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Did Abraham Lie? Sin and Holiness in the Patriarchs

The Scriptures recite the stories of countless individuals who have had their role in the tapestry of salvation history. The Haydock Commentary on the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible warns that in the cases of some: “the Scripture relates, but does not sanction what they did.”¹ A particularly difficult area of scriptural interpretation is the stories of the patriarchs of Genesis, who were among the first men to receive God’s covenantal call and are rightly called our fathers in faith, but who also seem to have committed various problematic and even sinful actions such as lying or marrying multiple women. In the life of Abraham himself, the great patriarch, there is the uncomfortable episode of his and Sarah’s trip into Egypt during which he instructs her to tell hostile kings that she is his sister, when she is truly his wife, though also technically his half-sister. As Thomas Oden, the compiler of an *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* writes, “The story of Abraham passing off his wife as his sister offered a considerable challenge to patristic interpreters.”² It offers considerable challenges to the modern interpreter as well, and the history of exegesis has been divided.

The question itself implicates the very nature of textual interpretation: the literal sense of Scripture must be taken seriously and understood before allegorical or typological meanings can be excavated. Abraham’s choices also bring up the unity of testaments since he and others are

¹ Geo. Leo Haydock, compiler. *The Old Testament of the Holy Catholic Bible with a Comprehensive Catholic Commentary*. (Monrovia, CA: Catholic Treasures. 1859, 1992), p. 43, Gen 27: 19.

² Thomas Oden, ed. *Genesis 12-50*. *Ancient Christian Commentaries on Scripture*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), Gen. 12:10-16, p. 6

reckoned as great models of faith by the New Testament. Tradition also has bearing on the situation and provides a stumbling block as weighty fathers and doctors of the Church, such as Augustine and Thomas, rule on the side of Abraham's innocence although this seems to contradict a common sense reading. Yet the fathers and certainly the modern commentators are not unanimous. To pave a path forward, we must see how exactly they absolve Abraham and what is at stake in the debate as well as make clarifying comparisons to other patriarchs who apparently lied and to other issues of sin under the old covenant such as polygamy. This paper will explore the barbs of this debate to see if there is sufficient evidence to release Abraham from the charge of lying and come to the moderate conclusion that Abraham may have acted in error, though also in ignorance, but that nonetheless God works through sinful humanity to gradually draw us back to him.

Interpreting Scripture

The Second Vatican Council provided sound instruction on interpreting the Bible according to the mind of the Church. To understand Scripture, the interpreter must pay attention to the "meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words."³ The Catechism picks this up and expands on it explaining the different senses of Scripture—the literal then the three spiritual senses: "The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation."⁴ The Catechism, quoting St. Thomas, affirms that "All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal."⁵ The preeminence of the literal sense must be strictly upheld in examining the text. The deep moral, allegorical and eschatological meanings, are all based on

³ Vatican II. "Dei Verbum." The Holy See. Rome: Vatican Office, 1964.
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html (accessed November 2011), § 12.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Second Edition. (New York: Double Day, 1994), § 116.

⁵ Catechism, 116

the literal sense as primary. Therefore, we cannot explain away uncomfortable passages as merely allegorical. On the contrary, the allegorical meanings will take their substance from the actual events which the Bible records in the literal sense.

Additionally, the Catholic exegete must read the Old and New Testament side by side with an eye to the unity of revelation. Thus Abraham is not only a father in faith for the Hebrew nation, he is also a father and model for the universal Church. The *Catholic Bible Dictionary* devotes a section to Abraham's faith and obedience as "the model of faith for all God's people,"⁶ a title acknowledged in the Old Testament⁷ and the New. St. Paul, in his letter to the Hebrews, praises many of the Old Testament figures as models of faith including Jacob⁸, Moses⁹, David¹⁰ and others after Abraham.¹¹ That New Testament praises the faith of these patriarchs provides an initial basis for avoiding calling them sinful. Yet the Bible itself speaks of Moses's sin which forbids him entry into the Promised Land¹² and of David's undoing through the temptation from Bathsheba.¹³ Given the well-known sins of these men, who stand alongside Abraham and Jacob in St. Paul's letter, it is curious that the great Church theologians have sought to exonerate Abraham and often Jacob for the event in which he called himself by his brother's name, Esau to receive the latter's birthright. While the unity of the testaments must be kept in mind especially with the New's praise of Abraham, the line-up with Moses and David whose sin the text acknowledges relieves the Catholic exegete of the definite task of having to explain away *any*

⁶ Scott Hahn, ed. "Abraham" in *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York: Double Day, 2009).

⁷ *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version. Second Catholic Edition. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 1 Maccabees 2:52.

⁸ Hebrews 11:21

⁹ Hebrews 11:23-28

¹⁰ Hebrews 11:32

¹¹ Hebrews 11:8-19

¹² Numbers 20: 8-13

¹³ 2 Samuel 11:1-26

seemingly sinful actions. Nonetheless, many great fathers of the Church still interpret the event in such a way so as to make Abraham blameless.

Abraham's Defenders

The group of commentators who excuse Abraham is filled with respected names: Augustine, Thomas as well as several modern scholars. Augustine's defense of Abraham is the strongest and most detailed. In his work, *Contra Faustum*, the great bishop of Hippo sought to answer the Manichean dualist heretics who promoted the notion of two gods, the evil god being that of the Old Testament, which they desired to remove from the Bible. Augustine admits that "For this deed of Abraham seems like that of a pimp," but he does not believe this is the case.¹⁴ Augustine is aware of orthodox thinkers in his own time who believed Abraham sinned, but he reasons that there is another way to answer the question: that when Abraham "indicated that she was his sister; he did not deny that she was his wife. He was silent about something true; he did not say something false."¹⁵ This is a very technical excuse. It is true that Abraham did not say something false, but he did intend to deceive. The Catechism defines lying as "speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving."¹⁶ Though the intended deception was there, the falsehood was not technically present, even though it hid a larger truth, that Sarah was his wife. However convincing this interpretation is, it became the argument taken up by St. Thomas and more recent commentators, as we will see.

But Augustine continues and sets out a narrative to dispel Abraham from any guilt by claiming that he acted prudently, in such a way so as to avoid tempting God. The objection that comes to mind regarding Abraham's conduct is one that Augustine foresees and counters: "Why

¹⁴ Augustine of Hippo. *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean (Contra Faustum Manichaeum)*. Roland Teske, trans. (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2007), Bk. 22, § 33.

¹⁵ Augustine, Bk 22, § 34.

¹⁶ Catechism, 2482

did Abraham not rather count of his God, so that he would not be afraid to admit that she was his wife?”¹⁷ Why does Abraham see a need to hide the truth rather than trust in God’s protection? Augustine agrees that God was of course able to do this, but that Abraham was striving to do all he could with his own resources to take care of the situation himself so that he avoided tempting God; Pharaoh’s hostile and lascivious customs put both Sarah’s chastity at risk and Abraham’s own life. Trusting in God to protect Sarah’s chastity, Abraham did what he could to protect his life. Augustine lauds Abraham’s deception as prudence as “It pertains to sound doctrine, however, that, when a person has something that he can do, he should not tempt the Lord his God....Abraham did what he could so that he would not tempt God. But he entrusted to God what he could not do.”¹⁸ Augustine’s defense is clever and orthodox, but the faithful Catholic need not see it that way.

After all, it seems to betray Abraham’s integrity to have Sarah say she is his sister. Even if this is not technical lying, there could still be some bad motive that renders the action problematic. Perhaps he acted out of fear. Surely there was a real danger to Sarah. If Pharaoh’s violence and lasciviousness were so worrisome, would it not be tempting God all the more to allow her to be put into a situation of such grave danger? God, of course, corrected the situation despite any apparently ill actions on the part of his covenanted one. That Pharaoh (and later Abimelech) are punished raises the rebuttal that it was not Abraham who sinned, but they. Indeed, that someone was punished admits that something wrong happened. But perhaps this issue is resolved by understanding that God simply corrected the situation effectively.

Yet, many Catholic commenters agree with Augustine on this point, including the *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, the *New Catholic Commentary*, the *Haydock*

¹⁷ Augustine, Bk XXII, § 36.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Commentary, Bruce Vawter, a Catholic biblical scholar, and St. Thomas Aquinas. Bernard Orchard's *Catholic Commentary* explains simply that "Sarai was his half-sister, 20:12. In the circumstances he was not obliged to tell the whole truth as that would have meant his own death without saving Sarai."¹⁹ Orchard takes up the same reasoning as Augustine: Abraham could not have saved Sarah, so he protected at least his own life. This line of argument has a whiff of proportionalism or the idea that any action is permitted so long as there is sufficient grave reason and the agent does not opt fundamentally against God. Nevertheless, Orchard agrees with Augustine on the technical question of lying.

The *New Catholic Commentary* agrees that Abraham acted prudently, but adds that the modern reader ought not judge him by Christian standards. Fuller's commentary declares, "Abraham's conduct appears shabby to us, but according to the moral standards recognized in his day he was acting prudently, and it would be a false issue to attempt to judge him by Christian standards."²⁰ This is an odd analysis because the very reason Augustine and others clear him of guilt is because he is a "model of faith" for Christians as well as Jews. The tone of this commentary is almost relativistic. While we must grant and understand that the ancient near East was a very different culture and time, Abraham is still following the One God as a model of faith for even modern Christians. He either lied or he did not. Claiming relativism brushes that question under the carpet without confronting it.

Bruce Vawter, the Genesis contributor to the aforementioned *New Catholic Commentary*, draws this point out his own book on Genesis. After again specifying that we should not judge Abraham by our standards, he writes, "On the other hand, a woman who already had a husband

¹⁹ Bernard Orchard, ed. *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*. (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1953), Gen 12: 13; p.193, 150a.

²⁰ Reginald Fuller, ed. *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*. (Camden, NJ: Nelson Publishing, 1969), 162b, p. 191.

was not marriageable: the husband would be to an oriental despot simply a temporary obstacle that could be removed. The author has stressed that Abraham was a ‘stranger’ in Egypt, that is, an alien without the protection of law. According to his lights, therefore, Abraham acted prudently.”²¹ This interpretation stresses the historical peril of Abraham, though this is absent from the text itself, which simply tells us that Abraham went to Egypt and told Sarah to say she was his sister. Granting that there was real danger, the question of lying is left unasked and unanswered.

The *Haydock Commentary* on the Old Testament does not do away with Christian judgment, but affirms Abraham’s prudence in the face of grave danger. Haydock notes that it is Pharaoh who is punished. According to him, “The event proved the justice of Abram’s suspicions [that Pharaoh was hostile], and God’s interference shewed that He was not displeased with his concealing part of the truth. Who can be so simple as to suppose, that we are bound to explain all our concerns to a foe?”²² This comment broaches a major point: that God does not show disapproval to Abraham’s action neither through punishment nor by expecting repentance from Abraham. This is one of the key reasons that so many orthodox commenters seek to absolve him. Haydock also deals with the lying issue and maintains that concealing the truth to enemies is certainly justified. This is a straight-forward perspective. Whether Abraham’s concealment of the truth actually constitutes a moral error remains to be vindicated.

Lastly, St. Thomas too clears Abraham of lying, but he stops there and does not address any other issues that might affect the status of Abraham’s action. In II-II, 110, 3 of the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas considers lying and whether it is always and everywhere wrong. He says unequivocally that “Now a lie is evil in respect of its genus,” and as such can never be good or

²¹ Bruce Vawter. *A Path Through Genesis*. (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956), p. 123.

²² Haydock, Gen: 12, 11; p. 28.

lawful.²³ The third objection raises the question about the Old Testament, noting that “deeds of holy men are related in Sacred Writ that they may be a model of human life. But we read of certain very holy men that they lied” and it goes on to describe Abraham and the case of Sarai and Jacob deceiving Isaac. The objection concludes that from these examples, “Therefore not every lie is a sin.”²⁴ What the objection assumes is that these models of faith must have been without sin and that because of that, any actions that they performed must have been righteous. Unfortunately, this is precisely the question at issue—whether the great models of faith could have sinned and the objector assumes the answer—that they could not have.

St. Thomas deals only with the instances of apparent lying, and he absolves both Abraham and Jacob from this charge. Thomas takes from Augustine the need to see the patriarchs as holy, “Augustine says (Lib. De Mend. v): ‘We must believe that whatever is related of those who, in prophetic times, are mentioned as being worthy of credit, was done and said by them prophetically.’”²⁵ This position, while held by the Church’s Angelic Doctor, is left unexplained. Of course the Letter of the Hebrews calls them models of faith, but still the patriarchs were subject the fallen human condition. Clearly, Jacob lied and sinned, at least according to Orchard’s commentary, though Thomas disagrees.²⁶ Perhaps we need not reject outright Augustine’s view of prophetic speech. Perhaps we can take it to refer to the moral or analogical senses of Scripture. Certainly Abraham’s rescue of Sarah from Pharaoh can be seen as a type of Israel being rescued from Egypt by God. Indeed, the Church Father, Ephrem the Syrian

²³ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. Second and Revised Edition. English Dominican Fathers, trans. (New York: Benzinger Brothers). Available online: <http://newadvent.org/summa>. Accessed November 2011; II-II, 110, 3.

²⁴ Aquinas, II-II, 110, 3, Obj. 3.

²⁵ Ibid, Reply 3.

²⁶ Orchard, Gen. 27:1-40, 153k.

held that to be analogical sense of the event.²⁷ Augustine's statement, as quoted by Thomas, is certainly correct as regards the analogical meaning of Scripture.

Nevertheless, we must still deal with the literal sense of what happened between Abraham, Sarai and Pharaoh and between Jacob and Isaac. And St. Thomas does take literally Augustine's enjoiner to read the prophets as acting prophetically. He excuses Jacob on the grounds that their actions must have been prophetic. Regarding Abraham, Thomas again cites Augustine and says that Abraham was not lying, but rather hiding the truth since Sarai really was his half-sister.²⁸ And this is all he says on the matter. Though this might be enough to say that Abraham was not telling a direct falsity, it does not explain or deal with the action as a whole. It seems that Sarai's chastity and bodily integrity are threatened when she is taken into the house of Pharaoh. Though this is unconfirmed by the text, Abraham's motives and apparent selfishness remain unresolved by Thomas's answer. A wrong intention, such as inordinate fear or lack of regard for his wife, could still sully his act of hiding the truth. Significantly, Thomas does not claim recourse to the principle of the patriarchs acting prophetically that he uses in dealing with Jacob. Still, Thomas declares that Abraham did not lie. Because Thomas deals only with the direct charge of lying and does not treat Abraham's faith or integrity in the issue, perhaps it is not a substantial disagreement with Thomas to hold that Abraham did something less than honorable, even if not formally lying.

A Comparison with Jacob on the Question of Birthright & Identity

To see whether it is rash or not to question Abraham's conduct on the journey into Egypt, a comparison with other apparent instances of sin in the Old Testament is helpful, particularly

²⁷ Ephrem the Syrian. "Commentary on Genesis, 9.3" in Oden, T. ed. *Genesis 12-50*. Ancient Christian Commentaries on Scripture, vol. 2. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 8.

²⁸ Aquinas, II-II, 110, 3, Reply 3. "hide the truth, not to tell a lie, for she is called his sister since she was the daughter of his father."

Jacob's receipt of Esau's birthright and the case of polygamy. There is substantial disagreement in the Catholic tradition as to whether or not Jacob lied when he received Esau's birthright. Augustine and Thomas explain away the potentially sinful act as mystical speech in that Jacob knew he was to act as first-born²⁹, but many commentators do not. If we can accept Jacob as having lied, then there would not be a *prima facie* reason to avoid attributing the same to Abraham.

Bernard Orchard's 1953 *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* has this to say about Jacob: "Jacob was guilty of false pretenses and of several lies. This is in no way glossed over in the text... There is no doubt what Isaac and Esau thought of the trick."³⁰ This commentary finds no discomfort in admitting Jacob's sin. It even specifically rules out Augustine and Thomas's interpretation and explains what Jacob rather should have done. "That Jacob knew of the prophecy, 25:23, that he, the younger, was to supplant his elder brother does not excuse his conduct. The proper course was to wait for Providence to bring the prophecy to fulfillment. For this wrongdoing Jacob had to pay heavily during his long years of hard toil with Laban."³¹ Orchard explicitly disagrees with the view that Jacob is speaking mystically to fulfill the prophecy, which is Thomas's explanation. Orchard explains that this is no excuse and that Jacob should have simply waited. In this confident assertion of Jacob's guilt, Orchard departs from St. Thomas's interpretation. Thus we are in good company to do the same. Though this is on the question of Jacob and not Abraham, it certainly seems to open the door to legitimate Catholic interpretations that contradict St. Thomas and that do read the stories about the patriarchs in a common sense light that admits of certain of their sins without diminishing the respect owed to them by the faithful.

²⁹ Aquinas, II-II, 110, 3, Reply 3.

³⁰ Orchard, Gen 27:1-40; p. 197, 153k 19.

³¹ Ibid.

Several other modern sources condemn Jacob's lie though without disrespecting the patriarchs or arguing that God blessed his misdeeds. Fuller's *New Catholic Commentary* says of Jacob's defrauding of Esau that, "There should be no attempt to excuse the malice of the lying and deceit practiced, even though these, too, must be judged according to the standards of the times. The author...himself recognized that what Rebekah and Jacob did was wrong and shows that it was punished."³² Though Jacob lived in a different time, Fuller's commentary insists that the writer did not intend to excuse his conduct. This again broaches the point about punishment. Rebekah losing her son and Jacob fleeing his homeland are scriptural evidence that they were punished and thus that God disapproved of their actions.

Scott Hahn, in his tour through the Old Testament *A Father Who Keeps His Promises*, affirms that Jacob has sinned. He writes, "No doubt God the Father was displeased by his children's long string of jealousies, deceptions and marital irregularities...Nevertheless, God's purposes would not be stopped. Once again, out of the threads of sin he spun a strategy to fulfill his promises."³³ Hahn excoriates the "deceptions and marital irregularities" after discussing Jacob specifically, but he also notes that with Sarah in Egypt Abraham had "resorted to a strategy of convenient deception."³⁴ While not an outright accusation of lying, Hahn admits that Abraham's action was at least dubious. He is harsher on Jacob, just as are Orchard and Fuller, but he also offers a reasonable explanation. Even through sin, God works out his divine providence for us.

Gleason Archer, a contemporary Protestant and very faithful scholar, makes similar remarks in his volume *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties*. Though Jacob receives punishment (deception from Laban that forces him into polygamy), nevertheless, "God

³² Fuller, Gen. 27:1-45 167a, p. 197.

³³ Scott Hahn. *A Father Who Keeps His Promises*. (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1998), p. 117.

³⁴ Hahn, p. 97.

continued to bless him, despite his devious and crafty ways, because He saw in him the makings of a true man of faith. It was only God's own providence that enabled Jacob to overcome..."³⁵ God's grace enabled him to grow. He who started out a sinful man, as we all do, God led to a life of true faith and dedication. In a way, this offers great hope for us if we can understand the patriarchs as models of faith in this way; it offers the hope that we too can grow and turn from sin (through grace) and also live lives dedicated to God. Perhaps Abraham is a model of faith in this sense as well; he goes from someone scared of foreign kings to someone ready to trust God's goodness and justice even in his command to sacrifice his own son, Isaac.

Further, it is on the question of Jacob's lie that the Haydock commentary reminds the reader that Scripture does not always approve of what it records. On Gen. 27:13, he says that Rebekah "was directed by God to this delicate business" and then on verse nineteen takes the same mystical tone as Thomas that Jacob is speaking to fulfill the prophecy, but then Haydock hesitates. He opens the possibility that it really was a lie and mentions that some of the early Church fathers defending lying in certain circumstances such as John Chrysostom. It concludes with, "even if we allow that they did wrong, the Scripture relates, but does not sanction what they did."³⁶ This is a very balanced analysis that presents a key paradigm. The Scripture does not always endorse that which it records. Haydock allows for this possibility of wrong doing alongside explaining Jacob's speech in a mystical sense. Holding both sides of debate provides a strong case for the freedom of Catholic to choose either.

The general willingness of commenters to admit Jacob's sin, who lived and acted in the same culture and time as Abraham, demonstrates that there is nothing inherently problematic in

³⁵ Gleason Archer. *Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), p. 101.

³⁶ Haydock, Gen. 27:19; p. 43.

ascribing sin to the patriarchs. The question remains as to why Abraham is generally absolved from wrong-doing when Jacob is not.

The Test Case of Polygamy

Polygamy is another issue that gives Christians pause when interpreting the Old Testament. Like Jacob's case, polygamy provides a lens for understanding action in the Old Testament that has been abolished by the new covenant of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. Ambrose, a mentor to Augustine, excuses the patriarchs from polygamy on the ground of basic ignorance. Regarding the polygamy between Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Ambrose says: "we should consider first of all that Abraham lived prior to the law of Moses and before the gospel; adultery, it seems, was not yet prohibited at this time."³⁷ This is incredibly helpful. It excuses Abraham of grave sin on the grounds of ignorance yet falls short of claiming God's approval of polygamist conduct. In his moderation, Ambrose offers a perspective that could apply equally well to the case of apparent lying: as it too was before the dispensation of the law, Abraham is not as culpable for actions that seem to contradict the natural law. Nevertheless, we need not understand God as approving of the problematic action.

Jacques Leclercq, a twentieth Belgian scholar, dealt with biblical polygamy systematically in his wider treatise, *Marriage and the Family*. He distinguishes two main schools of Catholic thought on the issue. The first "tradition holds that God allowed the Hebrews to practice polygamy. This tradition has on its side the great majority of theologians, among the Fathers as well as among the great Scholastics and modern authors."³⁸ This is the same line of reasoning that informs Augustine and Thomas in their arguments that Abraham did not lie. The reasons for excusing the patriarchs are the same: "Their main argument is the fact of patriarchal

³⁷ Ambrose. "Commentary on Gen 16:1-6." In Oden, p. 42.

³⁸ Jacques Leclercq. *Marriage and the Family*. Second edition. Translated by Thomas Hanley. (New York: Frederick Pustet Co. Publishers, 1945), p. 70.

polygamy and the absence of censure in the Scriptures. The patriarchs were men especially pleasing to God. It is therefore impossible to conceive, so the argument runs, that they were living in a state of grave sin.”³⁹ That the patriarchs were holy men who are our models of faith and the lack of censure for polygamy provides these thinkers sufficient ground for claiming that it was acceptable for them to take more than one wife, though this only applies under the old covenant, of course.

The greater thinkers of this school certainly command our respect. Nevertheless, Leclercq does not agree. He points out that:

Yet it is based upon a priori reasoning: the patriarchs were very holy men; we cannot admit, then, that they were guilty of grave sin; consequently, whenever one of them commits an act which the ordinary moral law styles sinful, an interpretation must be found that justifies it. This method is applied not only to polygamy, but also to Jacob’s lie, to Samson’s apparent suicide and, in a general way, to all the seemingly sinful acts committed by the Old Testament figures who were regarded as pleasing to God.⁴⁰

Leclercq’s point is that one can only arrive at such a view by assuming, a priori or before the fact, that the patriarchs were without sin. He also shows how these thinkers use the same arguments with polygamy as they do with the lying and other acts. Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with assuming the holiness of the patriarchs; perhaps it is the right lens to use when viewing Scripture. On the other hand, it is not clear that Scripture or tradition requires the interpreter to assume such a position. Nothing is lost theologically by admitted that the patriarchs could have sinned and that God simply works through whom he wills.

Leclercq then outlines a second way of understanding polygamy (and other Old Testament sin) and he believes “displays greater circumspection.”⁴¹ Represented by exegetes and philosophers, “they avoid speaking of a divine authorization or of polygamy. There merely

³⁹ Leclercq, p. 70.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 73.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 71.

chronicle the fact, record the absence of censure in the Bible and draw the conclusion that God tolerated the polygamy of the Jews, that He did not oppose it, and there they stop.”⁴² This method of prudent description is the view that Leclercq signs onto himself. It preserves an accurate account of the Old Testament events without necessarily adding God’s approval. This view is compatible with God’s patience and mercy as he works through our fallen condition gradually drawing humanity back to himself and eventually into the new and final covenant.

These two viewpoints need not be seen as contradictory. The first that holds there was a dispensation from part of the natural law “considers it possible to affirm” God’s approval, whereas the second view “believes it necessary to refrain from affirming” God’s approval.⁴³ This framework applies equally well to lying as it does to polygamy. Today’s interpreter can describe the events recorded in Genesis without affirming that God condoned all the actions of the father. This fits with the tradition, as taken up by the *Haydock Commentary*, that not every event recorded in Scripture is endorsed as good.

The Evidence of Sin

Given as we have seen that weighty commenters such as Augustine and Thomas excuse Abraham’s apparent lie as prudence, the faithful Catholic may still hold otherwise. Jacob lied; David committed adultery. There are plentiful examples of biblical leaders acting less than honorably. There is no reason that Abraham should be considered, a priori, to be free of sin when they were not. The sins of Jacob and David, who are sited in Hebrews 11 as models of faith, make it difficult to draw a line between them and Abraham, clearing Abraham of apparent sin but not them. Therefore, that Hebrews 11 mentions Abraham as a model of faith is not sufficient reason to explain away apparently sinful actions as innocent. Though this may have in fact been

⁴² Leclercq, p. 71.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 72.

the case, the exoneration must come from an examination of the text and the event, not through a predetermined desire to clear the charges of sin.

The other main reason that so many commenters absolve Abraham is the lack of repentance or punishment from God for his actions; this is one significant difference between him and Jacob. However, if we take Haydock's maxim that Scripture does not approve of all that it records, it does not follow that there must be punishment or repentance for there to have been wrong doing. It is true that Jacob's punishment is more obvious—he works for seven years only to be similarly deceived about his potential wife. Still, it is possible that Abraham was punished, and Gleason Archer's entry argues for this persuasively. Regarding Abraham's return to Canaan as promised, Archer postulates that, "it may well be that the subsequent years of agonizing delay (twenty or more until he was one hundred years old) were due in part to his failure and lack of faith in God's protecting power."⁴⁴ The lack of faith Archer refers to is Abraham's passing Sarah off as his sister. If Archer is right, then the lack of punishment some commentators use as a basis for differentiating Abraham and Jacob in terms of sin is obliterated.

Archer is unforgiving in his critique of Abraham's actions, and as a committed Christian, is unabashed to admit that some of the patriarchs sinned. In the case Abraham and Abimelech, Archer writes: "He then went on to explain that in point of fact Sarah was his half-sister, even though she lived with him as his wife. But here again Abraham showed a lack of confidence in God's power to preserve him from mortal danger and failed to uphold God's honor before the eyes of the unbelieving world."⁴⁵ Though Archer may go a bit far to maintain that Abraham actually acted in bad faith, he raises a solid counterpoint to the argument that Scripture tells of no punishment or repentance from Abraham. On Archer's reading, Abraham is greatly punished by

⁴⁴ Archer, p. 90.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 90.

the delay of fulfillment God's promise to make him an heir. It is true that Scripture does not declare this to be a direct punishment from God. The answer might lie in between Archer's rather harsh condemnation and the approval of Augustine. Abraham could have sinned in ignorance, and God punished Pharaoh to correct the situation, but Abraham still had to suffer delay of the covenant's fulfillment.

Even Augustine himself allows for the possibility that Abraham sinned. As previously mentioned, Augustine acknowledged that there were some, "not slanderers and attackers, to be sure, like Faustus," but who did argue that Abraham fell away from the firmness of his faith. If this was the case, Augustine affirms that he "would acknowledge that man's sin, and I would not for this reason judge that all his merits had been destroyed."⁴⁶ Though he still prefers his own interpretation, there is at least solid ground here for the faithful Catholic to hold otherwise.

Additionally, another highly reputable Church Father, who was a mentor to Augustine, St. Ambrose, thought that Sarah lied in stating that she was Abraham's sister, though he held that she did it out of concern for Abraham. The bishop of Milan writes, "She was willing, if necessary, to endanger her own modesty rather than the security of his husband. To safeguard her husband, she lied, saying that she was his sister."⁴⁷ Sarah certainly had understandable reasons that we would sympathize with in her desire to protect her husband. Nonetheless, Ambrose tells us that she uttered a lie. Thus the Church Fathers were not united in their interpretation of Abraham's journey with Sarah into Egypt.

⁴⁶ Augustine, Bk XXII, § 34.

⁴⁷ Ambrose in Oden, p. 8.

The Verdict on Abraham's Lying

As we have seen, the Catechism defines lying as speaking “a falsehood with the intention of deceiving.”⁴⁸ While Abraham does not utter a direct falsehood, given that Sarah truly is his half-sister, there is certainly the intent to deceive and calling herself “sister” intentionally hid the truth of their marital bond, which is very morally relevant as the deceived one tries to take her as a wife. In a deeper way, it is false to say that she was his sister. Though this was true, the effect of the statement is that “Sarah is marriageable woman,” and this is certainly false. The reality of Sarah as his wife is far deeper to who she is and their relationship than happenstance relations of kin which were common in the Old Testament.

If this analysis is correct, and Abraham did lie, it must still be shown that lying is always wrong to demonstrate that Abraham sinned. Thomas Aquinas held that lying was always wrong and Germain Grisez, an influential contemporary moral theologian makes the case, strongly, that lying is strictly prohibited in the Christian tradition saying: “Lying is part of the fallen human condition, but not of the condition of humankind renewed in Jesus.”⁴⁹ Although he acknowledges that “there is a lesser but significant school of thought holding that lying sometimes can be justified, particularly when it is a question of lying to an enemy, who has no right to the truth, in order to protect the innocent from harm.... Since the truth is to be spoken with one's neighbor, a person must not lie even to enemies, for enemies too are neighbors.”⁵⁰ Grisez stalwartly upholds that lying even to enemies is unacceptable, though of course he grants, “silence is not lying, and enemies need not be provided with the truth of which they can be

⁴⁸ Catechism, 2482

⁴⁹ Germain Grisez. *The Way of the Lord Jesus, Vol. 2: Living a Christian Life*. (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1983), p. 406.

⁵⁰ Grisez, p. 406.

expected to make bad use.”⁵¹ Yet Abraham does not keep silence, but speaks so as to deceive. This seems contrary to the virtue of truthfulness, which the Catechism defines as “the virtue which consists in showing oneself true in deeds and truthful in words, and in guarding against duplicity, dissimulation, and hypocrisy.”⁵² Against these standards, Abraham’s action seems at least problematic, if not directly sinful.

However, we should still bear in mind the difference between Abraham’s circumstances and our own. Vawter told us not to judge Abraham with Christian eyes, and he might be right in a sense because Abraham perhaps was ignorant of the sinful nature of deception. Grisez does admit that lying is part of the condition of fallen humanity. If this is the case, as I would argue it is with polygamy (the patriarchs were simply ignorant of various sins before the dispensation of the law), then Abraham’s action is not morally upright, but neither is it strictly worthy of condemnation. This demonstrates not the invalidity of the Old Testament (as Augustine’s opponents, the Manicheans, would have it) but rather the progressive nature of revelation and the great providence of God who works through sinful humanity to fulfill his great plan for salvation.

Conclusion

Though Augustine’s position was taken up by St. Thomas in the Middle Ages and became a very weighty and reputable school of thought on the issue, theirs is not the only acceptable Catholic view. While the modern exegete need not agree with Augustine, neither need we go so far as Archer does in his condemnation of Abraham’s apparent faithlessness. The parallel between polygamy and lying here provides a tenable path through the woods: many things are recorded in Scripture that are not necessarily approved of. Abraham calling Sarah his

⁵¹ Grisez, p. 406.

⁵² Catechism, 2468.

sister is recorded by the Bible without explicit reward or punishment, though Archer argues that Abraham was punished and others argue that Abraham was rewarded when Pharaoh gave him gifts. If he did lie, which is a common sense reading of the text, the Catholic need not be aggrieved that so great a model of faith sinned. On the contrary, as with the adultery of the great King David, these sins reveal that these were human beings, just as we are today, who were subject to original sin and disordered passions, and that despite this, God loved them, worked through them, and brought them to deep faith and righteousness. This is not a cause for scandal, but for rejoicing for how many more graces are afforded to us today under the New Covenant of Jesus Christ? Therefore how much for hope is there for us, who are sinful men like even some of the patriarchs, that God will love us, work through us and draw us to faith and righteousness in him.

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