

# Why Abraham Was Not Wrong to Lie

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The book of Genesis contains two well-known accounts of Abraham lying about his wife, Sarah (Gen. 12:10–20; 20:1–18).<sup>1</sup> In each of them, Abraham reports that Sarah is his sister,<sup>2</sup> Sarah is then taken from Abraham, trouble ensues for those who have taken her, and Sarah is then returned to Abraham. The account in Genesis 20 also explicitly tells us that the Lord protected Sarah from being “touched” in the circumstances (v. 6), and the account in Genesis 12, too, tells us that the Lord intervened, presumably for the same purpose (v. 17).

## Two Competing Views of Abraham

A very common conclusion drawn from such accounts is that Abraham’s lying was wrong and therefore that it serves as an example of the spiritual defects that exist even in prophets.<sup>3</sup>

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1. The episode in Genesis 12 occurs before the Lord changed Abram and Sarai’s names to “Abraham” and “Sarah,” whereas the account in Genesis 20 occurs afterward. For simplicity’s sake, I use their later names. I will do the same when referring to the related episode in Abraham 2.

2. In the Genesis 12 episode, Abraham is depicted as asking Sarah to lie, as well as telling the lie himself (see Gen. 12:13, 19). In Genesis 20, Abraham tells the lie to Abimelech personally (Gen. 20:2).

3. See, for example, Terryl L. Givens, “Letter to a Doubter,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 4 (2013): 134, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/letter-to-a-doubter/>. Givens makes the same claim elsewhere. See the transcription of a Q&A with Givens found in “Faithful LDS Scholars Address Faith Crisis,” available at <https://www.churchistrue.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Faithful-LDS-Scholars-Address-Faith-Crisis.pdf>; and Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible*

A counterclaim to this view, however, is that Abraham did not actually lie. To support this idea, some point out that Abraham could legitimately describe Sarah as his sister.<sup>4</sup> Others indicate that the Egyptian term used by Abraham to describe Sarah was ambiguous—it means both “sister” and “wife”—and that, for this reason, Abraham was not false in his statement.<sup>5</sup> Either way, Abraham did not lie.

Unfortunately, this second claim—that, for one linguistic reason or another, Abraham did not actually lie—is unpersuasive. The problem is this: Regardless of whether we say that Abraham could legitimately describe Sarah as his sister, or that his term in describing her was ambiguous, it is still clear that his *purpose* was to deceive. And others, in fact, were deceived. From a moral standpoint, therefore, the fact that Sarah could technically be called Abraham’s sister or that Abraham used a term that technically included the idea of “sister” seems, in the end, to be beside the point. Under either interpretation, the statement was still a deliberate half-truth—and, as a deliberate half-truth, a deliberate deception. Thus, despite the laudable effort to mitigate condemnation of Abraham’s conduct, appealing to such linguistic nuances actually fails to do so. Abraham must still, so it would seem, be seen as lying.

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*of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 64. Patrick Mason also employs Abraham’s lying as an example of prophetic weakness. See his *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 52. It is also worth noting that in both Genesis episodes Sarah lied as well. This can be inferred from Genesis 12:13 and is explicitly reported in Genesis 20:5. It is also clear that she lied in the episode found in Abraham 2:21–25. Writers typically do not focus on Sarah when discussing these incidents, however. The interest is primarily in Abraham.

4. See, for example, Ellis T. Rasmussen, *A Latter-day Saint Commentary on the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 38–39. See also Susan Easton Black, *400 Questions and Answers about the Old Testament* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2013), 45. One scriptural account, of course, depicts Abraham himself as making this point (Genesis 20:12).

5. See John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), <https://rsc.byu.edu/introduction-book-abraham/book-abraham-ancient-world>. Also motivated by what she considers to be the difficult theological issue regarding Abraham, Gaye Strathearn explores this ancient wife/sister motif in detail. See her “The Wife/Sister Experience: Pharaoh’s Introduction to Jehovah,” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 100–116, <https://rsc.byu.edu/sperry-symposium-classics-old-testament/wife-sister-experience>.

## The Shared Assumption in these Views

What is most interesting about these two competing views, however—one that Abraham lied and one that (for one linguistic reason or another) he did not lie—is that they both make the same underlying moral assumption: they both presuppose that lying itself is always wrong. The first view sees Abraham as practicing deception, and it considers his doing so to be proof that even prophets do wrong at times. The second view—that Abraham did not lie—seems motivated to claim that Abraham did *not* do wrong, and it supports this claim by arguing that he did not actually lie. But this approach harbors the assumption that Abraham *would* have done wrong if he *had* lied.

Thus, while the two views differ on the surface—on whether Abraham actually told an untruth—beneath the surface they both assume that he was wrong if he did. Either way, lying itself is assumed to be prohibited *tout court*.<sup>6</sup>

This recognition crystallizes the question of this paper: *Is lying prohibited tout court? Are there no exceptions?*

Note, at the outset, that this is a moral question, not an exegetical one. Rather than a concern with interpretation per se—for example, with identifying biblical writers' intentions in crafting the Abraham accounts—the concern here is simply with the ethical status of lying itself, wherever it occurs. Is lying categorically prohibited—or not?

Moreover, because our question is moral rather than exegetical in nature, we are also not concerned with an interpretive comparison of the various Abraham episodes. It is true, for example, that in Abraham 2 (vv. 21–25) the Lord is the one who instructs Abraham to lie. This is unlike the Genesis episodes, where Abraham lies of his own volition. But the concern here is not whether the episode in Abraham 2 is more

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6. Students of the scriptures can also find themselves wondering about Abraham's conduct in terms of the precarious circumstances it entailed for Sarah. It should be remembered, though—as mentioned earlier—that the Lord explicitly protected Sarah and that the circumstances were therefore not as perilous as they might seem at first glance. Moreover, Sarah's situation is not the issue normally raised about Abraham's conduct in academic circles. In the brief mention of Abraham's lie by Givens and Mason, for example, it is the lie itself—not the possible consequences for Sarah—that gets attention and is the evidence that Abraham did wrong. The same is true of those who argue that Abraham did not actually tell a lie. The concern in this argument, too, is not whether Abraham put Sarah in precarious circumstances but simply whether he was lying. The scholarly view I am interested in, then, is specifically the claim that Abraham's lie was wrong in itself.

accurate than those appearing in Genesis—or vice versa. The concern in considering Abraham’s conduct is to explore the moral status of lying itself—and, for that issue, the question of primacy is irrelevant. From a moral standpoint, it is actually simpler to think of all these accounts as depicting separate incidents. What matters is that they all present the same general *circumstances*—and in each case, those circumstances present us with an ethical question about lying.

This ethical question, then—not exegesis—is the present concern, and on that issue, the two competing views about Abraham make a common assumption—namely, that lying itself is morally wrong and thus prohibited. That shared assumption is the subject of this brief study.

### The Problem with This Assumption

On its face, the idea that lying is completely prohibited makes perfect sense, of course. After all, it is straightforwardly condemned in every book of scripture, from the Old Testament to the Pearl of Great Price (see Lev. 19:11; Prov. 12:22; Rev. 21:8; 2 Ne. 9:34; D&C 76:104; and Moses 4:4).

The problem, though, is that both the scriptures and our own gospel-informed thinking present us with clear counterexamples to such a blanket prohibition. Remember, for example, the famous incident in which the Nephites, under sustained aggression from the Lamanites, used deceptive measures to gain military advantage and defeat a Lamanite army (Alma 52:19–40)—a strategy that was used by Helaman with his Ammonite sons, as well, for the same purpose (Alma 56:30–55).<sup>7</sup> Such Nephite decoys were deceptions, but no one would say they were wrong.<sup>8</sup> Remember, too, the account of the Hebrew midwives in ancient Egypt

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7. Nephite leaders also did something similar in Alma 55:2–24 and 58:1–29, and in these instances, they succeeded in avoiding any loss of blood.

8. Remember that the Nephites had been commanded to defend themselves from Lamanite aggression (see Alma 43:46–47; 48:14; 60:28, 34). Moreover, note that Captain Moroni went to battle against the traitorous Nephite governors specifically because the Lord commanded him to do so if those governors—who were aiding the invading Lamanites—would not repent (Alma 60:33). This attitude toward self-defense is corroborated in Doctrine and Covenants 134:11 as well as in 98:33–36, where the Lord speaks of appropriate defense as “the law” he has given over the earth’s history. Remember, too, that the Lord routinely helped the Nephites in their self-defense against Lamanite aggression. Such help is either reported or presupposed in numerous passages (see, for example, W of M 1:13–14; Mosiah 1:13–14; Alma 2:16–19, 28–31; 16:6–8; 43:23–24; 44:3–5; 57:25–26, 35–36; 58:10–12, 33, 37, 39; 59:3; 60:20–21; 61:13, 21; Hel. 4:24–25; 7:22; 12:2; 3 Ne. 3:15, 21, 25; 4:10, 31, 33; and Morm. 3:3, 15).

who routinely lied to Pharaoh in order to save the lives of newborn Hebrew males and who were expressly blessed by the Lord for doing so (Ex. 1:15–21). Remember also that when Syria was mounting aggression against Israel on one occasion, the Lord explicitly helped Elisha deceive the Syrians (2 Kgs. 6:8–23). And, as mentioned above, also remember a third episode involving Abraham and Sarah—the one in which *the Lord* instructed a lie about their relationship (Abr. 2:21–25). It is difficult to consider every instance of lying morally wrong when the Lord himself approves it, and even directs it, in such scriptural episodes.

We reach the same conclusion when we examine our own thinking about concrete nonscriptural instances. Consider, for example, a famous case in which we are asked to imagine that (1) a would-be murderer comes to our home, and we know he is seeking to kill someone; (2) he asks us if the person he is seeking is in our home; and (3) the person is, in fact, in our home. Assume also that there is no way to stop this would-be murderer if he knows the truth (we are not armed, there is no way to create a delay, the police cannot arrive in time to prevent the murder, and so forth). Now, it would obviously be a lie to tell this would-be murderer that the person he seeks is *not* in our home—but we would all agree that it still would not be wrong to do so.<sup>9</sup> Think, too, of the actual cases of families who hid Jews in their homes during the Holocaust. Such families were effectively lying to the Nazis all day, every day—but no one believes that such lying was wrong.

When faced with these concrete and extreme cases, it turns out that everyone recognizes times when lying would not be wrong. Intuitively, it makes sense that, other things equal, you can lie to those who will either kill you or other innocent people if you *don't* lie to them. It is not difficult to imagine cases in which we feel this way, not to mention finding examples of this in the scriptures themselves.<sup>10</sup>

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9. This case was posed long ago by the French philosopher Benjamin Constant (1767–1830). A recent source for Constant's example is Lenal A. Callender, "In Defence of Kant's 'Infamous' Reply to Constant: 'On a Supposed Right to Lie from Benevolent Motives,'" 2014, <https://vdocuments.net/in-defence-of-kants-reply-to-constant.html?page=1>. For some background on this case, see appendix A.

10. Of course, all of this leaves aside the question of whether we actually have a positive duty to lie in such extreme cases. It is one thing to say that we are justified in lying in one circumstance or another, and another to say that we actually *should* lie in them—to say that we are not only permitted to tell an untruth but that we are morally obligated to do so. Although this is an important moral distinction, it is not necessary to address it here, since those who write about Abraham assume that lying is not even justified. This obviously

But intuition is not enough. To be completely satisfied and, for that matter, to actually be confident in our judgments, it is important to unpack this intuition. This is particularly the case with Abraham, whose deception is often considered to be wrong despite our general instinct about lying and killing. Moreover, our intuitions about these cases seem to contradict the clear commandment against lying, which, as mentioned earlier, appears in every book of scripture. This makes it hard to accept that this obligation can be superseded simply by our intuitions.

All of this indicates the value of trying to understand why we feel the way we do in the cases we have considered. It is a little bewildering to see how easily we can form our judgments in these instances, even though we are completely aware of the commandment against lying that seems so clearly to contradict them.

### **A Way of Thinking about Truth-Telling**

Part of our bewilderment, it would seem, is due to thinking of truth-telling strictly in terms of an abstract *rule*. Thinking this way is not unreasonable, of course, since the vast majority of the time we *are* obligated to tell the truth. As mentioned, this is a common feature of the scriptural record.

The problem, though, as we have seen, is that it is not difficult to think of occasions when telling an untruth is completely justified. This is evident even when we consider some aspects of ordinary living. Think, for instance, of homeowners who—in worrying about potential burglary—routinely make it look as if they are at home when they are not (for example, by leaving lights on, playing music, having neighbors take in mail and trash cans, and so forth). People do this kind of thing all the time, and it is all clearly a lie—but no one believes it is wrong. Such examples, in addition to the more extreme cases we have already seen, indicate that truth-telling cannot really be a rule *per se*. There must be more to it than that. Following, therefore, are some general considerations that might help us gain increased clarity about this issue.

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precludes the possibility that it could ever be a positive duty, and that is why it is not important to take up the distinction here. For purposes of addressing Abraham, it is sufficient to show that lying is at least justified in certain cases.

### *Lying as the Violation of a Relationship*

Perhaps a useful way to begin thinking about truth-telling is to see it at least partly as a function of our relationships with each other. Rather than simply being a rule that should be obeyed *as* a rule, perhaps, at a deeper level, it has more to do with how we treat each other.

To get a sense of what this means, think, to begin, of our status as persons with agency. Such fundamental freedom has been an inherent aspect of our nature from the very beginning (D&C 93:29–30). However, we cannot properly exercise our agency if we are doing so against a background of falsehoods—if we are responding to things that are not actually real. In order to be fully accountable for how we order our lives—for what we *become* as a result of what we choose, moment by moment, to do—we must be experiencing the world as it actually is.<sup>11</sup> As persons with agency, we therefore have a right to *know* the way the world is: we have a personal right to the truth.

It follows from this that we also have a corresponding duty—namely, to tell each other the truth. To assert that we all have a personal right to the truth is meaningless if it does not mean that we all *owe* each other the truth. The right entails the duty.

Once we see this, it is easy to appreciate that lying violates the relationship we have with one another. If I lie to you, I am violating what I owe you as a person who has a right to the truth. I am violating *you*. I am manipulating your mind—I am *using* you—and this is a mistreatment of you, personally. Indeed, it makes sense to see the abstract imperative about truth-telling as, at least partly, an instantiation of the deeper principle that we are not to mistreat each other: it is a violation of the second great commandment. Such mistreatment can happen in multiple ways, of course—for example, by illegitimately causing physical harm or even death to someone. But lying is also one of the ways we mistreat others, and it makes sense that that is at least one reason why there is a general prohibition against it: lying is wrong *because* it is a mistreatment of others. Again, it violates the fundamental commandment about how we are to feel about and treat each other.

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11. For a brief discussion on this point about accountability, see appendix B.

### *Forfeiting Rights*

Now, recognizing a deeper principle about mistreating each other has an important consequence. Since this deeper principle is what generates individuals' right to the truth in the first place, no one can assert this right to the truth if their *purpose* in possessing it is to mistreat someone—to physically harm or even kill them, for example. Both morally and logically that is self-defeating. Since everyone's personal right to the truth is grounded to begin with in the more fundamental right not to be mistreated, no one has that right to the truth if their *purpose* is to mistreat someone. That would be to corrupt—and thus to negate—what engendered the personal right in the first place: we cannot have a right to violate what *gives rise* to the right.

One thing this means is that although people have a right to the truth, they can also *forfeit* their right to the truth. When their purpose is, say, to murder someone, they are violating what generates their right to the truth in the first place, and they therefore lose that right.<sup>12</sup> They have no moral claim on others to tell them the truth.

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12. The notion of forfeiture typically arises in discussions regarding self-defense where (to put it simply) we might say that although everyone possesses a right against violence, aggressors—*by* their aggression—actually forfeit that right, whereas those who are merely defending themselves maintain it. There is thus a moral difference between acts of aggression and acts of self-defense, even though both involve violence. A bit more discussion of this general point has recently appeared in my article, “Captain Moroni and the Sermon on the Mount: Resolving a Scriptural Tension,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2021): 132–33. The idea of forfeiture has been challenged from time to time in the philosophical literature, but it has also been successfully defended. Judith Thomson, for one, challenged it in an early paper, but later explicitly invoked it. See Judith Jarvis Thomson, “Self-Defense and Rights,” in her *Rights, Restitution, and Risk: Essays in Moral Theory*, ed. William Parent (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 33–50, and her classic “Self-Defense,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 283–310. Charles Fried (my first influence) and Frances Kamm both employ the idea, as does Fiona Leverick, even more fully. See Charles Fried, *Right and Wrong* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); F. M. Kamm, *Intricate Ethics: Rights, Responsibilities, and Permissible Harm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Fiona Leverick, *Killing in Self-Defence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Grabczynska and Ferzan criticize Leverick's reliance on forfeiture, but unpersuasively, and Brian Orend explicitly defends the notion against critics. See Arlette Grabczynska and Kimberly Kessler Ferzan, “Justifying Killing in Self-Defence,” *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 99, no. 1 (2009): 235–53, and Brian Orend, “A Just-War Critique of Realism and Pacifism,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 26 (2001): 435–77. Of course, in society generally, we routinely recognize that rights can be forfeited. People have a right to liberty, but if they perform sufficiently serious criminal acts, they forfeit that right and are restricted in their liberty through incarceration.

### *The Obligation to God*

What we owe other persons is not the only reason we have a duty to tell them the truth, however. Another reason we have this duty to others is because of what we owe *God*. Because truth is one of the Lord's essential characteristics,<sup>13</sup> we are obligated to honor him by emulating him: we have an obligation to be truth-tellers to our fellow human beings because of what we owe *him*. Thus, even though those with murderous intentions have forfeited their *personal* right to the truth, we nevertheless have an obligation to tell others the truth because of what we owe the Lord. Our obligation to others *and* to God both seem to be reasons why, as mentioned earlier, we are regularly commanded to not lie.

Despite our obligation to God to tell others the truth, however, even this obligation does not apply without exception. Not only are we certain that he would approve the deception practiced by those hiding Jews, as well as by us in lying to the would-be murderer at our door, but we have also seen scriptural examples in which the Lord actually approves, helps, and even directs acts of deception. Thus, although it is true that we have an obligation to God to tell others the truth, even this obligation does not apply in *every* circumstance.

### *Moral Asymmetry*

One element that seems to make a difference in the cases we are considering (the Hebrew midwives, Elisha, those hiding Jews, and so forth)—and that would help explain the Lord's approval—is the asymmetry of the moral choice they pose. Notice, for example, that if we all have the personal right not to be mistreated—and thus have a right to the truth—then we have an even more stringent right not to be killed. Violation of that personal right constitutes a much greater mistreatment than simply being lied to—and that is precisely what is at stake in the cases we are considering. They pit lying against killing, and, other things equal, it is obvious that killing is the more serious of the two acts.

But the asymmetry is actually more radical than this. After all, it is not just that we are faced with lying versus killing in the abstract—as if the particular nature of these acts did not matter. To the contrary, their particular natures are crucial, because they are crucially different: we are

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13. For example, the scriptures tell us that he is “a God of truth” (Deut. 32:4; Ether 3:12), that Jesus is “the truth” (John 14:6), and that the Holy Ghost is the “Spirit of truth” (John 15:26).

faced with lying to someone *who has no right to the truth in the first place* (and thus has no right *not* to be lied to) versus saving the life of someone who has *every* right not to be killed. So the point is not just that lying is a less serious mistreatment than killing. It is also that the persons being lied to have no right not to be lied to in the first place, whereas those whose lives are at stake have *every* right not to be killed. Morally, again, the situation is completely asymmetrical.

### *A Restricted Choice*

Another element that seems to make a difference in the cases we are considering—and that would also help explain the Lord’s approval—is that the innocent parties in these instances have no option beyond this completely asymmetrical choice. The Hebrew midwives did not have some third alternative, for example—a way both to tell the truth *and* to save lives. Nothing they did could have prevented infants from being killed if they told Pharaoh the truth. The same was true of those hiding Jews during the Holocaust. They too had no third alternative that would have permitted them to tell the truth and yet save those they were hiding. Telling the truth would have *entailed* the loss of those lives.

The same is true in every one of our cases, from the would-be murderer at our door to Elisha. In none of them is there some higher authority that can be relied on to overrule such a restricted choice and permit the parties to tell the truth *without* entailing innocent deaths. The killing simply cannot be prevented if the truth is known.

These two features of our cases, then—the radical asymmetry of the options they present, and the restriction to these two options only—would seem to explain how the Lord could sanction lying in them. In each case, the persons being lied to have no right *not* to be lied to, whereas those whose lives are at stake have *every* right not to be killed. When this is the unavoidable choice, it seems evident enough that the Lord would approve the decision to lie, just as we would.

### *A Tentative General Principle*

At least tentatively, all of this suggests the following three-part principle about lying in the cases we are considering: The innocent parties in these situations have no obligation to tell the truth to their antagonists because (1) those antagonists have no right to kill anyone in the first place and thus have no right to the truth that would help them do so (that is, they have no right *not* to be lied to); (2) at stake are the lives of

innocent persons who, in contrast, have *every* right not to be killed; and (3) the killing cannot be prevented if the truth is known (lying versus this killing are the *only* options).

All of our cases present such extreme and morally asymmetrical circumstances, and this is at least one possible explanation for why we feel that lying in them is justified—and this is true even regarding our obligation to the Lord.

### Accounting for Our Intuitions

The quick discussion above is far from a full account of lying, of course. Moral philosophy is a discipline rich in subtlety, debate, and careful moral distinctions, and full moral arguments, therefore, are necessarily more complex and subtle than this.<sup>14</sup> The concern here is simply to consider some specific cases where everyone would agree that lying is justified (the cases of Elisha, the Hebrew midwives, and so forth) and to raise some general considerations for thinking about them. We have

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14. The very notion of a right is complex, for instance, and the literature on the topic is therefore large. A fairly recent detailed and comprehensive discussion is F. M. Kamm's *Intricate Ethics: Rights, Responsibilities, and Permissible Harm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). An earlier volume that also illustrates the complexity involved in thinking about rights is Ronald Dworkin's classic *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978). My purpose is dramatically narrower than providing a complete and detailed argument about either rights or lying, however. I will be content if my brief discussion simply resonates with the intuitions and considered judgments of most readers regarding the particular cases I have identified. A more complete treatment of my thinking (at least in intellectual terms) would draw importantly on Kant (particularly his second formulation of the categorical imperative), Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas (my understanding of whom is completely indebted to C. Terry Warner). Additional features are derived from important and, in my view, classic works by Charles Fried, who wrote on the relational foundation of right and wrong long ago, and Ronald Dworkin, whose conception of equality is central to my thinking about moral issues. See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, rev. ed., ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmerman (1785; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958); Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Charles Fried, *Right and Wrong* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978). Obviously, countless authors have emphasized Kant's categorical imperative, and on multiple topics. To pick up on just one of the threads, specifically regarding self-defense, see Jonathan Quong, "Killing in Self-Defense," *Ethics* 119, no. 32 (April 2009): 507–37; and Kimberly Kessler Ferzan, "Self-Defense, Permissions, and the Means Principle: A Reply to Quong," *Faculty Scholarship at Penn Law* (2011): 503–13.

intuitions about these cases, and the intent here is no more than to identify at least a minimum plausible explanation that would account for these intuitions.

Here, for example, is how this approach looks in one of the nonscriptural instances we have considered:

Because the Nazis had no right to exterminate the Jews in the first place, and thus had no right to the truth that would help them do so (that is, they had no right *not* to be lied to); because the Jews had *every* right not to be killed; and because the killing could not be prevented if the truth were known (lying versus this killing were the only options), those hiding Jews had no obligation to tell the Nazis the truth. They were completely justified in lying all day, every day.

Once we understand the elements of this argument, we can put the idea in more abbreviated form, as follows:

Not only did those hiding Jews face the unavoidable choice of either lying to the Nazis or entailing Jewish deaths, but, in addition, the Nazis actually had no right *not* to be lied to, whereas the Jews had *every* right not to be killed. Those who hid Jews were thus completely justified in their deception.

The same logic applies to the would-be murderer at our door, as well as to our scriptural cases. For example, we can say of the Hebrew midwives:

Not only did they face the unavoidable choice of either lying to Pharaoh or entailing infant deaths, but, in addition, Pharaoh actually had no right *not* to be lied to, whereas those infants had *every* right not to be killed. The Hebrew midwives were thus completely justified in their deception—which explains why the Lord would bless them.

The identical logic applies to Elisha, who deceived the Syrian attackers before any war began (with the Lord's help, remember), and to the Nephites, who deceived their Lamanite attackers during their ongoing defensive war against them. Both were thoroughly justified in their deceptions, and for the same reasons as those above.<sup>15</sup> In all of these instances, both scriptural and nonscriptural, our intuitions tell us that these lies are

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15. Although identical in moral structure, the Nephite case is more general and indirect than the other cases we are considering. For a discussion of their particular example, see appendix C.

justified, and this approach to them provides at least one possible explanation for why we feel that way.

The case of Abraham is no different, even though people often assume he was wrong. To see this, consider first the account involving the Egyptians in Abraham 2:21–25, where the Lord explicitly tells Abraham that he will be killed if the Egyptians know the truth about Sarah. The logic is the same as in the other cases:

Not only did Abraham face the unavoidable choice of either lying to the Egyptians or being killed, but, in addition, the Egyptians actually had no right *not* to be lied to, whereas Abraham had *every* right not to be killed. Abraham was thus completely justified in his deception.

Seen this way, the idea that Abraham was justified now seems as intuitive as the other cases. And the same logic, of course, applies to both of the related Abrahamic episodes in Genesis, where Abraham also saw that his life was at stake (Gen. 12:12; 20:11). What is intuitive to us in the other instances, then—that is, that their lies were completely justified—applies equally to Abraham.<sup>16</sup>

All of this is particularly significant when we think of the Lord himself instructing Abraham to lie in Abraham 2. This is not because that passage somehow takes precedence over the biblical episodes but only because the Lord's clear involvement throws our ethical question into

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16. I do think it is intuitive for us to see the deception in these cases (including Abraham's) as justified. This is why, despite the various commands in scripture, it is still somewhat mystifying that Abraham's conduct has so often been seen as a problem. Not only do we (1) have an account in modern scripture in which the Lord tells Abraham to lie, (2) possess other scriptural episodes in which the Lord approves and even assists in deception, (3) have obvious cases in our history, like families hiding Jews from the Nazis—and so forth—in which we naturally believe that lying is justified, but (4) we also have our own intuitions that tell us someone in Abraham's situation would be justified in lying. It seems likely that part of what prevents us from thinking clearly in Abraham's case—that is, seeing his conduct as problematic even though we clearly recognize other exceptions—is his preeminent spiritual status. If the story were about an ordinary person facing a choice like Abraham's, then, given the totality of the story as it played out, the lie would likely be shrugged off as a perfectly reasonable thing to do—just like we do with the midwives, for example. It seems to be Abraham's elevated spiritual status that makes it hard to see it that way in his case: at least inchoately, the thinking might be that, given such status, the standard is naturally more stringent for him. But notice: even if this were the case, because of Abraham 2 it still would not be enough to show that his lie was wrong, since there *the Lord* instructs Abraham to lie. Thus, whatever increased stringency we might think applied to Abraham, that (obviously) was still not enough to make his lie wrong. All of this seems evident enough, which means it is still mystifying why Abraham's lie has ever been thought to be a problem.

such bold relief. Something has to explain how the Lord himself could instruct a lie, and this approach, at least in general terms, seems to offer a plausible framework for such an explanation.

### **The Commandment against Lying: A Key Presupposition**

The foregoing is one approach regarding justified deception in the cases we are considering. This account, then, along with our intuitions, naturally invites us to revisit our understanding of the commandment against lying. After all, when the Lord says, “Thou shalt not lie,” and “He that lieth and will not repent shall be cast out” (D&C 42:21), it appears that the command must apply without exception. It seems prohibitive of *all* lying.

We have seen, though, that a broader look at the scriptures, and at our own moral thinking in certain cases, indicates that this understanding cannot actually be correct. Indeed, even if only tacitly, we have always known there are exceptions. There are simply too many counterexamples, including the Lord’s own approval and direction at times, to support a blanket prohibition of all lying.

The common structure of the cases we have considered helps us see at least one plausible reason for why such exceptions exist. The fact that these cases have the same moral structure, and that both our intuition and our reasoned judgment tell us that lying is justified in them, suggests that the commandment against lying simply does not *contemplate* cases like these. Instead, it appears to presuppose circumstances that are actually very different. Either (1) everyone in the situation actually has a right to the truth (that is, they *do* have the right not to be lied to); or (2) no innocent lives are at stake; or (3) if they are, the killing can be prevented even if the truth is known (lying versus killing are *not* the only options).

These are more normal circumstances, and it makes sense that a commandment would assume those rather than the extreme situations we have been considering. Most of the time, for example, people lie because they merely want to save face or, perhaps, to avoid the consequences of their actions. Even more serious, but also common, are circumstances in which people want to gain an advantage over others, exact revenge, satisfy their greed—or meet some other purely selfish interest. Such circumstances are breeding grounds for lies and have nothing like the moral structure we see in the exceptional cases we are considering. The commandment, therefore, applies straightforwardly to such circumstances and condemns their deceptions.

In contrast, the cases of the Hebrew midwives, Elisha, Abraham, and so on, simply seem to fall outside what the commandment against lying contemplates—and that, plausibly, is why they constitute genuine exceptions to it. *Their* actions, in *their* circumstances, are not what the commandment was designed to prevent—it presupposes very different kinds of circumstances—and its prohibition, therefore, does not apply to them. They are authentic exceptions.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note that such instances are completely anomalous, however. In the vast majority of cases, the circumstances map exactly what the commandment was designed to prevent, and to lie in these circumstances is clearly prohibited.

This means that the approach presented here is not at all permissive. It actually prohibits every lie proscribed by the various commandments against lying, while simultaneously offering an explanation for why we (along with the Lord) have *always* recognized exceptions. This account does not offer new exceptions but simply explains the type of exceptions we have always recognized when we have actually thought about it.

Again, although this account supplies a general structure for understanding the specific cases we are considering, it is far from a complete theory of lying. More than anything, it is simply an introduction to the topic.<sup>18</sup> However, this treatment does seem to help us with these

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17. The presupposition presented here is only partial, of course, since it is derived only from the particular cases we are considering. Additional cases of justified lying, including more subtle ones, would lead to a more robust conception of the presupposition that appears to be built into the commandment. The discussion here is just a sliver of what would be a much larger project in understanding all justified lies.

18. For example, surely there are some acts less serious than murder that would nevertheless justify lying, and a full theory would account for them—along with many other subtle variations. Think, for instance, of the homeowner example, mentioned earlier. Burglary is far less serious than murder, and yet we all feel comfortable with homeowners lying about being at home when they are not. Part of the reason, surely, is that potential burglars, by their evil intentions, have forfeited any personal right to the truth and thus have no moral claim on homeowners to tell them the truth. It is easy to imagine that the Lord, too, approves deception in such cases—and yet they are far from circumstances of murder. They also are far from certain in their outcomes: rather than the certainty that some innocent person(s) will be killed—as in the cases we are considering—in this example, there is only the *risk* that one's home will be burglarized. The situation is thus both less serious and less certain than the cases we are looking at. Moreover, we can also imagine situations in which, for reasons far short of murder, antagonists have forfeited any personal right to the truth but in which we still feel obligated to tell the truth out of our duty to God. A complete theory of lying would account for all such permutations. Moreover, as already mentioned, there are other types of lies altogether (for example, to

particular cases. It seems to offer, at least in outline, a minimum plausible explanation for why we believe that lying is justified in these instances. Instinctively we can see this, and this approach is a possible way to help us understand why. The most important example, of course, is the case of Abraham, because his conduct gets the most attention. This approach allows us to see that his situation was exactly like the others, and that it makes perfect sense, therefore, to see his lie as not morally wrong at all but instead as completely justified—which, of course, also helps explain why, in one passage, the Lord himself would instruct Abraham to tell an untruth.

## Two Corollary Issues

### *The Irrelevance of Biblical Writers' Intentions*

Earlier mention was made of biblical writers' intentions in creating their accounts. This matters because it is sometimes thought that these intentions are relevant to the moral judgments modern readers make about Abraham. The idea is that in crafting their accounts of Abraham's deception in the first place, biblical writers were intentionally conveying the message that prophets can be inspired and still make mistakes. Since that was their very purpose, modern writers are therefore justified in reaching that conclusion based on these accounts: it is exactly what the original writers intended.

There are two problems with this argument, though.

The first is that if, by Abraham's lie, biblical writers intended to show that prophets can be inspired and still make mistakes, they were assuming that his lie *was* a mistake—that it was a moral wrong. But the only way to jump from “Abraham lied” to “Abraham was wrong to lie” is to assume in the first place that lying itself is always wrong—that it is prohibited *tout court*.<sup>19</sup> However, as we have already seen, this assumption is a mistake. Therefore, if, in fashioning their accounts of Abraham's lie, biblical writers were intending to show that prophets can be inspired

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satisfy greed or to gain revenge), and there are also lies intended simply to spare others' feelings—and a full theory would address all of these as well. An analysis this complete, however, would require consideration of far more variables and moral distinctions than brought forth here, and doing so is beyond the scope of any single paper.

19. The alternative is to say that even though lying is not always wrong, this *particular* lie was wrong. However, because the authors I have referenced do not argue in this way, one is left to conclude that their claim of Abraham's wrongdoing is based on the broader assumption—namely, that lying is always wrong.

and still make mistakes, *they* were making a mistake. They were making their own false assumption about lying. It is no defense of modern writers, then, to say that they are merely reaching the conclusion that the ancient writers intended. Because of their false moral assumption, those ancient writers were *mistaken* in what they intended—and thus they obviously provide no support to modern writers who follow them in that mistake.

The second problem is that biblical writers seemed to have the *opposite* intention in writing about the Hebrew midwives and Elisha. There we are shown the Lord both helping and blessing acts of deception, which would seem to deliver the message that people can deceive without their deception being wrong—which is the opposite of the conclusion reached about biblical writers' intentions in the Abraham case. In that case, it is assumed that people *cannot* deceive without their deception being wrong. When we see that biblical writers can have opposite intentions in this way, it seems even more obvious that it is a mistake to rely on them and what they think, and to form our own moral judgments instead.

### *Repentance?*

One way of looking at cases where it is obviously not wrong to lie is to think that lying in those instances is just serving the greater good. According to this view, although we *are* doing wrong in lying, that wrong is outweighed by the good we are producing: Abraham is saving his life; Elisha is saving the Israelites' lives; the Hebrew midwives are saving babies' lives; and so forth. In this view, although people are doing something wrong by lying, they are achieving the greater good by doing so, and that is what justifies it. The deception *is* still wrong, however, and thus seems to call for at least some kind of repentance.

In the view presented here, however, lying in these cases is *not* actually wrong—even a little—and thus there is simply nothing to repent of. Abraham was not mistreating the Egyptians in lying to them, for example, because, due to their murderous intentions, they had no claim to the truth in the first place. For the same reason, Elisha was not mistreating the Syrians, the midwives were not mistreating Pharaoh, those who hid Jews during the Holocaust were not mistreating the Nazis—and so on. In all of these cases, the truth was not given to people who, because of their murderous intentions, had no right to the truth in the first place. Preventing such persons from mistreating others was in no sense a mistreatment of *them*.

Neither, moreover, do the lies in these circumstances dishonor God. The radical asymmetry of these situations, and the strictness of the choice they force upon innocent parties, seems to explain why God would sanction lying in the cases we have seen. Such circumstances are completely different from those presupposed by the commandment against lying and therefore constitute genuine exceptions to it.

It is true, of course, that we will all feel regret that the world can present circumstances of this sort—situations in which lying is appropriate and justified. Nevertheless, it *is* appropriate and justified in the circumstances we have seen and therefore calls for nothing like repentance.

This becomes even more apparent when we recall, again, that in the book of Abraham it was the Lord who instructed Abraham to lie. It seems absurd to imagine God giving instructions to do something (1) that was morally wrong; (2) that would thus require repentance by Abraham for obediently performing it; and (3) that, based on such repentance, would also require suffering by his Son in order to atone for the wrong *that he himself had commanded*. A similar kind of problem applies to the Lord's helping Elisha lie, as well as his approving of the repeated lies told by the Hebrew midwives. Again, it is absurd to imagine that God would help and approve acts (1) that were morally wrong; (2) that would therefore require repentance from those who were performing them; and (3) that, based on such repentance, would also require suffering by his Son in order to atone for the very wrongs *he was helping and approving*.<sup>20</sup>

All such considerations indicate that in the cases we have considered, lying is not wrong even in a small degree and thus calls for nothing like repentance.

## Conclusion

We have considered a number of specific cases in which our intuitions tell us that lying is justified. We have also identified a general structure for understanding why we think this way in these particular instances, including why they do not violate the commandment against lying.

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20. In one sense, speaking of God performing acts that would require the suffering of his Son is not actually accurate. This is because the Savior was the one actually giving direction to Abraham, helping Elisha, and approving of the midwives' lies. Nevertheless, he was doing so *as* the Father, and, in light of that, this way of speaking *is* accurate. It is a genuine absurdity to imagine the Father (in whose place the Savior was acting) giving commands and approving acts that would not only require repentance but would also require the suffering of his beloved Son.

All of this applies to Abraham. In the end, there seems to be no good reason to think that he did wrong when he lied about Sarah. When we consider the evidence and all the relevant factors, including the five similar cases we have looked at, it is clear that he was *not* wrong to do so.

It is highly beneficial, of course, to have a rule against lying that governs conduct for the vast majority of circumstances in our lives. Following that commandment prevents a massive amount of mistreatment that would occur without it. Although far from complete, and although other explanations might serve as well, or better, the account here at least helps us see a minimum plausible explanation for why the commandment can operate as a rule in this way and yet simultaneously admit the exceptions we see in the specific cases we have looked at, including Abraham's.

A final point: The conclusion that Abraham was not wrong to lie does not suggest that prophets such as Abraham are flawless, of course. To believe that his lie was completely justified is not the same as saying that he was perfect. Everyone appreciates that even the greatest of prophets are human and have human weaknesses. But it does not follow from this that we should point to false examples to make the point—and that appears to be what happens in common thinking about Abraham. It seems clear that Abraham's lie was not an instance of wrongdoing, and it would be better, therefore, if it were not casually treated as if it were. Doing so not only perpetuates an insufficiently nuanced and thus inadequate view of lying itself, but also results in an inaccurate perception of Abraham.

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## Appendix A

As mentioned in the text (note 9), Benjamin Constant initially proposed the case of the would-be murderer at our door. His solution to it was to say, first, that rights give rise to duties, and then, second, to add that “to tell the truth then is a duty, but only towards him who has a right to the

truth. But no man has a right to a truth that injures others.”<sup>21</sup> Although people almost universally agree with Constant in his answer, Kant was not one of them. This is not surprising, since Constant was specifically challenging Kant’s view of lying in proposing this example in the first place. Kant published a reply to Constant, but some of Kant’s reasoning in his reply is widely considered ludicrous. The range of interest in this topic can perhaps be represented by the arguments of four authors as a sample. David Sussman, for instance, defends Kant’s overall reasoning by placing it in a specific context: not in the arena of personal morality (“virtue,” as Kant referred to this domain of philosophy), but specifically in the context of the relations among free and equal members of a political community with a just legal system (the ethics of “right,” as Kant referred to this domain of philosophy). Thus, contra Kant himself, Sussman finds a way (through the notion of “deputizing”) to justify the lie even on Kantian terms.<sup>22</sup> Lrenal Callender defends Kant’s reasoning in both philosophical contexts and claims that Constant simply uses the term “right” in a way different from the way Kant uses it.<sup>23</sup> Christine Korsgaard argues that the lie is permissible from the standpoint of Kant’s first formulation of the categorical imperative but not from the standpoint of the second or third<sup>24</sup>—and this because the standard of conduct Kant establishes for us is designed for an ideal state of affairs: one in which everyone is living in accord with Kant’s maxims. We are to conduct ourselves *as if* we were living in such a world. She argues that this suggests the need for special principles for dealing with evil—principles that do not assume the ideal state of affairs that Kant generally asks us to assume.<sup>25</sup> James Mahon also defends Kant on lying, incorporating distinctions both regarding the context of lying and regarding three different *kinds* of lies addressed in Kant’s work.<sup>26</sup>

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21. See again Callender, “In Defence of Kant’s ‘Infamous’ Reply to Constant.”

22. See David Sussman, “On the Supposed Duty of Truthfulness: Kant on Lying in Self-Defense,” in *The Philosophy of Deception*, ed. Clancy Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 225–43.

23. See Callender, “In Defence of Kant’s ‘Infamous’ Reply to Constant.”

24. If these are unfamiliar, see Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

25. See Christine Korsgaard, “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 15, no. 4 (1986): 325–49.

26. See James Edwin Mahon, “The Truth about Kant on Lies,” in *The Philosophy of Deception*, ed. Clancy Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 201–24, [http://wlu.academia.edu/JamesMahon/Papers/152941/The\\_Truth\\_About\\_Kant\\_On\\_Lies](http://wlu.academia.edu/JamesMahon/Papers/152941/The_Truth_About_Kant_On_Lies). For one translation of Kant’s published reply itself, see Immanuel Kant,

## Appendix B

Regarding the relationship of truth to accountability, note Jacob's reminder to the Nephites that the Lamanites' filthiness at that time "came because of their fathers" (Jacob 3:7, 9), and also his warning to the Nephites that "ye may, because of your filthiness, bring your children unto destruction, and their sins be heaped upon your heads at the last day" (Jacob 3:10). Also recall the Lord's pronouncement that, though the people at the time of the flood were the most wicked of all his creations, "their sins shall be upon the heads of their fathers" (Moses 7:36–37), and his declaration in our day that if parents are not diligent in teaching their children, "the sin be upon the heads of the parents" (D&C 68:25). Remember, as well, that Samuel blamed the unbelief of the Lamanites in his day on the "traditions of their fathers" (Hel. 15:15) and that Captain Moroni did the same decades earlier. He remarked that the traitorous behavior of Nephite governors was worse than the conduct of the Lamanites who were attacking the Nephites, because the Lamanites' hatred was caused by "the tradition of their fathers" (Alma 60:32). And early in Book of Mormon history, Lehi blessed the children of Laman that "if ye are cursed, behold, I leave my blessing upon you, that the cursing may be taken from you and be answered upon the heads of your parents" (2 Ne. 4:6)—a blessing he extended to the children of Lemuel as well (2 Ne. 4:9). All of these passages indicate that accountability is attenuated when persons must exercise their agency in an atmosphere populated by false beliefs or false ways of living—or both. We see this even in the Ammonites. While scripture clearly declares that there is no forgiveness for murder "in this world, nor in the world to come" (D&C 42:18), the Ammonites committed acts of murder and yet obtained forgiveness.<sup>27</sup> In this case, as in all the others above, some degree of diminished accountability must be operative in order to explain such forgiveness. What all of these passages show is the importance of the truth in individuals' exercise of agency and in their degree of accountability for how they exercise it.

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"Concerning a Pretended Right to Lie from Motives of Humanity," trans. A. E. Kroeger, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (April 1873): 14–19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25665827?seq=1>.

27. For a discussion of this matter, see Duane Boyce, "The Ammonites Were Not Pacifists," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016): 293–313.

## Appendix C

As mentioned earlier (note 15), the Nephite case is more general and indirect than the other cases we are considering. They used deceptive tactics, not because particular lives were at stake in the moment, but because *all* Nephite lives were at stake in the general ongoing war against the invading Lamanites. The Nephites did not start the war but were merely defending themselves against the aggressing Lamanites who were invading and killing them. As seen earlier (note 8), the Lord had commanded the Nephites to defend themselves, and he helped them do so. Moreover, the Lamanite threat was severe and ominous. They vastly outnumbered the Nephites they were attacking (see appendix D), and their intent was specifically to murder them—an attitude that led to killing even women and children (see, for example, Alma 35:14; 43:9–10, 45, 47; 48:24; 49:7; 60:17). We have record of instances in which Lamanite armies were already in occupation of Nephite cities and thus were refusing to fight; instead, they were advancing their aggression by steadfastly maintaining those occupations (for example, Alma 52:19–40; 56:13–55; 58:1–29).

In these circumstances, the only way these Nephite armies could actively defend their people was to defeat as many Lamanite armies as possible and to retake Nephite cities. And the only way to do this was to practice deception. They did not know whose particular lives they were saving by their actions, but they did know that by defeating Lamanite armies and retaking Nephite cities they were hastening the end of the war, thereby saving numerous innocent lives, however unknown they might be.

Thus, although more general and indirect, the moral structure of the Nephites' circumstances is actually the same as the other cases we are considering. Let's call the killings that could be prevented by retaking Nephite cities and defeating as many Lamanite armies as possible—thereby shortening the war and reducing loss of life—"preventable killings." Then the logic goes like this:

Not only did Nephite defenders face the unavoidable choice of either lying to the Lamanites or entailing preventable killings, but, in addition, the Lamanites actually had no right *not* to be lied to, whereas the Nephites had *every* right not to be killed and thus every right to prevent such killings. The Nephite defenders were thus completely justified in their deceptions. (With suitable modifications, the same thinking applies to Elisha's situation with the Syrians.)

## Appendix D

That the Lamanites vastly outnumbered the Nephites is a prominent feature of the record. Recall, for example, that the Nephite population was less than half the size of the Lamanite population in about 120 BC (Mosiah 25:2–3). Roughly thirty years later, the text begins reporting major dissensions from the Nephites to the Lamanites (Alma 2), and by the time of Captain Moroni (more than ten years after that), the text tells us that dissenters who had joined the Lamanites were nearly as numerous as the entire remaining Nephite population (Alma 43:13–14). By the time the war begins in Alma 43, therefore, the Nephite population—which, apparently, had long been less than half the size of the Lamanites—had been reduced by nearly half again. Not only, then, did the Nephites face regular attacks from the Lamanites, but, although there is no way to be certain, it is possible that the Lamanites outnumbered the Nephites by a ratio of nearly four to one. When under attack, the circumstances were genuinely dire for the Nephites.<sup>28</sup>

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28. I am indebted to Royal Skousen for pointing out to me in personal correspondence the textual correction—changing “descendants” to read “dissenters” in Alma 43:14—that brings this passage into conformity with the earliest texts. See also Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 428–29.