

Some Biblical Perspectives on Deception

1. In some cases, without condoning the deception, God works through the deception to accomplish his will.

- Abraham with Pharaoh; Abraham with Abimelech; Isaac with Abimelech (Gen 26). In all three of these cases, there is deception in telling a half truth which leads people to believe something which is not true. The one deceived is the one punished and the deceiver ends up being protected and rewarded.
- Joseph being sold to the Ishmaelites (Gen 37) and the subsequent lies told to Jacob. God uses this to bring good to Jacob's entire family

2. Deception to preserve one's life is at least tolerated.

- David lies to Ahimelech in his flight from Saul (1 Sam 21:2). After Ahimelech and the priests are killed, David's regret was not the lie he told but that he had not killed Doeg the Edomite (1 Sam 22:22). Jesus refers back to this incident, specifically David and his men eating that which only the priests were allowed to eat, as evidence for flexibility in the law. Jesus seems to be working from the premise "that which is not condemned in Scripture is endorsed by Scripture"
- David feigned madness before the Philistine king (1 Sam 21:12).
- David attacks and destroys non-Jewish peoples but leads the Philistines to think they were attacking Jewish settlements (1 Sam 27:10,11).

3. Deception to gain something of value

- Jacob, with Rebecca's help, engages in overt deception in order for Jacob to gain Esau's blessing. Once given, God seems to honor the blessing given by Isaac.
- On the other hand, God protects Jacob from Laban's deceptive practices.
- Rebecca with Laban (note: why did Rachel steal the household gods? The teraphim were likely equivalent to having the deed to all of Laban's land after his death. In many ancient near eastern cultures, something like a will, the person in possession of a person's household gods after their death had the right of inheritance). She was also lying to protect her life. The teraphim actually prove to be useless due to the treaty Laban makes with Jacob, and perhaps Rachel's death in childbirth following this incident reflects God's attitude towards the deception. This is pure speculation since the Scriptures create no cause and effect link.

4. Deception to destroy an enemy (not explicitly condemned and on one occasion described as God's plan – God works through it to accomplish his purposes)

- Killing of the Shechemites (Gen 34): God strikes fear in the surrounding peoples.
- Hushai's deception with Absalom (2 Sam 16:18). This deception and the subsequent lies told to Absalom's men to protect Jonathan and Ahimaaz are described as God's plan (2 Sam 17:14). God uses this to protect David and destroy Absalom.
- God commands a 'lying spirit' to deceive Ahab so that he will be killed in battle (1 Kings 22:22).

5. Deception in warfare is on occasion commanded and certainly not condemned

- The destruction of Ai through deceptive ambush is commanded by God (Josh 8:2).

6. Not explicitly lying but neither telling a person everything can be perceived to be deceptive. This is not condemned and on at least one occasion commanded by God.

- Jacob's flight from Laban
- When Samuel anoints David as king, God commands Samuel to make an offering in order to mislead Saul about the true intention of his mission. From Saul's perspective this was certainly deceptive.
- Jesus' tightly protects his identity as Messiah knowing that it will be misunderstood
 - Forbids the demons from revealing his identity
 - Waits two years before asking his disciples if they have discovered his true identity

7. Deception is sometimes viewed as an explicit demonstration of faith

- The Hebrew midwives lied to Pharaoh concerning male births.
- Rahab lied to the citizens of Jericho concerning the spies hidden in her home.

8. Engaging in certain activities could be interpreted to imply that a person believes one thing when they actually believe something else. This could be interpreted to be deceptive. However, it is not condemned in the Scripture.

- The building of altars throughout the book of Genesis was in line with the ancient near eastern belief that the gods lived in "high places." Altars were built to honor local deities. The Patriarch's building of altars would most likely have been understood in this way by the surrounding peoples. The New Century Version translates Gen 35:14, "Jacob set up a stone on edge in that place where God had talked to him, and he poured a drink offering and olive oil on it **to make it special for God.**" The final phrase is not in the Hebrew but it is implied in the cultural context.
- The early church continued to be involved in the temple which might have implied agreement with the animal sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin after the final sacrifice had been made on the cross.
- The early church continued in synagogues worshiping with those who rejected both the deity and Messiahship of Christ.
- Paul acted as a good law-abiding Jew when with the Jews, but eating with the Gentiles was thought to be deceptive by the Jews (although Paul argues that it was not deceptive).
- In Paul's list of hardships encountered by the apostles he lists "regarded as imposters / deceivers, yet true" (2 Cor 6:8).

9. Using words in a way that is different than that used by one's audience could be understood to be deceptive. This is not condemned.

- The same word used of Paul in 2 Cor. 6:8 is used of Jesus by his enemies (Mt. 27:63). His claim to be Messiah was understood wrongly by Jewish leadership. However, when he failed to be the Messiah that they expected, he was accused of being a "deceiver/imposter."
- Jesus made his unbelieving brothers believe that he was not going to go to Jerusalem for the feast but then he went (Jn 7:1-10).
- Jesus, when he says that Lazarus is "sleeping" (Jn 11:11).

Conclusion:

In general, outside of the context of warfare, deception which brings harm (emotional, physical, financial, etc.) on another person is condemned. Yet God can and does work through even deceptive practices to accomplish his purposes. Being perceived to be deceptive in either words or actions does not automatically mean that the person is actually deceptive.