

1 Samuel 16:1-6: Did God Tell Samuel to Lie?

[E-mail Correspondence]

The following is a dialogue between myself and another person, regarding the issue of concealing information from others. The specific issue was whether or not 1 Samuel 16:1-6 supports the use of deception (and lying) in order to avoid anticipated bad results in a situation.

Ultimately, the dialogue ended in a stalemate, for each of us started with different perspectives on the nature of the situation. He began with the assumption that the events described in the passage WERE inherently deceptive, and everything in his perspective flowed from that starting point. My starting point was that these passages WERE NOT examples of deception, and that nothing in the context claims that they were so.

I obviously continue to believe that he was wrong. But I must say that the discourse was very helpful for me - forcing me to explore the issue more deeply than I had before. I am thankful that the discussion remained friendly to the end, rather than (as is often the case with such topics) heated and hostile.

Dennis

HIS ORIGINAL QUESTION:

During a recent Bible study of I Samuel 16:1-6, it struck me that there was an element of craftiness in God's response to Samuel's cowardice. While there was no outright dishonesty, there was, as the military would say, some misinformation.

My question is: Is craftiness an attribute of our God? I have some problems with that as craftiness usually has an element of misinformation. Alternatively is this an example of the author attributing Divine instruction to Samuel's rather human solution to a difficult situation?

MY REPLY:

In 1 Samuel 16, the prophet was told to do two things: sacrifice to the Lord, and anoint David. He was told that if questioned by Saul, he was to tell him about only the first of the two tasks.

Some people want to use this passage, to claim that lying is permissible. But as you have observed, there was no "outright dishonesty." Only truth was spoken.

The principle underlying this passage is something like this: Information can be withheld from enemies who would use that information to do evil. It is important to realize that "not telling everything" is NOT the same as "lying." In contrast, "misinformation" - at least the way I've seen it used - normally DOES include lying. Or rather, it normally IS lying - just another word for the same activity.

There are MANY situations in which withholding information is considered completely legitimate - and again, I'm NOT referring to lying. Often, for instance, children are only told certain things, without being told ALL the details - especially if they cannot understand them.

Even in the Bible... if you compare "parallel passages," you will see that one account may mention specific details that the other doesn't mention. But that doesn't mean that the one is lying or is inaccurate!

I hope this distinction between "not saying everything" and "saying something false" helps in providing an answer to your question.

HIS REPLY:

- >The principle underlying this passage is something like this: Information can
- > be withheld from enemies who would use that information to do evil. It is
- > important to realize that "not telling everything" is NOT the same as
- > "lying." In contrast, "misinformation" - at least the way I've seen it used -
- > normally DOES include lying. Or rather, it normally IS lying - just another
- > word for the same activity
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- > There are MANY situations in which withholding information is considered
- > completely legitimate - and again, I'm NOT referring to lying. Often, for
- > instance, children are ...

Accepted. But how about the element of deceit. If you withhold info because it is unnecessary then clearly there's nothing wrong. But withholding info to deceive? It's not lying of course but isn't there an element of dishonesty? It seems to me that this type of activity is so commonplace in everyday living that we more or less accept it as a norm and excusable. But when you apply it to God...? My problem is accepting that our God can 'deceive'. Certainly there is no need for Him to do so since he is sovereign. So why do it? Which is why I raised the question of whether Samuel or the author of Samuel without realizing the significance of what he was writing, falsely attributed a purely manmade solution to God...

By the way, thanks for responding. I really appreciate it.

Regards.

MY REPLY:

Thanks for your reply. You stimulated my thinking about some of the specific issues related to the topic, so I thought I'd share some of these thoughts.

I'm not sure if I can yet put them all into words, but I'll try!

>...But withholding info to deceive?

Perhaps the issue is whether or not it actually was deception.

I don't think that the statement given ("I'm going to sacrifice...") would CAUSE a false conclusion on the part of Saul. I don't think there is any logical necessity (referring to the laws of logic) for error to be reached, because of such a statement.

On the other hand, if he had said, "I am ONLY going to sacrifice...", or, "I am NOT going to anoint...", - then that would certainly be deception.

There may also be the issue of what a person has the RIGHT to know. For instance, if I try to meddle in your life or business, you have NO obligation to tell me everything about what you do. But if I was your employer, or a close family member, I would have the right to information that an "outsider" doesn't have. But even then, the employer wouldn't have the same rights as the family member, etc.

In the O.T., the role of the prophet was ABOVE that of the king. He, being the direct representative of God in the matters of right and wrong, had authority OVER the king. The king was to submit to the will of God, which was communicated through the prophet. This being the case, Saul didn't have the right to question and condemn Samuel, in this matter. [I could also ask, where did Saul's authority to be king come from? From the Lord, of course, but THROUGH SAMUEL!! Samuel's authority was HIGHER than Saul's!]

Whatever we do in attempting to understand this passage, we MUST interpret it in a manner that does not force a violation of other specific statements of Scripture. Some of these specific statements are as follows:

- We read in Hebrews that God CANNOT lie.
- James says that God does NOT tempt people (i.e., encourage them to sin). [The word "tempt/test" occurs with a different emphasis in some other passages... God "tests" someone in the sense of providing them (indirectly) with an opportunity to prove what type of person they are.]
- We are also commanded to be holy in ALL we do... and it is because God is holy.
- There are direct commands such as "do not lie" (and the equivalent) in both O.T. & N.T.

- >...I raised the question of whether Samuel or the author of Samuel
- >without realizing the significance of what he was writing, falsely
- >attributed a purely manmade solution to God...

This is an important question, and the way we answer it will reflect our perspective of what the Bible is, how it got here, whether or not we believe it contains errors, etc.

I will give you a few of my own thoughts. I do not know what you think on this issue, so I'm not attempting to write it "against" you, or anything like that! (If anything sounds that way, it's accidental.)

I believe the Bible was written by the prophets and apostles, who wrote it as God's representatives. I also believe that the message they wrote was in some manner directed by God, so that there was NOTHING in what they said that was erroneous. (In other words, I would have to say that the Samuel passage was an accurate description of what God said, not a mistake.)

There are many things in the Bible that are not said the way we might expect them to be said. There are passages that we may have difficulty understanding. There are things that may be absent, that we might think should be present. It is my view that what IS there, is given to us exactly in the way that is best, with complete precision and accuracy... and that, as we submit to it, we will continue to gain a better understanding of its message (an on-going process for us all!).

Since this topic isn't the primary purpose for this letter, I will stop here. If you want further comments on it, I have written some articles that express my views, and I can send them at another time.

Dennis

HIS REPLY:

- > Perhaps the issue is whether or not it actually was deception.
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- > I don't think that the statement given ("I'm going to sacrifice...") would
- > CAUSE a false conclusion on the part of Saul. I don't think there is any
- > logical necessity (referring to the laws of logic) for error to be reached,
- > because of such a statement.
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- > On the other hand, if he had said, "I am ONLY going to sacrifice...," or, "I
- > am NOT going to anoint..." - then that would certainly be deception.

I'm not sure I fully agree with you here...The analogy might be say, John wanted to get out in the evening, quash a few beers with his mates and just talk football. But Mary really doesn't approve of the guys John hangs out with and gets really worked up about it. So John knows if he brings it

up Mary's going to 'kill' him before he steps a foot out of the door. So he says, " Dear,...I'm going to the store to pick up a couple of things...". Which is true because he is going to pick up the beers. What he doesn't say is that straight after that he's going to meet up with the guys.

Now you're going to have to do a lot to convince me that John wasn't guilty of some deception here, although technically he was honest and yes, he just withheld information. When I first read the passage [1 Sam. 16:1-6], my impression was 'whoa, this is really too easy.' Too human, in fact. This is a solution you expect a guy to come up with, and I would accept it if Samuel came up with that solution. But Samuel had attributed it to God.

- > Whatever we do in attempting to understand this passage, we MUST interpret it
- > in a manner that does not force a violation of other specific statements of
- > Scripture. Some of these specific statements are as follows:
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- > James says that God does NOT tempt people (i.e., encourage them to sin). [The
- > word "tempt/test" occurs with a different emphasis in some other passages...
- > God "tests" someone in the sense of providing them (indirectly) with an
- > opportunity to prove what type of person they are.]
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- > We are also commanded to be holy in ALL we do... and it is because God is
- > holy.
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- > There are direct commands such as "do not lie" (and the equivalent) in both
- > O.T. & N.T.

I accept that. Which is the reason for my struggle with Samuel.

- > This is an important question, and the way we answer it will reflect our
- > perspective of what the Bible is, how it got here, does it contain errors,
- > etc.

Yes it does.

- > I will give you a few of my own thoughts. I do not know what you think on
- > this issue, so I'm not attempting to write it "against" you, or anything like
- > that! (If anything sounds that way, it's accidental.)
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- > I believe the Bible was written by the prophets and apostles, who wrote it as
- > God's representatives. I also believe that the message they wrote was in some
- > manner directed by God, so that there was NOTHING in what they said that
- > was
- > erroneous. (In other words, I would have to say that the Samuel passage was
- > an accurate description of what God said, not a mistake.)
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- > There are many things in the Bible that are not said the way we might expect
- > them to be said. There are places that we may have difficulty understanding.

- > There are things that may be absent, that we might think should be present.
- > It is my view that what IS there is given to us exactly in the way that is
- > best, with complete precision and accuracy... and that, as we submit to it,
- > we will continue to better understand its message (an on-going process for us
- > all!).

I accept that. On faith I accept that the Bible is inerrant, but I have to admit that there are times when I can't help feeling that it is too simplistic an answer....

Regards.

MY REPLY:

I really appreciate your answer, even though we may reach a "stalemate" as far as agreement is concerned. Thanks for your additional comments.

I see what you mean, in your John and Mary scenario. And in that situation, I would agree with your assessment. I should also mention that your analogy also matches in this additional way: the one who is withholding information (John) is the one who is higher in authority (the same way that I described the prophet as having higher authority than the king).

The only problem for me is the question of whether or not it is close-enough to Samuel's type of situation, for the analogy to completely fit. When I look at the John and Mary situation, I read into it a scenario in which John is probably *sinning* in the activities he is being secretive about. It's my impression (something you DIDN'T say, so I'm reading it into the story) that Mary is mad because John neglects his duties and responsibilities around the house. And maybe he comes home drunk and beats her up (?). If this were the case, I would strongly condemn John. Moreover, if this were the case, I would condemn him even if he openly admitted what he was planning to do!

As I've described it, the reason for condemnation would be the fact that John's planned activity was *sinful,* rather than the fact that he didn't fully disclose all his intentions. This would contrast with Samuel's case, in which he intended to do what was *righteous.*

I see Samuel's situation to be something like this:

Samuel: "Lord, if I tell him, he will kill me."

The Lord: "Well then, don't tell him!"

And I see the issue to be NOT the fact something was left undisclosed, but rather the issue of whether or not his planned actions were righteous or sinful in God's sight.

I will apply this to a "Mary and John" scenario. For this illustration, I'm going to say that they live in a country that is hostile to the Bible. (His wife is also hostile to the Bible, and has the "habit" of turning Christians in to the authorities, for imprisonment and death.) John says, "I'm going to get some things at the store." He doesn't tell her that he plans to stop at someone's house on the way home, to do something his wife disapproves of. Now I will give two scenarios:

1) Suppose he plans to visit that person in order to get drunk, and then to go out with that person and steal a car, etc. ... I would say he is sinning - NOT because he didn't tell her, but because his activities were sinful.

2) Suppose he plans to visit in order to attend a secret Bible-study... I would say that what he did was righteous - because his activities were righteous. I would say that failure to disclose his intentions was NOT an issue.

The way I see it, disapproval or approval would be related to the type of activity the person would do, not whether or not he disclosed information about it. (Am I beginning to repeat myself?! I'd better quit here!)

I think this issue is related to a much broader issue. Should we STOP doing what is right IF evil people don't want us to do it? Or should we do it anyway? If I understand your position, however, you would see it as two different issues.

Anyway, I'm not going to get upset if we don't reach agreement. Even if one of us would convince the other, I'm sure we could find other things to have questions about! ;-) Ultimately, the important thing ISN'T whether or not we know all the answers (and there are many things we'll not understand in this life)... but whether or not we know the God who does! If our lives are built on the sure foundation (Mt. 7:24-27), the other things will eventually be resolved!

Peace...

Dennis

HIS REPLY / FINAL COMMENTS:

Seems like the example you gave and the reasoning is saying that the ends can justify the means, i.e. if the ends were righteous then John was deceiving...but if the ends were sinful then John was deceitful. I'm not sure I can I agree with you.

- > Ultimately, the important thing ISN'T whether or not we know all
- > the answers (and there are many things we'll not understand in this life)...
- > but whether or not we know the God who does! If our lives are built on the
- > sure foundation (Mt. 7:24-27), the other things will eventually be resolved!

Well at least there is something for us to agree with you about. I feel often that our understanding is so limited compared to the eternal and incomprehensible wisdom of God that sometimes it feels so foolish of us to pretend that we can even begin to fathom God. And which makes me hesitant to cling to conventional dogma and church doctrine.....

> Peace...

> Dennis

Peace to you too... Thanks for this dialogue. Regards.

MY FINAL COMMENTS:

I wanted to express thanks for the discussion on 1 Samuel 16. I personally think I learned a lot from it; I hope you did, too.

I think the basic point of disagreement is over whether or not the withholding of information is "deception." I am under the impression that you say it IS and I say it ISN'T.

I found it surprising that you would interpret what I said as "end justifying means." I strongly oppose such a view toward ethics! But if we are looking at the whole issue from different ways (i.e., interpreting it as "deception" vs. "not deception"), that might explain it.

I like your last paragraph... and the last sentence:

>And which makes me

>hesitant to cling to conventional dogma and church doctrine.....

As I see it, two types of people could make this type of claim [of being hesitant to cling to conventional dogma & church doctrine]: 1) those who oppose the Bible [and who see no distinction between Bible and dogma/doctrine] and 2) those who are totally devoted to it [who prefer the Bible over the dogma and doctrine that people develop, in their imperfect attempts to "define" the Bible]! Imagine what type of discussion it could be, if the right 2-3 people got involved in it!

Peace

Dennis