

Truth-Telling as Subversive Obedience

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The ninth commandment—"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor"—has not been an accent point in biblical ethics or an emphasis in Mosaic-covenantal faith. Moreover the commandment is easily reduced to a kind of banal moralism, as though "lying" is a bad thing and should be avoided, a notion which is as thin as one can make the commandment. We here reconsider this commandment both as an exploration in interpretive method, and to see how this commandment may be a primal carrier of a Mosaic-covenantal vision of reality that is oddly pertinent to our moment of social crisis.¹

I

It is important at the outset to recognize that the commandment, expressed in absolute terms, is part of the decalogue given at "the holy mountain." As such it constitutes a part of the most elemental insistence of the Sinai covenant.² More than that, it voices an important dimension of the Mosaic vision of social reality and social possibility.

The commandment brings into stark juxtaposition two terms which assure its covenantal intent: "neighbor—false." The prohibition is not simply against "false witnesses," but it is a false witness against *your neighbor*, that is, a fellow member of the covenant community. The horizon of the prohibition is the well-being of the neighbor and the enhancement of the neighborhood. More broadly the prohibition concerning practices and conditions that make a neighborhood viable and genuinely human.

The antithetical term here is "false" (*sqr*). In the second version of the decalogue, the term is *sû'*, but the intention is not different (Deut. 5:20). The term "false" concerns utterance which distorts or misrepresents or skews. Viable community, according to Mosaic vision, depends upon accurate, reliable utterance. The process of community is profoundly vulnerable to distorted speech which inevitably skews social relations and social structures.

The commandment, however, is even more particular. It alludes to the precise setting in which false utterance is possible, seductive, and dangerous. "You shall not answer with false testimony." The verb "answer" and the noun "witness" indicate that we are concerned with solemn utterance under oath in a judicial context. In short, the commandment seeks to assure a reliable, independent judiciary. The ten commandments, as a whole, seek to bring every facet of social life under the aegis of Yahweh and into the context of covenant. This ninth commandment concerns the court system, and insists that evidence given in court must be honest and reliable and uncontaminated by interest. It is astonishing that in its most elemental summary, Yahwistic ethics insists upon a reliable, independent judiciary as one of the pillars of viable human life.³

It is clear that the notion of a court which gives reliable utterance is a continuing concern of the tradition of Moses. In Exod. 18:13-23, offered as a Mosaic innovation, Moses is instructed to find reliable judicial officers:

You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain (v. 21).⁴

And in speaking of judges subsequently,

You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue (Deut. 16:19-20).

The courts are seen to be crucial, because in social disputes which relate to political, economic matters, it is the capacity and responsibility of the court to *determine, limit, and shape reality*. And therefore if power and interest can intrude upon truth—by way of influence, manipulation, or bribe—then truth has no chance. It is reduced to power, and the powerless are then easily and predictably exploited.

Recent public events make altogether evident that a reliable, independent judiciary is indispensable to a viable society. In the U.S., it was the courts which were finally able to insist upon a constitutional vision of human and civil rights when all other aspects of the public process had failed. In old colonial powers and in the dictatorships of “banana republics,” it is often only the judiciary that prevents legitimated exploitation and brutality. Indeed, even as I write this, it is a “truth commission” with something like quasi-judicial powers at work in South Africa which has a chance to put to rest the long nightmare of brutality in that society. This commandment insists, in a direct and unadorned way, that “social truth” inheres in neighborly transactions and is not open to the easy impact of raw power which denies human reality. The commandment guarantees that *reality* is not an innocent product of *power*. The future of humanity is not open to endless “reconstruction” by those who have the capacity to do so, but must adhere to what is “on the ground.”

II

The commandment is likely articulated in a simple, face-to-face agrarian society. It is a simple requirement that neighbors not distort shared social reality. But as is characteristic in biblical traditions, this simple agrarian provision is transformed into a larger social concern by the imaginative power of the prophets. The requirement of truth-telling is matured by the prophets, first by enlarging its scope to include royal reality with its penchant for distorted public policy and second, by turning a “rule of evidence” into a Yahwistic claim. Examples of this larger maneuver include Nathan’s word to David concerning the violation of Uriah (II Sam. 12:7-12) and Elijah’s word against Jezebel who had manipulated truth by royal power (I Kings 21:19-24). In both cases, it is important that it is the issue of truth which is at stake in the prophetic confrontation. Both David and Jezebel have born false witness, David against Uriah, Jezebel against Naboth. Such distorting actions cannot stand, even if performed by the royal house.

In the prophetic period, powerful royal interests were skillful at the management of symbols and the control of information (disformation) that scenarios of “virtual” reality could be constructed completely remote from lived reality. The tradition of Jeremiah is preoccupied with *falsehood* whereby managed reality yields a phoney

sense of life and well-being.⁵ The poet counters such control:

From the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
and from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.
They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying "Peace, peace,"
when there is no peace (Jer. 6:14; cf. 8:11).

Now the concern is not one citizen deceiving another, as it might have been in a neighborly, agrarian society. Now it is the great organs of news and information in society being managed to serve distorted public ends, calculated to deceive on a grand scale.

Working the same rhetoric, the prophet Ezekiel holds religious leadership peculiarly guilty for such programmatic distortion:

In truth they [the prophets] have misled my people, saying "peace" when there is no peace....When the people build a wall, their prophets smear whitewash on it (Ezek. 13:10).

These recognized voices of established reality deliberately misrepresent the true state of the economy and of foreign policy. Society has broken down and is not working, and they legitimate the dysfunction and give false assurance. The voices of accepted legitimacy present a fake reality, with failed fact disguised as workable fantasy. The prophetic traditions accepted as canonical are agreed that such fantasy will bring devastation upon a deceived community.⁶

We have here made a large leap from face-to-face neighborliness into the royal engine room of public distortion. With this leap, I may suggest three facets of "false witness" which invite to killing distortion. These distortions in our contemporary world echo those against whom the great prophets railed:

1. *Euphemism*. The use of euphemism consists in describing a reality by labeling it in terms that completely disguise and misrepresent. Long ago Isaiah had noted the capacity to deceive by giving things false names:

Ah, you who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light,
and light for darkness.
who put bitter for sweet,
and sweet for bitter (Isa. 5:20).⁷

Those who control the media have vast opportunity for such sustained intentional distortion. Robert Lifton has chronicled the way in which the perpetration of the Jewish Shoah cast these deathly operations in "toxic euphemisms," so that the entire process of the death camps could be presented as a practice of medicine.⁸

In our own time, moreover, Noam Chomsky has characterized the ways in which

the public apparatus is endlessly submissive to deliberate misnomer.⁹ The deceiving work of euphemism—which is a public pattern of false witness against neighbor—is especially effective in two areas of our common life. First the entire military industry and the so-called defense program of the world’s last superpower are regularly disguised by euphemism, for the simple reason that a massive killing enterprise to protect inequity in the world dare not be called by its right name. This is evident in giving peaceable names for missiles capable of massive destruction. Second, in like manner, the rapacious free market economy delights in euphemism, in order to cover over the human pain and cost of extraordinary and inconsciable profits. Thus, as Chomsky notes, unemployment becomes “downsizing,” “jobs” has now become a four letter word for “profit,” and greed operates under the name of “opportunity.”

2. The capacity for misrepresentation is especially poignant in television *advertising*¹⁰ which posits a never-never land born in the happy ways of the “product.” In that land there is never pain, never hurt, never fear, never poverty, never any negation that is not overcome by “the product.” One would not ever know from such ads that the gaps of rich and poor grow like a cancer in our society. The ads present a “virtual reality” enormously attractive but remote from where the world must be lived.

3. Closely related to advertising, is the incredible world of *propaganda* which offers a vested interest as a totality of truth, which generates false certitudes and false loyalties which belie the reality of human life.¹¹

The church in its accommodating timidity has characteristically wanted to keep the commandments of Sinai safely in modest zones of moralizing. It is unmistakable, however, that *euphemism*, *advertising*, and *propaganda* all serve to bear false witness against neighbor. And since dominant “word-making” and “world-making” are always in the hands of those who control technology, these pseudo-versions of reality are regularly the work of the strong against the weak, the haves against the have-nots, the consequence is to make invisible and unavailable the truth of life in the world.

III

The rhetoric of the courtroom operates where “truth” is unsettled, in dispute, and still to be determined. The ancient agrarian prohibition against false witness seeks to stop social distortions that make life brutal, exploitative, and unbearable. Against these propensities, the prophets urge that the deathly truth of the world must be told, a truth that characteristically lives and works at the expense of the weak.

Along with *the truth of the world* in its failure, however, this commandment concerns *telling the truth about God*. This may seem so obvious as not to warrant comment. Except that “God” is completely enmeshed in social-political-economic realities.¹² In order to maintain social advantage, it is often necessary to tell the truth about God in false ways, because the “really real,” that is, the gospel truth about God is revolutionary, subversive, and disruptive.

In II Isaiah, we may see how this simple agrarian prohibition is now turned into a theological agenda whereby Yahweh is “the Neighbor” about whom the truth must be told. Israel must bear true witness to this Neighbor in the midst of exile. Some exiled Jews, apparently, had come to terms with Babylonian realities, accepted the legitimacy of Babylonian gods and engaged in Babylonian modes of life. That is, the claims of God had to be conformed—by false witnesses—to power realities. The prophet critiques “the witnesses” who submit to “idols” which can neither see nor hear

nor do anything (Isa. 44:9). Those false gods to whom false witness is given generate false lived reality.

The poet seeks to counter that entire cache of falseness by a summons to truth telling. Israel is to tell the truth about Yahweh, to be Yahweh's true witnesses:

Do not fear, or be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it?
You are my witnesses!
Is there any god besides me?
There is no other rock; I know not one (Isa. 44:8).

In the preceding chapter, Yahweh asserts to the exiled Jews: "You are my witness" (43:10). And the testimony to be given concerns Yahweh's capacity to initiate an alternative in the world, to work a newness in society, to emancipate Israel, and to overcome the military-industrial power and hubris of Babylon. When true witness is given to this awesome Neighbor, it is about rescue, liberation, and transformation:

I, I am the Lord,
and besides me there is no savior.
I declared and saved and proclaimed,
when there was no strange god among you
and you are my witnesses,
says the Lord.
I am God, and also henceforth I am He;
there is no one who can
deliver from my hand;
I work and who can hinder it?...
Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse.
army and warrior;...
I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth,
do you not perceive it? (Isa. 43:11-19).

The truth about Yahweh is that Yahweh is about to disrupt and make a newness. If Israel tells falsehood about Yahweh, then Yahweh will be weak, passive, and impotent, yet another adornment of the status quo. This truth or falsehood about this holy, magisterial Neighbor is not a cognitive matter of having the right "idea." It is rather a practical, concrete matter of voicing the authority, energy, and legitimacy of living a liberated life and thereby going home. False or true witness concerns the actual future of life in the world. Those who are "kept" and domesticated by Babylon may lie about Yahweh. Those prepared for Yahweh's alternative future, however, tell the truth which causes the dismantling of the powers of alienation and death, powers which thrive only on falsehood.

IV

When this ancient agrarian prohibition is made larger and more public by the prophets, and then is carried into the New Testament, the requirement of *telling the truth about God* devolves into *telling the truth about Jesus*. The Fourth Gospel, like II Isaiah, is cast in juridical rhetoric, in order to make an argument and stage a dispute about the true character of Jesus. In this regard, Israel is not to bear false witness against its neighbor, and the church is not to bear false witness against Jesus.¹³

In the Fourth Gospel, John the Baptizer is the forerunner of Jesus to whom witness is first of all made:

You yourselves are my witnesses, that I said, "I am not the Messiah" (John 3:28).

The same rhetoric is employed by Jesus:

If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who testifies on my behalf and I know that his testimony to me is true. You sent messengers to John and he testified to the truth....But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works I am doing, testify on my behalf that the father has sent me. And the father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf (John 5:31-37).

The Fourth Gospel is presented as a dispute about the truth of Jesus. The assertion and vindication of that truth concerns the character of Jesus, his relation to his Father, and his crucifixion and resurrection.

The Fourth Gospel apparently culminates in the "trial of Jesus," or better, "the trial of Pilate."¹⁴ Before the Roman governor, Jesus asserts:

For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth (John 18:37).

And Pilate hauntingly responds:

What is truth (v. 38)?

What indeed! The gospel narrative is notoriously enigmatic. But surely it makes a claim, certainly in its own idiom, that in Jesus of Nazareth the things of the world are settled on God's terms. That is the truth before which the Roman governor stands in dismay.

The world—the recalcitrant world presided over by the Roman governor—cannot bear the truth of Jesus, for that truth moves beyond our capacity to control and our power to understand. And so the world "gives false witness" about Jesus. In doing so, it gives false representation about the world. Just as exilic Jews preferred not to tell the truth about Yahweh because it is a truth too subversive, so many of us in the church choose to bear false witness about Jesus, because the managed, reassuring truth of the empire is more compelling. The truth evidenced in Jesus is not an idea, not a

concept, not a formulation, not a fact. It is rather a way of being in the world in suffering and hope, so radical and so raw that we can scarcely entertain it.

V

Telling *the truth about God*, telling *the truth about Jesus*, and telling *the truth about the world* are intimately connected to each other. They are intimately connected in the Sinai covenant whereby God asserts a powerful relation to the world: “It is all mine” (Exod. 19:5-6). They are even more visibly linked in the life of Jesus, wherein the purposes of God take fleshly form. Conversely, it is inescapably the case that lying about God, lying about Jesus, and lying about the world are inextricably related to each other.

We have learned to lie well.¹⁵

We imagine that God is not the bestirrer of radical newness;

We conclude that the suffering of Jesus is not our redemptive vocation;

We assert that the world—and our economy—is all fine, fine on its own terms with imperial gods and a pliable Jesus.

We, even with our resolved faith, tend to live inside that reassuring ideology that can recognize nothing deathly and that can receive nothing new.

The world of the Bible consists in a dispute about evidence. The baptized community is “in the dock,” summoned to tell the truth and not to bear false witness. The preacher, moreover, is regularly and visibly put on exhibit, to tell the church’s truth to the world and to tell God’s truth to the church. Very often the world refuses to hear, and of course the church is regularly recalcitrant in receiving testimony. And even the preacher, on occasion, cringes from what must be said, so much are we ourselves accommodated to “the lie.”

We can admit all of that. And yet! And yet preaching goes on, folks gather, waiting fearfully but also hopefully for another witness that tells the whole true. And so, good preacher, we may acknowledge the pressure and the way we flinch. But there is also the enduring possibility: Truth in dispute, and our feeble utterance to be sure that our Neighbor is rightly offered and discerned.

The truth now to be told concerns our failed society:

Political power is now firmly in the hands of the money power in a symbiotic relationship that feeds inequity and injustice. Wealth is derived from power. And power in America is exercised almost exclusively by the wealthy.¹⁶

The prophets know this, and cannot call it “peace.” But there is more. The gods of death have pushed hard on Friday. But faithful testimony requires a Sunday “bulletin” that expresses our amazement against the Friday forces of our life.

I am no romantic. I know this explosiveness of Easter which exposes all “prior” truths as false witnesses cannot be said in many churches. The wonder is that it is available to us. It is a truth we not only fear but also crave. Happily some in the church besides us preachers already know. Truth-telling is not easy work. But it is freeing. And it is the only defense the neighborhood has, both our *lower case-n neighbors* and our *Capital-N Neighbor*. And we are invited to take no bribes!

Notes

¹ For a parallel consideration of the fourth and tenth commandments, see Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 79-110, and Brueggemann, "The Commandments and Liberated, Liberating Bonding," *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 145-58.

² The literature on the decalogue is immense. In addition to the magisterial and normative interpretations of Luther and Calvin, see Walter Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (OBT; Fortress Press: 1980), Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Fortress Press: 1985), 63-83, Paul Lehmann, *The Decalogue and a Human Future: The Meaning of the Commandments for Making and Keeping Human Life Human* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), and Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology I* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 100-117.

³ A range of texts is related to this commandment and some perhaps derived from it: Exod. 23:1, 6-8, Lev. 19:11, 16-17; Deut. 19:15ff., Amos 2:7, 5:15, Micah 3:11, Prov. 11:9-13, Psalms 12:2, 27:2, 64:8.

⁴ There is a long-standing critical tradition that situates the judicial provisions of Exodus 18 in the context of Jehoshaphat's reform, on which see II Chron. 19:4-11. While such a critical judgment may be made, the text as it stands makes a claim for Mosaic authorization.

⁵ See Thomas W. Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood: A Study in the Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (SBT Second Series 16; London: SCM Press, 1970).

⁶ The issue of false and true prophecy is an enormously vexed issue. While it may be claimed that there is nothing which formally distinguishes false and true prophets, it is clear that in substance ancient Israel, in its canonizing process, made important distinctions. For representative views of the issue, see James L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect Upon Israelite Religion* (BZAW 124; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971), and James A. Sanders, "Canonical Hermeneutics: True and False Prophecy," *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Fortress Press: 1987), 87-105. On the classic case of Jer. 27-28, see Henri Mottu, "Jeremiah vs. Hananiah: Ideology and Truth in Old Testament Prophecy," *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 235-51.

⁷ The NRSV renders the first word "ah." That innocuous translation is unfortunate, for the term bespeaks sadness at loss and death. The word indicates a sense of loss that is to come on those who practice deceiving euphemism.

⁸ Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 202 and *passim*.

⁹ Chomsky's argument in this regard is stated in many places. See for example, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), *What Uncle Sam Really Wants* (Tucson: Odonian Press, 1992), *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (Boston: South End Press, 1979). My own references are from a lecture he presented in June, 1995.

¹⁰ See especially Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Random House, 1993), *How to Watch TV News* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1992).

¹¹ The most important studies of the theme are by Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Random House, 1973), and *Technological Society* (New York: Random House, 1967).

¹² Karl Marx has seen this with the greatest clarity and influence. Note his programmatic statement: The criticism of heaven is thus transformed into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.

¹³ On the importance of juridical language in the Fourth Gospel, see Robert V. Moss, "The Witnessing Church in the New Testament," *Theology and Life* 3 (1960): 262-68, Andrew T. Lincoln, "Trials, Plots and the Narrative of the Fourth Gospel," *JSNT* 56 (1994): 3-30, and more generally A. A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78-127. Most remarkably, the Fourth Gospel affirms the Paraclete as a witness to Jesus, on which see Gail R. O'Day, "Excursus: The Paraclete," "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *NIB IX* (1995): 774-78.

¹⁴ On this text, see the helpful comments of O'Day, *ibid.*, 815-27, and the shrewd interpretation by Paul Lehmann, *The Transfiguration of Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 48-70.

¹⁵ See M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

¹⁶ Richard N. Goodwin, "A Three-Party Election Won't Address Issue of Economic Injustice," *Boston Globe*, Friday, 26 July 1996, A17.