noted in the New Testament (1 Pet 2:22; cf. John 15:10), together with a summons to follow His example (1 Pet 2:21)—a command that would be pointless and preposterous, if people were forced to encounter real moral dilemmas in life in which they have to commit moral evil. Ellen White pointedly declares: "He [i.e., Christ] came to demonstrate that humanity, allied by living faith to divinity, can keep all of the commandments of God."[129] Since Jesus was "in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15), then we can be absolutely assured that no human being will ever be faced with conflicting moral obligations, in which a sin must be committed.

C. When God created humans in the beginning of this earth's history, He made them free moral beings (see Gen 2:15-17). Thus, one is never forced either to obey or disobey God or His moral law. Scripture teaches that individuals are always afforded a genuinely free choice—between good and evil, right and wrong, faithfulness and disloyalty, allegiance and treachery, obedience and disobedience (see Deut 30:19; Josh 24:15; cf. Matt 11:28-30; 2 Cor 6:2). In a chapter fittingly titled, "Satan's Enmity Against God's Law," Ellen White notes that "man was created a free moral agent. . . . He must be subjected to the test of obedience; but he is never brought into such a position that yielding to evil becomes a matter of necessity."[130] Furthermore, she reminds us that, "everyone may place his will on the side of the will of God, may choose to obey Him, and by thus linking himself with divine agencies, he may stand where nothing can force him to do evil."[131] Therefore, the notion that occasions arise in which the choices are only between one moral evil and another moral evil flatly contradicts Scripture and supports Satan in his enmity against God's law.

D. A constant refrain found throughout the Scriptures is the reality that God is both able as well as willing to protect and provide for those who face tests, trials, and temptations (see, for example, Ps 46:1; 91:1-8; Dan 3:16-18; Rom 7:24, 25; Jude 24). In 1 Corinthians 10:13, the apostle Paul tells us that "God is faithful," and He "will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it." Concurring that "He lays on them no burder greater than they are able to bear,"[132] Ellen White says: "God has made ample provision for His people; and if they rely upon His strength, they will never become the sport of cir-

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[129] Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, 15 November 1898, 730.

[130] White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 331-332.

[131] White, *Education*, 289 (emphasis added).

[132] White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 7:274.

cumstances";[133] for no temptation or trial is permitted to come to His people which they are unable to resist.[134] Moreover, Scripture says: "God helps you want to do the things that please him. And he gives you the power to do these things" (Phil 2:13 ERV). In other words: "Whatever is to be done at His command may be accomplished in His strength. All His biddings are enablings."[135] The biblical reality is that believers "can do all things through Christ" (Phil 4:13), because the "God whom we serve is able to deliver us" (Dan 3:16) from any temptation. However, "even if He does not" (Dan 3:18 NIV), loyal followers are challenged to "be faithful even to death" (Rev 2:10 NLV). The fact that a trustworthy God has promised to keep His followers from falling and to provide a morally right way of escape when trials come confirms that one will never be forced to choose between two evils.

E. The final judgment which takes place before Christ's second coming is frequently mentioned in the New Testament (see Matt 12:36, 37; Acts 24:25; cf. John 5:22; Rom 14:10; Heb 9:27). Accentuating the importance of God's moral norms, the writer of Ecclesiastes concludes his exhortation, saying: "Honor God and obey His Laws. This is all that every person must do. For God will bring to judgment everything we do, including every secret, whether good or bad" (Eccl 12:13 NLV, 14 CJB). Analogously, after enumerating specific commandments from the Decalogue, so that no one can mistake what "law" he is referring to, James says: "So speak and do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty" (Jas 2:12). As Ellen White pertinently observes: "In order to be prepared for the judgment, it is necessary that men should keep the law of God. The law will be the standard of character in the judgment."[136] Obviously then, there can only be a fair final judgment if there is a clear moral standard that can always be obeyed by human beings, through the power of God. This fact also challenges the notion that moral conflicts occur in which people are forced to violate the law of God.

F. The wholistic nature of the divine moral law is emphasized in the Epistle of James, as follows: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (Jas 2:10 NIV). Therefore, from God's perspective, there is no such thing as a "lesser moral evil" that He will merely disregard or overlook, for the transgression of any of His commandments is sin (see 1 John 3:4 KJV). In Ellen White's words: "In order to be a commandment breaker it is not necessary that we should trample upon the whole moral code. If one precept is disregarded, we are transgressors of the sacred law."[137] But, Scripture records that, "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). This offer

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[133]White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 421.

[134]Ibid., 332.

[135]Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1923), 333.

[136]White, *The Great Controversy*, 436.

[137]White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:253.

of forgiveness, however, does not negate the truth that such action is classified as "sin." On the contrary, the fact that it must be confessed proves that it is a moral evil. Thus, when one recognizes that the Bible discounts the concept of a so-called permissible lesser evil, it will become clear that "God requires of all His subjects obedience, *entire* obedience to *all* His commandments."[138]

G. Lastly, yet most critically, the overall theme of the cosmic controversy between good and evil needs to be thoughtfully considered. The first three chapters of Genesis indicate that the Tempter set out to lure Eve into doubting, questioning, and eventually challenging the veracity of God's word, as well as the validity, justice, and fairness of His moral requirements (see Gen 3:1-6). Indeed, "from the first, the great controversy had been upon the law of God. Satan had sought to prove that God was unjust, and that his law was faulty, and that the good of the universe required it to be changed."[139] Further light on this cosmic battle emerges from the first two chapters of the book of Job. One of the things Satan set out to prove was that, if God removed His protective care from Job, it would be impossible for Job to be loyal to God and obedient to His law (see Job 1:7-12). Ellen White observes: "Satan had claimed that it was impossible for man to obey God's commandments; and in our own strength it is true that we cannot obey them. But Christ came in the form of humanity, and by His perfect obedience He proved that humanity and divinity combined can obey every one of God's precepts."[140] This statement corresponds well with God's injunction regarding the Decalogue: "'Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments'" (Deut 5:29). Since God requires people to always obey all His moral laws, and since "God has given no commandments which cannot be obeyed by all,"[141] it can once again be seen that there is never a time when one will be compelled to choose between two moral evils. In the final analysis, a study of the great controversy theme indicates that it is Satan who claims that on occasion God's moral law "cannot be obeyed."[142]

This concise overview of biblical data concerning the essence of the moral law, the example of Jesus Christ, the fact of human freedom, the promise and power of God's protection, the nature of the final judgment, the wholistic character of the divine law, and the reality of the cosmic controversy between Christ and Satan, all demonstrate irrefutably that it is utterly impossible for genuine conflicts of absolute scriptural moral obligations to exist in God's universe!

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

[139]White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 69.

[140]White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 314.

[141]White, *The Desire of Ages*, 204.

[142]Ibid., 309.

Why then, do some insist that all human beings "are sometimes forced to choose between two or more evils"[143]?

Admittedly, there are people who have assembled all civil, ceremonial, and moral laws into one large collection of rules. As a result, they often end up with various conflicts, such as Nebuchadnezzar's decree to worship the golden image (Dan 3:1-6), versus the second commandment of the Decalogue (Exod 20:4-6).[144] However, more careful scholarship has demonstrated that "the notion that there is some type of division within the law is not a concept that has been imposed on it from the outside."[145] That this categorization is fair to the biblical text is shown by the fact that the civil statutes in the Covenant Code of Exodus 21-23 had a heading that referred to its laws as "judgments" to be used as precedents.[146] Furthermore, while "the Decalogue carried no socially recognizable setting with its laws,"[147] thus implying its permanency, the ceremonial rules, from Exodus 25 through at least Leviticus 7, "had an expressed word of built-in obsolescence when it noted several times over that what was to be built was only a model."[148] Thus, it is aptly concluded that "the law can and must be viewed as being divided into various components."[149] When this is done, the limited civil rules and terminated ceremonial rites will be properly understood. Then, when the Decalogue is rightly perceived as God's eternal moral law, the conflicts previously seen will simply vanish.

Moreover, there are some who maintain a belief in the conflict of moral obligations because of the way in which they choose to interpret and apply certain of the Ten Commandments. For instance, one writer says that telling the truth under threat to potential killers "makes one a participant in the shedding of their blood."[150] In other words, "to permit a murder when one could have prevented it is morally wrong."[151] It seems that this belief is constructed on the sixth commandment, for it is suggested that "the command 'You shall not murder' (Exod. 20:13) implies that we should help prevent the unnatural death of innocent people as well."[152] Moreover, it is argued that "human life made in God's image has the same intrinsic value no matter which way one contributes to its demise."[153] Thus, since it is held that "it is morally unjustifiable not to resist

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[143]"In Defense of Rahab," 26.

[144]See, for example, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*, 119.

[145]Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "God's Promise Plan and His Gracious Law*," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (September 1990): 291.

[146]Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 46.

[147]Ibid.

[148]Ibid.

[149]"God's Promise Plan and His Gracious Law," 300.

[150]"The Ten Commandments and Ethical Dilemmas," 265.

[151]*Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*, 232. See also, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, 174.

[152]*Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*, 183.

[153]Norman L. Geisler, "A Response to Olson's Critique of Ethical Hierarchicalism," *Evangelical Journal* 4 (Fall 1986): 83.

evil,"[154] "failing to prevent such a death is as culpable as actually causing it."[155] The pivotal issue here has to do with appropriate responsibility and culpability. Nowhere in the Ten Commmandments is it either directly stated or implied that these absolute moral laws may or should be inverted from negative prohibitions ("You shall not kill")[156] to positive limitless obligations ("You must prevent innocent people from being killed"). Logically, if "failing to prevent such a death is as culpable as actually causing it,"[157] then not deterring those who, for example, choose to commit adultery, steal, or covet, would of necessity make one guilty of violating those commandments as well. Clearly, the moral law must be read as given by God, and not presumptuously transmuted into propositions that place falsely-assumed or counterfeit responsibilities on people. Properly read as they are recorded in the Bible, these moral laws of God cannot and do not ever conflict.

Finally, one other basis for a belief in these moral dilemmas is due to what some allege is the evidence from "the brute realities of life,"[158] "'reason, and human experience.'"[159] Clearly, for these individuals the facts or occurrences of life, as they personally perceive them, provide the supposed proof that moral obligations conflict. Instead of diligently undertaking a hermeneutically sound and exegetically reliable analysis of what the Bible itself shows to be God's immutable and eternal absolute moral laws, they often operate on unexpressed assumptions and unexamined societal standards as to what these universal ethical norms presumably are. Then, based on these unproven theories, the conclusion is drawn that these duties conflict in the real world and in the Bible.[160] By way of illustration, consider the precise problem of lying to save life being investigated in this study. As noted above, some have considered it an absolute moral duty to prevent innocent human life from being taken. However, according to the biblical data, "it is an absolute not to commit murder; but it is not an absolute to save a life."[161] In other words, the reason for this dilemma is the "imposition of worldly definitions of truth on the Bible."[162] While it is no doubt a culturally-conditioned mandate to preserve innocent human life at all costs, this convention

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[154]*Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, 174.

[155]*Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*, 183.

[156]Exod 20:13 (NJB).

[157]*Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*, 183.

[158]*Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, 94.

[159]"Rahab Revisited," 5. In the original statement the word "Scripture" was also included, a point to be considered next.

[160]In view of this type of phenomenological approach to ethics, one writer has noted that, "many theological ethicists allow the development of their work to be controlled, not by theological enquiry, but by the law of that phenomenology of life"; *Theological Ethics*, vol. 1, *Foundations*, 461.

[161]C. Gordon Olson, "Norman Geisler's Hierarchical Ethics Revisited," *Evangelical Journal* 4 (Spring 1986): 12.

[162]Review of *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics*, in *Transformation* 1 (October/December 1984): 28.

does not correspond with Scripture. Considering loyal obedience more important than life itself, Jesus said: "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev 2:10). Just as Jesus Christ "obeyed [God] even when that caused him to die" (Phil 2:8 ERV), in the same way Christians are called to "follow His steps" (1 Pet 2:21), and be "willing to die" (Rev 12:11 NLV) for Him. In brief, "Death before dishonor or the transgression of God's law should be the motto of every Christian."[163]

Thus, when all the relevant biblical principles impacting on the conflict of genuine absolute moral obligations are taken into consideration, when God's immutable Ten Commandments are properly separated from other restricted regulations, when these ethical requirements are correctly interpreted, and when all unscriptural societal expectations are eliminated, it becomes incontrovertibly evident that it is utterly impossible for the divinely-designed moral absolutes to ever come into unavoidable contradiction!

Fear of the Future or Faith in the Father?

By way of review, the fourth and final point made above in defending Rahab's deception was that, "Potential consequences of any action must be carefully considered, and rigorously avoided if life-threatening. Since human life is considered most important, it needs to be protected even at the cost of truth." In view of the fact that it has just been demonstrated that loving loyalty to God's law of absolute truthfulness invalidates the humanistic belief of lying to save life, only the matter of "potential consequences" will be discussed in this section.

In setting the stage for retelling the story of Joshua 2, the writer of "In Defense of Rahab" made note of the strategic importance of the fortified city of Jericho, the first challenge the Israelites faced as they prepared to enter Canaan. The author 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."[164] Later, expressing a similar concern for avoiding undesirable results, he 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."[165] Then he 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."[166] Accordingly, reasoning that these consequences had to be rigorously avoided, the writer applauded Rahab for her daring deception.[167]

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[163]White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:147.
[164]"In Defense of Rahab," 24.
[165]Ibid., 26.
[166]Ibid.
[167]Ibid.

In a nutshell, the argument used above 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.'"[168] Incredibly, the article on Rahab never once mentioned 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).[169] Thus, adopting an atheistic approach of totally ignoring God's pivotal role in the lives of His people, the Rahab incident has been approached from a thoroughly humanistic perspective.

When it is seen that all "ethical systems can be broadly divided into two categories, deontological (duty-centered) and teleological (end-centered),"[170] which are "mutually exclusive,"[171] it becomes clear that the writer's stress on results makes this a teleological approach. This scheme stands in stark contrast to the deontological "ethic of principle,"[172] which holds that actions are "intrinsically right or wrong regardless of their consequences."[173] In essence then, since teleology is dependent on the often changing circumstances of life, it amounts to an inconsistent, relativistic tactic; while deontology proves to be a trustworthy, principle-based method for making moral decisions.

It seems that the natural human reaction, when confronted with perplexing ethical difficulties or life-or-death dilemmas, is to attempt to project the future, and then to make decisions based on these consequential speculations. However, the person who has become "a new creation" in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:17), is called upon to no longer be "conformed to this world" but to have a "transformed" way of thinking (Rom 12:2), and to "walk in the newness of life" (Rom 6:4), "according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:4). What this means in concrete situations is spelled out explicitly in instructions given by Jesus Christ: "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). In brief, the challenge is: Do not operate out of fear of the future, but by faith in the Father!

This conspicuous contrast between "fear" and "faith" surfaces in the account of the storm on the Sea of Galilee. After Jesus had miraculously silenced the turbulent ocean, He asked His disciples: "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?" (Mark 4:40). The reaction of Shadrach, Meshach, and

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[168]Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 96.

[169]See, for example, the following passages that talk about the "promised" land: Exodus 12:25; Deuteronomy 6:3; 9:28; 27:3.

[170]*Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*, 24.

[171]William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, 2d ed., Foundations of Philosophy Series (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 15.

[172]*Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, 20.

[173]"Deontological Ethics," in *Ethics*, vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Salem P, 1994), 219. See also, *What Are They Saying about Moral Norms?* (New York, NY: Paulist, 1981), 87; "Teleology or Deontology?" *Irish Theological Quarterly* 53 (1987): 36.

Abednego, when faced with either the fiery furnace or forsaking their heavenly Father, exhibits precisely the opposite reaction. Though they believed that God was able to deliver them from death, they said to Nebuchadnezzar: "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."[174] For, "Christ's ambassadors have nothing to do with consequences. They must perform their duty and leave results with God."[175] How then should moral decisions be made? Essentially echoing Revelation 2:10, Ellen White declares: "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."[176]

Admittedly, statements such as these run counter to a culturally-conditioned, results-oriented, rationalistic mind. As one scholar astutely noted: "We want to be like the most High, subject to none. 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."[177] When the biblical truth is acknowledged that only the Creator can "tell from the beginning what will happen in the end" (Isa 46:10 NLV), people will begin to spurn speculating about possible consequences and embrace the challenge of living for God's glory (Matt 5:16), in complete conformity to His commandments.

Thus, the prescriptive teachings of Scripture, together with its exemplary testimonies, establishes the deontological approach as the authentic biblical method for making moral decisions. Since consequential reasoning proves to be a "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Col 2:8 NIV), it needs to be roundly rejected. Instead, just as Jesus was "obedient to the point of death" (Phil 2:8), regardless of consequences, the dedicated believer is challenged to "think and act like Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5 NCV), fearless of the future, but "faithful, even to the point of death" (Rev 2:10 CJB).[178]

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[174]White, *The Sanctified Life*, 39.

[175]White, *The Great Controversy*, 609-610.

[176]White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 634.

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

[178]In addition to the exemplary life of Jesus, and the faith-building account of the three Hebrews, there are several other biblical narratives which provide worthy models of faithful actions in life or death emergencies. There is the record of Daniel and his friends who were loyal to God, even at the risk of the life of the friendly heathen overseer, Ashpenaz (Dan 1:3-13). Then, there is the story of Peter, who followed God's directions in escaping from prison, even though he knew that the sixteen non-Christian guards would be executed for his jailbreak (Acts 12:1-19). Also, there was Mordecai, who remained faithful to God, refusing to worshipfully bow before Haman, even when a death decree was made against the entire nation of the Jews (Est 3).

Besides these Scripture chronicles there are several 20th century stories of Christians who acted out of faith in the Father, not fear of the future, when faced with life-threatening circumstances. For example, an Adventist family, living in Austria during the Nazi occupation, took in a

Conclusions and Implications of this Investigation

This article set out to make a Christ-centered, Bible-based, appropriately-applied examination of the issue of lying to save life. Utilizing published articles on the biblical narrative of Rahab as a springboard for discussion, an analysis was first made of the scriptural perspective of truth. It was concluded that the God of truth and verity has made it an absolute binding moral obligation that people must communicate truthfully; so much so, that those who choose to copy Satan, "the father of lies," will perish, while the redeemed who emulate Jesus,

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12-year-old Jewish boy who was fleeing for his life. One day the Gestapo showed up at their door. When the soldier asked by name whether the boy was in their house, the wife looked the soldier straight in the eye and, trusting in God, 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 account comes from Poland, also during World War II. A Christian mother and her daughter 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. Since things had happened so fast, the mother had no time to figure out what to do. But, being a woman of great faith, 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 third incident happened in Romania during Communist rule. A first-grade Seventh-day Adventist boy faced a wrenching decision the first week he attended school. As he came home on Friday, he found an armed soldier and another man in his home talking to his mother. These men had come to ensure that he would attend school the next day. Turning to the first-grader they tried to persuade him to give up the "superstitious" belief in God. Then, they threatened to kill his mother, unless he agreed to attend school on Sabbath. The mother, encouraging her child to make his own decision, told him not to worry about her. He appeared torn between love for his earthly mother and loyalty to his heavenly Father. He did not want to go to school on Sabbath. But, should he lie, saying he would go, in order to save his mother's life? Would he be responsible if the soldier killed his mother? No; daring to stand faithful unto death, he refused to compromise his loyalty to God! Incredibly, God intervened and honored his integrity, for he was able to complete his education without ever attending school on Sabbath.

A more recent incident occurred in China, where the church works under the watchful eye of the government. When a large number of people were ready for baptism into the Adventist faith, they hired two trucks as transportation. Since they had never been to the lake before, they stopped for directions at an intersection. Too late they realized that they had actually walked into the state security offices. Before they could leave, the officer in charge asked: "What are you going to do at the lake?" Now, what were they to say, since conducting a baptismal service was strictly illegal? Because they trusted in God, and did not want to use deception, 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 as soon as they started out, a sudden rainstorm erupted. Miraculously, the rain fell only behind the trucks, soaking the motorcyclists, and making the road muddy and impassable 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!

"the Truth," will have eternal life. After having laid this basic groundwork, the specific issue concerning lying to save life was then considered at length. First, the concern regarding what ethical standards may be deduced from Scripture stories was addressed. It was shown that, only when the characters acted in harmony with God's plainly revealed will in the Decalogue, and as exemplified in the life of Jesus, should they be imitated. Second, the matter of motives was examined. An exegetical inquiry into the biblical expressions, together with an overview of the standard dictionary meaning of deceit and related terms, revealed that irrespective of motives, to intentionally mislead someone is a violation of the ninth commandment. Third, the question of the existence of genuine conflicting moral obligations was investigated. After a brief historical survey, and an enumeration of the four major methods used by Christians to address ethical dilemmas, seven biblical principles were adduced. Based on a study of the essence and unity of the law, the example of Jesus, the fact of human freedom, God's protection, the standard in the judgment, the great controversy, a proper isolation of the moral law, a trustworthy interpretation of the meaning of these commandments, and a repudiation of unbiblical societal expectations, it was concluded that it is totally impossible for real conflicts of absolute scriptural moral obligations to exist in God's universe. Finally, the issue of the role of consequences in decision making was appraised. While those who have argued in favor of lying to save life have opted for a speculative relativistic approach, it was demonstrated that the Bible's principled position is a call to uncompromising faithful obedience, even in the face of death.

As has doubtless been observed, this research on the extent and application of truthtelling has important implications for several other vital theological concepts. It impacts the nature of the character of the Father—a God of integrity whose word can be trusted. It affects the perception of Jesus Christ, the essence of truth and the believer's example for moral living. It has a bearing on one's view of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, One who has been sent to empower believers to successfully overcome any temptation. It has tremendous significance for the doctrine of revelation and inspiration, especially as it relates to the unity of Scripture and the need for a biblically sound hermeneutical procedure to interpret its many intriguing stories.

In the final analysis, it appears there is no middle ground, no third alternative. On this issue of lying to save life, the choice is either to be conformed to the world or transformed by the Word; societal conventions versus scriptural commandments; to live in fear of the future or by faith in the Father! As Jesus put it: "Whoever is not with Me is against Me" (Matt 12:30 NLV).