Hiding the truth: exegetical discussions of Abraham’s lie from Hugh of St. Victor to Stephen Langton

Emily Corran
University College London

Abstract
This article hopes to continue the tradition of Bible commentary scholarship initiated by Beryl Smalley by considering three exegetes from the late twelfth century who commented on Abraham’s lie to the Egyptians (Genesis XII:13). Augustine’s exegesis on this passage prompted Hugh of St. Victor, Peter the Chanter and Stephen Langton to consider not only whether Abraham was lying, but also the broader question of whether he was justified in deceiving by omission. All three agree with Augustine that lying is wrong, but are less willing to endorse his statement that Abraham justly hid the truth. In their discussions of Abraham’s actions and motives, the exegetes put forward an understanding of dishonesty which includes misleading as well as mendacious speech and consider the role of moral obligations between people in the decision to ‘hide the truth’. The ethical thought of Peter the Chanter and Stephen Langton in particular was original: both criticized Augustine’s theory of lying and advocated stricter understandings of honesty at a time when other authors were less critical of Augustine’s theory of licit omission. As such, they deserve to be given a place in the history of ethics.

A century ago, this article would have stood outside the mainstream of historical writing. Since then, Beryl Smalley has put medieval Biblical exegesis on the historian’s map;¹ Sir Richard Southern has done the same for scholasticism;² and John W. Baldwin for the practical ethics of the Paris schools.³ This is the tradition which the present article hopes to continue by examining the response of the Paris schools in their formative age to the long-standing problem of lying.

In the twelfth century, the ethics of lying turned on two questions: what is a lie, and can a lie ever be justified? The most prominent textbooks of theology and canon law, Peter Lombard’s Sentences and Gratian’s Decretum, included substantial chapters on the subject.⁴ Both provide a series of general rules taken principally from Augustine’s philosophy of lying. This includes Augustine’s definitions of lying, taken from his two treatises, De Mendacio and Contra Mendacium: a lie is ‘a false signification with the intention to deceive’, and a liar is one ‘who has one thing in his mind, but who says

The eight kinds of lie are: first, the lie when teaching religion; second, the lie that helps no one, and hurts someone; third, the lie that helps one person but harms another; fourth, the lie told purely out of the desire for lying; fifth, the lie told out of a desire to please; sixth, a lie which protects someone’s property and hurts no one; seventh, a lie which saves someone’s life and hurts no one; and eighth, a lie which hurts no one, and protects someone’s chastity. These teachings would shape all theological discussions of lying in the medieval period. Indeed, in the thirteenth century, in Sentences commentaries and Summae, there was little overt disagreement with Augustine’s teaching, nor even much expansion of his thought. In the twelfth century, however, the subject was the source of considerable debate, and theologians were more willing to question Augustine’s teaching. Arthur Landgraf’s and Marcia Colish’s studies of the Sentences of the various theological schools demonstrate disagreements about lying which turned principally on the logical implications of Augustine’s definition, and the question of the beneficent lie. An example of the first question is the debate concerning a Jew who mendaciously called Christ the Messiah. The schools of Anselm of Laon and Gilbert de la Porrée questioned whether this should be considered a lie, since the Jew intended to speak a falsehood, although in fact he told the truth. One instance of the second debate was the question, addressed by the Lombard and others, of whether the Egyptian midwives told a justified benevolent lie when, in Exodus I:19, they lied to Pharaoh, who had ordered them to kill all male Hebrew babies.

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6 Augustine identified eight kinds of lie, and summarized these into a three-fold distinction, between the malevolent lie, told for evil intentions, the jocose lie, which was intended only to please its audience, and the benevolent or officious lie, intended to help someone. Augustine conceded that benevolent and jocose lies are less sinful than a lie told with evil intentions, but he emphasized that all lies are sinful, and that neither extreme necessity nor benevolent intention could justify a lie. The Lombard and Gratian repeat Augustine’s typology of lying and his universal prohibition.

7 These teachings would shape all theological discussions of lying in the medieval period.


11 Colish, Peter Lombard, ii. 475; Colish, ‘Rethinking lying’, pp. 166, 169.
Twelfth-century Bible commentaries included similar theological questions about lying. Just as theological works drew on Biblical examples to probe at moral questions, by the same token, Biblical commentaries explained the lies told by Biblical figures with reference to doctrinal principles. At several moments in the Old Testament, patriarchs and prophets lie, and it seems to be a good thing: no-one could doubt that we are supposed to be rooting for Jacob when he impersonates Esau in order to win the blessing of the first-born (Genesis XXVII), and for Abraham when he grows rich as a result of his lie to the Egyptians (Genesis XII:13); and when Judith pretends to have betrayed the Hebrews in order to assassinate Holofernes, we are told explicitly that God increased her beauty to facilitate her plan (Judith X:4). It is the business of an exegete to explain how these morally difficult episodes should be understood and to determine whether these figures were guilty of a sin.

The story of Abraham’s lie to the Egyptians attracted an unusually rich range of commentary from twelfth-century exegetes; Hugh of St.Victor, Peter the Chanter and Stephen Langton all discuss the story at length. To some extent, they discuss Abraham’s lie to the Egyptians with the same ethical interests as other twelfth-century authors. All three consider Abraham’s words with reference to Augustine’s morality of lying (which they found faithfully reproduced in the Lombard’s Sentences and Gratian’s Decretum), and use this opportunity to tackle the Augustinian questions – what is a lie, and can a lie be justified? All three seriously question Augustine’s conclusions. This disagreement sets them apart from the Lombard and Gratian, but falls within a wider context of twelfth-century debates about the morality of lying.

In several respects, the three authors’ exegesis on this story is different in character from other contemporary discussions about lying. All three address the passage with their own preoccupations, but Peter the Chanter and Stephen Langton in particular approach the subject of lying with a distinctive casuistry. They both weigh Augustine’s ethical principles, which focus on a duty to tell the accurate truth, against other considerations such as Abraham’s duty to protect Sarah, and his responsibility not to mislead the Egyptians. In consequence, their commentaries on this story represent a rare occasion in medieval theology when discussions of lying included issues such as the moral obligation not to equivocate and the likely good or bad result of a lie.

The story of Abraham’s lie to the Egyptian comes at Genesis XII:12–13. When they are about to enter into Egypt, Abraham seems to ask Sarah to lie to save his life. His words are: ‘I know that you are a beautiful woman, and that when the Egyptians shall see you, they will say: “She is his wife”, and they will kill me, and keep you. Say, therefore, I pray you, that you are my sister, that I may be well used for you, and that my soul may live for your sake’. The story attracted a remarkably rich set of commentaries from medieval exegetes. In part, this was because of the unusual treatment it received in the standard Gloss produced in the early twelfth-century at Laon.

The Gloss was a compilation of patristic and earlier medieval commentaries on the Bible, in the form of a series of short marginal and interlinear citations arranged

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12 All Biblical quotations are taken from the Douay version because this is the most literal translation of the Vulgate Latin.
When later medieval commentators on the Bible, such as Peter the Chanter and Stephen Langton, gave their own commentaries, they generally did so by lecturing from a copy of the glossed Bible. In consequence, the commentaries in the standard Gloss determined the parameters of later discussions of Biblical passages. On the subject of lying, the compilers of the Gloss transmitted overwhelmingly Augustinian commentary. Like the Sentences and the Decretum, the Gloss restates the standard definition of the lie (a false statement told with the intention to deceive) and the doctrine that all lies are wrong without exception. These Augustinian comments are reproduced both next to prohibitions of lying in the Decalogue and the Psalms, and in connection with stories in which Biblical characters lie, including Abraham’s lie to the Egyptians. Consequently, Augustine’s thought about Biblical instances of lying was highly influential for all medieval exegetes.

Augustine’s exegesis of Biblical instances of lying was profuse. He was sensitive to the question of lying, and more or less systematically commented on Biblical stories involving lies. He had two separate polemical agendas: first, against contemporary Christian authors (most notably, Jerome) who said that lying could sometimes be justified and who used Biblical examples to back up their arguments; and second, against Manichean exegesis of the Old Testament which accused the patriarchs of, among other sins, sinful deception. Against the argument that the Bible shows instances of justified lies, Augustine replied that Biblical authors never lied, and that God never rewarded a character in the Bible for lying. Jerome had pointed out instances in Galatians II:11–14 where Paul’s narrative and Peter’s reported behaviour seemed inconsistent, and had concluded that both Apostles must have engaged in a benevolent simulation. Augustine replied that no Biblical author and no Apostle could possibly have lied, since this would have undermined all Biblical authority.

Against the argument that lies could be justified because God had rewarded the Egyptian midwives who lied to Pharaoh to save Hebrew infants, Augustine replied that even though God built them houses as a reward for their piety, their lie was nevertheless a sin.

When he argued against Manichean criticisms of the Old Testament in the Contra Faustum, Augustine’s polemics became more complex. He argued that although the narrative of the Old Testament was undoubtedly true, many of the events were included not as literal examples to Christians, but as figurative prophecies of the truth. Some actions of Old Testament figures were sinful, even though they were not explicitly reproached by God in the Biblical narrative, and were included in the account because of their figurative meaning. This was the case for Lot’s drunkenness and incest with his daughters. Augustine further stated that because not only the words,
but also the actions of prophets and patriarchs were prophecies of Christ, it would be
csmall-minded to reproach these actions as sins, when these were in fact instances of
virtue in great minds. He compared those who criticize the morality of patriarchs to
schoolboys who ridicule great poetry that does not obey the rules of grammar.¹⁸

When Jacob impersonated Esau in order to win the birthright from Isaac,
Augustine commented in Contra Mendacium, it was a mystery and not a lie.¹⁹ The
moral rules of the new dispensation are not relevant to his actions because they had
prophetic meaning.

Nevertheless, for the purposes of answering Manichean attacks, Augustine’s ethical
defence of the Old Testament did not only consist of identifying the patriarchs’ actions
as prophecies. He stated that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did act prophetically, but that he
would also defend them against the Manichean accusations of malevolence and
falsehood – that is, he would show that their actions, understood literally, were not
sinful.²⁰ To this end, Augustine showed in the Contra Faustum and on other occasions
that what appear to be falsehoods of the patriarchs were in fact only equivocations or
cases of hiding the truth. To name one example, when Joseph falsely called his brothers
spies, Augustine explained that his words should be understood as a conditional
statement: the words ‘by the health of the Pharaoh, you are spies’ should be read as ‘If
you do not bring Benjamin back to Egypt, you will be considered to be spies’.²¹

Augustine’s comments on Abraham’s lie to the Egyptians fall into this latter category
of defence of the literal actions of the patriarchs. In the Contra Faustum, Augustine
responded to two accusations against Abraham, namely, that he was guilty of conniving
to sell his wife to Pharaoh to be a concubine, and that he lied out of weakness of faith,
and fear of death.²² To the second of these two accusations, Augustine replied that
Abraham was not lying, but hiding the truth. Sarah was related to Abraham, and
Abraham did not deny that she was his wife; he only concealed this information.²³ As
with Joseph, this was not a case of lying but of licit equivocation.

Against the accusation that Abraham sold his wife to Pharaoh, Augustine employed
a weaker set of arguments. He contended with a difficult Biblical narrative; it is evident
from the account in Genesis that Abraham’s words led Pharaoh and Abimelech to
believe that Sarah was unmarried, and to try to marry her themselves.²⁴ Moreover, we
are told that the Egyptians treated Abraham well for her sake, and gave him livestock
and servants, and that Abraham said that Sarah was his sister precisely in order to be
treated well. Augustine was forced to admit that Abraham did nothing personally to
protect Sarah’s chastity. He could only state simply that Abraham was unable to prevent
the misdeeds of the Egyptians, and so entrusted Sarah’s safety to God’s protection.
Abraham was both justified in putting his trust in God to save Sarah’s chastity (a
situation he could not help), but also in the right to use an equivocation to save his
own life.

¹⁹ Contra Mendacium, X. 24, p. 499.
²¹ Quaestionum in Heptateuchum Libri VII, bk. i, q. 139, pp. 53–4; cf. Rusch, i. 97.
²² Contra Faustum, XXII. 33–6, pp. 627–9; cf. De Civitate Dei, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb (2 vols., C.C.S.L.,
²³ In De Civitate Dei (XVI. 19, ii. 522), Augustine says only that Sarah and Abraham were related, whereas in
Contra Faustum (XXII. 35, p. 629), he states that Sarah was Abraham’s half-sister by his father, referring to Genesis
XX:2.
²⁴ Genesis XII:15–16, XX:2.
In the *Contra Faustum* Augustine set out this argument in several distinct stages. However, in later adaptations, his words were abbreviated and many of the contours of his argument were lost. Hrabanus Maurus turned Augustine’s several-pages-long arguments into a single paragraph, and the *Gloss* shortened Hrabanus’s commentary still further. Instead of a careful examination of a series of moral problems, all his comments are presented as an answer to the single question of whether Abraham was guilty of lying. More obviously than in his own writings, Augustine’s argument appears in the *Gloss* to apply instrumental reasoning to the question of equivocation and to offer explanations as to why equivocation was justified in this case.

Augustine’s comments, as they appear in the standard *Gloss*, read:

It is asked why the Patriarch wished to lie by saying that she was his sister, and did not rather entrust her to God, who, if he wished, could have saved her chastity from the Pharaoh. But he wished the truth to remain hidden, not that a lie should be spoken. For Sarah is said to be his sister, since she is the daughter of his brother. By this it is shown that no one should tempt his God, as long as he can act by reasonable counsel. [Abraham] did what he could for his own life, but what he could not do, he entrusted to God, in whom he put his hope, and to whom he entrusted his wife’s chastity.

On one level, this passage falls into a wider genre of comments on lying in the *Gloss*, in that it quotes Augustine’s exegesis, it argues against the idea that Biblical figures told justified lies, and it redefines Abraham’s lie as an equivocation. On another level, the passage is very unusual. In other cases of patriarchs’ lies, such as the stories of Jacob and Isaac, and Joseph and his brothers, Augustine states that the apparent lies are either a mystery or an equivocation, and provides no further moral explanation. Here, on the other hand, he provides reasons why it was just for Abraham to equivocate on this occasion, namely, because he was protecting his own life.

For subsequent medieval exegetes, this commentary set the agenda for discussion. The possibility that Augustine’s comments suggest, which does not appear elsewhere in his exegesis, is that it may not have been right to equivocate if Abraham had not spoken with good intentions. When Hugh of St.Victor, Peter the Chanter and Stephen Langton came to consider the story, Augustine’s comments in the *Gloss* prompted the question: was Abraham in the right to say deceptively that Sarah was his sister? The result was a series of distinctive discussions of the ethics not only of lying, but also of equivocation and deceptive speech in general.

Augustine’s commentary on Abraham’s lie to the Egyptians arose out of an attack on Catholicism by the polemicist Faustus, who argued that Manichean beliefs were truly Christian, and that the Old Testament described a wicked God, false rituals and immoral patriarchs. Augustine’s discussions of Abraham are highly rhetorical; he seizes on every possible argument that could be used to show that Abraham did not act sinfully.

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26 In fact at Genesis XX:12, Abraham says that Sarah is his half-sister.
27 ‘Queritur cur patriarcha voluit mentiri ut diceret sororem suam, et non potius deo commissit qui, si vellet, eius pudiciciam apud Pharaonem conservare posset. Sed veritatem voluit celari non tamen mendacium dici. Soror enim dicitur quia filia fratris et in hoc ostenditur quia nemo debet tentare Deum suum, dum habet quid faciat rationabili consilio. Fecit enim pro vita sua quod potuit; quod autem non potuit, Deo commissit, in quem speravit, cui pudiciciam coniugis commendavit’ (Rusch, i. 45).
In the twelfth century, there were no longer serious criticisms of the morality of the Old Testament. Instead of the development of orthodox answers to threatening controversies, theologians were motivated by a more academic interest in resolving problematic areas of philosophy. As such, Augustine’s theory of lying no longer existed as a response to serious claims that Biblical narrative might be deceptive, or that the patriarchs were corrupt, but rather as a more general ethical question about the role of intention in determining whether false speech should be considered a lie. Peter Lombard offered the most extensive digest of Augustine’s thought on lying in his Sentences, in order to demonstrate that all lies must be intended to deceive, and that every lie is a sin. He quotes only one example of a patriarch’s apparent lie – Jacob’s impersonation of Esau – and simply states that this was not a lie but a mystery. Gratian quotes a similar set of Augustinian authorities in order to prove that anyone who swears falsely in the belief that what they say is true is not guilty of lying. He quotes Augustine’s comments on Abraham’s lie to the Egyptians, in the same version as they appeared in the Gloss to the Bible. The only point he makes in connection to Abraham, however, is that Old Testament instances of lying cannot be adduced to prove that lying is not always sinful, since Abraham only hid the truth. He does not question further Augustine’s statement that Abraham was justified in saying that Sarah was his sister in order to save his life.

In contrast to the minimal interest in the lies of the patriarchs shown by the Lombard and Gratian, Hugh of St. Victor was more favourably disposed to extended discussion of the literal sense of the Scripture. Hugh was one of the first twelfth-century exeges to emphasize the importance of the literal commentary, not only for the purpose of becoming familiar with the chronology and topography of Biblical history, but in order to understand the ‘sententia’ of the Biblical authors, that is, the theological implications of Biblical history in the literal sense. This included discussions of the ethical implications of the actions of Biblical figures. His commentary on Genesis appears to be a set of teaching notes which survive from his lectures on the Pentateuch, dated at some time between 1125 and 1141, and includes a section discussing Abraham’s actions and motives. He is interested above all in how Abraham could have intentionally deceived the Egyptians, yet not be culpable. Like the Lombard and Gratian, he is concerned about the role of intention in lying. Unlike these authors, however, he seeks to solve the problem not only by quoting Augustine’s philosophy of lying from the De Mendacio and the Contra Mendacium, but also through a close reading of Contra Faustum and by comparing Abraham’s lie with other Biblical instances of deception. What drives his argument is an unwillingness to accept Augustine’s term ‘hiding the truth’ at face value.

Hugh initially repeats the claim that Abraham was not lying, since Sarah could truly be called his sister. However, he prefaces this comment with a question. He takes up a line of argument from the De Mendacio, in which Augustine weighs up the spiritual danger of telling a lie against the temporal good it could bring about. In this passage, Augustine states that even if a lie does not hurt anyone and helps someone, anyone

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29 *Decretum*, C. 22, q. 2, c. 22.
31 Smalley, pp. 85, 99.
33 *De Mendacio*, VI. 9, pp. 426–7.
who tells a lie risks his own spiritual life for something much less valuable, and so acts irrationally. Hugh turns this against Abraham: ‘It is asked why such a just man wished by lying to save the life of a body by the death of a soul, or to provide for his own life and to neglect the chastity of his wife as if God could not equally save his life and his wife’s chastity?’ Thus far, Hugh is in agreement with Augustine that all lies are wrong.

Hugh elaborates on the nature of deception that took place. He uses two comparisons with other Biblical deceptions in order to explain what happened:

Again, if a word or sign is offered to signify what is not the case, however, not on account of deception but on account of utility, correction or rebuke, it is not called a lie; just as the Lord himself ‘made as if he would go farther’ to Cleophas and to the other disciple [Luke XXIV:28], yet did not however intend to leave but to remain in order to rebuke and strengthen them. Again, Elisha having been caught said to those seeking him that he was not the one they were seeking, and promised that he would lead them to him, and led them into the middle of their enemies, which they deserved before God (4 Kings VI:17–19). And he was the speaker of divine will, not of his own, nor is he accused of lying any more than he who reports the words of another.

This passage is problematic. Hugh is engaged in the Augustinian aim of absolving the patriarch of lying; his two examples are intended to show instances in which a just deception took place in order to punish those being deceived. The story of Elisha and the Arameans and of Jesus on the road to Emmaus are linked in that, in both cases, God inflicted those being deceived with aurasia, a kind of miraculous blindness, as a reproach for lacking proper religious insight. There is no such miracle in the Abraham story. Although, as a patriarch, everything Abraham did could be understood to be good on a prophetic or figurative level, nothing in the story suggests that God explicitly and miraculously instructed Abraham to deceive the Egyptians. When considering only the literal implications of Abraham’s words, then, the justification of direct divine intervention that Hugh suggests does not work very convincingly. There is not much evidence of ‘correction and rebuke’ either, since when Pharaoh discovers their deception, it is he who scolds Abraham and Sarah, and sends them on their way (Genesis XII:18–20).

Hugh seems close to saying that Abraham’s lie was permissible because of his good intentions. However, it is difficult to identify these intentions, beyond a wish to save his life. It is therefore in order to bolster his claim that Abraham was practising ‘utility, correction or rebuke’ that Hugh cites some stories in which a miraculous deception took place. The catena of stories is not congruous. Moreover, the idea that Abraham’s deception did not count as a lie because he had good intentions is counter to Augustinian thought; Augustine categorized deceptive falsehoods told with benevolent intentions as officious lies, which were always a sin.
The last part of Hugh’s comment on this passage suggests that he was not entirely satisfied with his answer so far. He offers an alternative explanation, which was considered but rejected by Augustine in the *Contra Faustum*. Unlike Augustine, Hugh presents the argument as a serious possibility:

Or let us concede that Abraham did lie, as men do. It is no wonder, for he did not always tell the truth. Did not saint Peter lie in fear of death at the Passion of the Lord? But it should be known that instances of holy men falling from grace, when this happens with God’s permission, are put before us to give us hope of getting to our feet again.\(^{37}\)

This is a complete reversal of Hugh’s first argument; from being comparable to Christ, Abraham has become like Peter denying knowledge of Christ. Hugh falls back on the conclusion that Augustine was seeking to avoid, namely, that Abraham did sin in his pretence. This suggests that Augustine’s argument of equivocation was not entirely convincing for Hugh. Overall, the passage denotes hesitation and uncertainty.

No consistent verdict on Abraham’s actions emerges from Hugh of St. Victor’s commentaries, nor does he describe a clear morality of lying. He knew Augustine’s teaching, and ostensibly abides by the principle that a lie must always be wrong. However, in the first half of his commentary, he moves the conversation away from discussing whether Abraham told a lie, towards considering whether his words were justified in this case. He offers two verdicts – that Abraham deceived the Egyptians justly on God’s instructions, or that he was guilty of telling a culpable lie like Peter – but does not decide in favour of one or the other.

Both Peter the Chanter and Stephen Langton lectured extensively on the Sacred Page. Their commentaries reach us primarily as *reportationes* of lectures. The precise date of the teaching is not known, especially in the case of Stephen Langton, whose commentaries were recorded in several redactions. Peter the Chanter taught between 1170 and 1193,\(^{38}\) and Stephen Langton between the eleven-seventies and 1206.\(^{39}\) Because several versions of the commentaries of both authors survive, the manuscript evidence is problematic.\(^{40}\)

The Chanter and Langton were members of a circle of theologians in the late twelfth century who were particularly interested in the practical social problems of their period, including the morality of the clergy, usury and war.\(^{41}\) Although Peter the Chanter and his circle are best known for ‘casuistical’ thought\(^ {42}\) (that is, using general

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\(^{38}\) Baldwin, i. 12–13; ii. 15, nos. 90–1.

\(^{39}\) Baldwin, ii. 18, n. 130. It is possible that he revised his commentaries during his exile in France in 1207–13 and 1216–18 (Baldwin, i. 27–8; ii. 108–11, nos. 103–4). For evidence which pushes back the start of Langton’s teaching career to the 1170s, see M. J. Clark, ‘The commentaries on Peter Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica* of Stephen Langton, Pseudo-Langton, and Hugh of St. Cher’, Sacris Erudiri, xliv (2005), 315–16.

\(^{40}\) In comparison to Stephen Langton’s works, relatively few manuscripts of Peter the Chanter’s commentary on Genesis exist. The author has used the 13th-century British Library, Royal MS. 2 C.VIII (hereafter *R*). Although it is not possible to say whether the version in this manuscript is complete, the commentary on Abraham’s lie to the Egyptians is certainly substantial. For a full list of manuscripts, see F. Stegmüller, *Repetitorium Biblicum Medii Aevi* (Madrid, 1950–80), no. 6454; for details of manuscripts used for Stephen Langton, see appendix.

\(^{41}\) See Baldwin.

\(^{42}\) Baldwin, i. 252.
principles to solve concrete ethical problems), in the case of their exegesis of Abraham’s lie, both exegetes do more than simply apply Augustine’s thought to the case in hand. Peter the Chanter and Stephen Langton were both familiar with more abstract theological debates about lying, and indeed contributed to the discussion in their more speculative theological writings. However, both introduce rather different considerations into their discussions of Abraham’s lie than those found either in their more theoretical works or in preceding exegesis of this story.

Like the Gloss and Hugh of St. Victor, Peter the Chanter and Stephen Langton ask whether Abraham was truly telling a lie. However, their discussion is not limited to this subject – both exegetes bring additional moral considerations to the table. Peter the Chanter weighs Abraham’s choice to say Sarah was his sister against his obligation to protect Sarah from danger to her chastity, and seems to conclude that, in order to save Sarah’s immortal soul, Abraham should have abstained from the ruse that saved his own corporeal life. Stephen Langton considers what additional obligations to honesty should have influenced Abraham’s actions beyond the simple duty to tell the truth. Both commentators discuss honesty not only in the narrow terms of the intent to deceive, but also as a value affected by the special moral obligations between people. As a result, their understanding of the motives and duties that should have affected Abraham’s moral choice is considerably more complex than that of their predecessors.

When Peter the Chanter comments on Abraham’s deception, he quotes both Augustine and Hugh of St. Victor. He reproduces the entire entry in the Gloss almost word for word. The Chanter is more selective in his use of Hugh: he quotes the idea that the words were not a sin ‘because of utility, correction or rebuke’. However, the Chanter saves Hugh’s comparison with the road to Emmaus and Elisha for a later passage. Here, the Chanter confines himself to saying that the utility, correction or rebuke was ‘the mystery of a holy matter’, and clarifies the nature of the deception; the speaker (Abraham) understood one thing by his words, and those listening (the Egyptians) understood another. He compares this deception to that of St. Lawrence, who, when Decius, the Roman prefect, asked him to gather the treasure of the church, distributed as much wealth as possible to the poor. When asked to present the treasure, he showed the poor to the prefect and declared that they were the treasure of the church. By citing this example, the Chanter suggests (in this section) that Abraham and Sarah’s deception was an equivocation, rather than the miraculous obfuscation described by Hugh.

The Chanter contributes a far more detailed discussion of Abraham’s motivations in misleading the Egyptians, and thus revisits in more detail Augustine’s arguments about whether Abraham was justified in his deception:

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43 On the writings of Peter the Chanter on lying, see Landgraf, ‘Definition und Sündhaftigkeit’, pp. 61, 71; on Stephen Langton’s works on lying, see Landgraf, ‘Definition und Sündhaftigkeit’, pp. 65, 75–6, 79–80, 161, 168–9, 174; Landgraf, ‘Die Stellungnahme’, p. 219.
45 R, fo.14vb, ‘Si tamen ad significandum quod non est profertur verbum vel signum, et non ad decipiendum sed propter utilitatem vel correctionem vel incriptionem, scilicet, sacre rei misterium, non est mendacium licet aliter et aliter intelligatur ab audiente et proferente. Ut beatus Laurentius de thesauris’.

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By saying this, he preferred to trust one to God, rather than two. For if he said she was his wife, he would have committed both his wife’s chastity and his own life to God. He knew that the Egyptians hated adultery more than homicide, and so he presumed that they would not abuse his wife without killing him first. By saying that she was his sister, he was not in danger, nor was the chastity of his wife. But a just man is bound to prefer his own corporeal death to the spiritual death of another. Similarly, he should have preferred to die corporeally than that another should sin more mortally than he would sin if the just man lived. But Abraham presumed that while he lived, the Egyptians would commit adultery with his wife, if they knew that he was her husband. And he presumed that if he died himself, they would perpetrate adultery with his widow, which is less of a sin than adultery with a married woman. Therefore, he should have chosen to die corporeally so that his wife would sin less, rather than to live and cause his wife to sin more. He even seems to have sinned mortally when he said that he was not her husband so that, in this way, he might live.

Peter starts with a statement taken from the Gloss, that Abraham saved his own life, and entrusted his wife’s chastity to God. He counters this statement with the argument that a just man should prefer to die rather than endanger his wife’s spiritual life. Although this seems like a reprise of Hugh of St. Victor’s and the De Mendacio’s theme, that a lie to save a life can never be justified, in fact, Peter is thinking of the sin of adultery. He argues that since Sarah’s potential adultery with an Egyptian would be as a married woman if Abraham lived thanks to her lie, and as a widow, if he died at the hands of the Egyptians, she would commit a lesser sin if he died at their hands, since the adultery of a widow is less sinful than that of a married woman.

The Chanter does repeat the Augustinian formula, that a lie cannot be justified, and that Abraham hid the truth but did not lie. However, the bulk of his commentary, and almost all of the part that is original to him, is given over to reasoning out possible justifications for Abraham’s deception. Against Augustine’s conclusions, he shows that his words were not justified, since they would lead Sarah to sin more than if he died.

What characterizes the Chanter’s approach to this story is not any detailed discussion of lying and honesty per se, but his willingness to discuss the choice to deceive in terms of the practical results it would achieve. Implicitly, the Chanter assumes that if Abraham’s actions were found to have a good end, the means would be justified.

When Stephen Langton comments on this passage, he directly addresses two problems in Peter the Chanter’s explanation. He focuses first on the question of whether

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46 The sense of this clause, ‘if they knew that he was her husband’, does not seem to follow the logic of the passage; if Abraham lived, it would be because the Egyptians did not kill him as they thought he was not her husband.


48 Cf. De Mendacio, VI. 9, pp. 426–7, where Augustine compares the absurdity of lying, and thereby risking a spiritual life in order to save a corporeal life, with the absurdity of committing adultery for the same reason.
Abraham further endangered Sarah’s chastity by asking her to tell the lie. The second and longer question discusses the ethical implications of the Chanter’s statement that Abraham understood one thing by his words, and the Egyptians another.

Langton deals with the Chanter’s main contention quickly at the start of his commentary. Against the idea that Abraham should have preferred to die than to put Sarah in danger of committing a more sinful form of adultery, he replies that her chastity may not have been wounded at all, since it was a case of rape. He quotes the words of St. Agatha, who was persecuted by an amorous Roman senator: ‘If you make me suffer against my will, my chastity will win a twofold crown’. Langton points out that rape is inflicted on women against their will, and consequently a woman’s chastity cannot be harmed by the sins of others. It is therefore nonsense to argue that Abraham could affect his wife’s chastity by remaining alive as her husband, or choosing to die, thereby leaving her a widow. In either case, she would not consent to any abuse, and therefore would not sin.

The aspect of Peter the Chanter’s argument that interests Stephen Langton most is his statement that Abraham understood one thing by the word ‘sister’, and the Egyptians another. The Chanter’s words only more explicitly state the implications of Augustine’s explanation; however, the formulation that he chooses puts Stephen Langton in mind of a sentence from Isidore, included in the chapter on oaths in the Sentences. Isidore states that as a measure against artfulness, God takes oaths by the meaning understood by the one to whom it is made. Langton cites this principle to raise the question of whether Abraham was guilty of a falsehood, even though he believed his words to be true:

Again, surely the words are to be referred to the intentions of the one to whom the locution is made, just as the oath should be interpreted according to what the person to whom it is sworn understands. It seems therefore that he speaks a falsehood. It seems that it is different for an oath by which he is obliged to do something in particular for someone, than in speech, which is held communally for all. And it was the custom of common speech to call nieces sisters among Jews, just as nephews [are called] brothers as is held below.

Langton distinguishes between an oath, to which the rule about transparency of speech applies, and common usage. Although Abraham’s words were not spoken in the sense understood by his interlocutors, the fact that he was speaking in a communally held figure of speech absolves him from speaking a falsehood. Langton spells out that the difference between an oath and common speech is that an oath carries with it a special obligation to others. Because Abraham took on no such obligation to the Egyptians, it was not false to use a figure of speech employed in the Jewish community when talking to them.

49 App. 5; cf. De Civitate Dei, I. 18, pp. 32–4.
50 ‘quacumque arte verborum quis iuret, Deus tamen, qui conscientiae testis est, ita hoc accipit, sicut ille cui iuratur intelligit’ (Sentences, bk. iii, dist. 39, c. 11, p. 227).
51 Throughout his commentary Langton seems to use the phrase ‘falsum dicere’ as a synonym for ‘mentire’, ‘to tell a lie’. He only uses the word ‘mendacium’ once (apparatus 1, 10). That he is using ‘falsum dicere’ to mean specifically culpable falsehood comes through most clearly at apparatus 18, where he asks whether St. Lawrence licitly deceived or spoke a falsehood: ‘Numquid ita licuit decipere eum vel dixit falsum’. Langton seems to view speaking a falsehood as the opposite of a licit deception in terms of culpability. In the discussion of Langton’s passage in this article, the author has tried to keep her vocabulary as close to Langton’s as possible, and uses the word ‘falsehood’ when he uses ‘falsum dicere’ and ‘lie’ when he uses ‘mendacium’.
52 App., 6–9.
Langton returns to the theme in the next-but-one sentence. This time he describes the context of Abraham and Sarah’s lie more precisely as a ‘public locution’. Langton may have been quoting Gregory the Great’s *Moralium in Job*, in which Gregory says that, particularly when preaching to heretics, the church proclaims in ‘public locution’ what at the same time it preserves in inward faith; and that it does not teach one thing in public and keep another to itself in secret. Langton’s point in saying Abraham spoke in ‘public locution’ is that Abraham was not talking to his own Hebrew community, but to unbelieving Egyptians. Abraham therefore had a special responsibility to avoid hypocrisy.53 Langton considers the argument that a public locution should be held to the same rules as an oath, namely, that it should employ language in a sense that the recipient understands. Since the Egyptians must have understood by Abraham’s words that Sarah was literally his sister, was Abraham in the wrong to have used these words?54 Langton asks whether there can ever be an oath which uses words which are understood in a different sense by the person swearing the oath and the person receiving it. He offers the example of two saints in order to answer this question. His first example is St. Lawrence, who was cited by the Chanter. Langton considers the argument that St. Lawrence used an equivocal oath, since he promised to show the church’s treasure. Decius understood this to mean the precious objects held in the church, whereas Lawrence always meant the poor members of the church.55 Langton decides that St. Lawrence replied licitly, not because it was a just equivocation, but because when Decius asked where the stolen treasure was, St. Lawrence simply showed him the poor to whom he had distributed the treasure.56 Because St. Lawrence’s words were true in the literal sense understood by Decius as well as in the figurative sense understood by Christians, this was not a falsehood.

Langton’s second example is that of St. Thomas the Apostle, who was paid by the emperor of India to build a palace. Instead of constructing a physical palace, Thomas gave the money to the poor, so that they would pray for the emperor. Thomas claimed that he had not deceived the prince because he had built him a spiritual palace.57 Langton answers the question of whether this is a licit equivocation by distinguishing between an oath and simple speech (‘simplici locutione’). In the case of an oath, the person who will receive the oath determines its form; it is up to this person to tell the one who will make the oath how he ‘divides and distinguishes’ it (Langton seems to mean by this that it is up to the recipient of the oath to decide exactly what the language of the oath should be, and what it should be taken to mean). If the person who swears does not do as he promised, there will be no doubt that he has consciously acted against his words (he will be ‘duplex corde’, that is, he said one thing and did another). However, these rules do not apply for simple speech.58 Because St. Thomas did not swear an oath, but used simple speech, his equivocation was not a sin. By analogy, Abraham and Sarah’s statement that she was his sister was not illicit because they used normal speech and not an oath.

54 App., 11–15.
55 App., 16–18.
56 App., 21.
57 App., 19–20.
58 App., 22–5. This is stated obliquely in the phrase ‘non sic est cui simplici sermone’ – this author would translate it understanding an implicit verb, ‘dicit’; ‘The same rule does not apply concerning the one to whom one speaks with simple words’.
Langton’s discussion acknowledges that the truth of an enunciation can depend not only on the technical accuracy of the words, but also on the likelihood of its audience understanding it. It is one thing for Sarah to call herself Abraham’s sister among Jews; it is another to say so to those outside their community. Langton also recognizes that different conventions apply to different contexts of speech. A person who swears an oath makes a special commitment to tell the truth in transparent language; in normal speech there is not the same obligation. If Abraham’s deception is permissible, it is because the kind of speech that he and Sarah employed did not imply any special obligation to the Egyptians. Langton founds his ethical discussion on a concept of language as a means to communication between people, in which the way language is used for different social functions is as important as the accuracy of the words themselves. He does not regard the sin of lying purely as a transgression against truth and a misuse of speech, but as a potential failure to carry out the implicit obligations towards other people that go with certain kinds of speech.

All three exegetes reach different verdicts on Abraham’s deception. Hugh of St. Victor seems undecided whether Abraham was guilty of telling a lie to the Egyptians. Peter the Chanter states that Abraham did not tell a lie, but was nevertheless in the wrong to tell the Egyptians that Sarah was his sister. Stephen Langton concludes, after consideration, that Abraham did not tell a falsehood (that is, a lie) to the Egyptians, and therefore that he was in the right. The extent of these disagreements about Abraham’s culpability indicates that there was no clear consensus about the ethics of equivocation and deception among these authors.

The quality of Peter the Chanter’s and Stephen Langton’s moral arguments differs significantly from Augustinian precedent and other twelfth-century discussions. The assumption underlying Augustine’s comments on Abraham’s deception is that, although lying is always wrong, there is no ethical problem with misleading by selective silence. The more influential teachers of the twelfth century, such as Peter Lombard and Gratian, only cited the lies of the patriarchs in order to establish that the Bible offered no warrant for permitted lying, and Gratian seems to accept at face value Augustine’s reclassification of the lie as equivocation. Peter the Chanter, on the other hand, takes exception to the applicability of this caveat in the case of Abraham, since the result of such an equivocation would nevertheless be immoral. Stephen Langton suggests that an equivocation can be as morally reprehensible as a lie in certain situations, and considers whether Abraham should be held to a stricter moral code in a ‘public locution’.

These innovations suggest that both authors had a richer understanding of the morality of dishonesty than that which appears in Augustine’s Biblical exegesis. Both the Chanter and Langton briefly comment on Abraham’s duty to tell the truth. However, what attracts their attention is Abraham’s moral obligations to Sarah and to those he deceived. Instead of a simple duty to the truth and to God, Peter the Chanter and Stephen Langton considered lying as an act against other people. Instead of explaining away the deception, Peter the Chanter discusses Abraham’s choice in terms of practical means and ends, and Langton considers the rules governing social interactions. This change of emphasis allowed the two masters to introduce considerations of context and circumstance into their discussions of lying, and to offer fuller commentaries on the moral problems associated with dishonesty. As such, their reflections deserve to be recognized and given a place in the history of ethics.
Appendix

Stephen Langton’s commentary on Genesis XII:13

Many manuscripts of Langton’s commentary on Genesis survive in several redactions. In order to attain a good text for the passage on Abraham, it has been necessary to take readings from more than one manuscript. British Library, Royal MS. 2 E.XII (hereafter \( R_2 \)) and Cambridge, Peterhouse MS. 112 (hereafter \( P \)) both provide early and full texts. In the case of the Abraham passage, \( R_2 \) has the more complete version, but nevertheless has some important omissions. Both of these texts have the incipit ‘In Exodo legitur’, and therefore correspond to the version in Stegmüller, no. 7744.2. The author has also used the much later Cambridge, Trinity MS. B.3.7 (James, no. 86; hereafter \( T \)). This text corresponds to the more common redaction of Langton’s commentary on Genesis, Stegmüller no. 7744. Stegmüller provides a full list of the ‘ghastly tangle of manuscripts’ (Southern) for this commentary.

With such a small sample, there is no possibility of establishing relationships between manuscripts. The author has simply based her editorial choices on constructing a text that makes grammatical sense. From (18), the two earlier witnesses \( R_2 \) and \( P \) diverge significantly, with the version in \( T \) being closer to \( R_2 \). Whereas the version in \( R_2 \) and \( T \) presents the two stories from saints’ lives, then gives the Master’s response to the two cases together, \( P \) presents first the story of St. Lawrence, with a response, then the story of St. Thomas with a response. The version in \( P \) gives more details of the stories in question, but fewer on how they should be interpreted. The author has chosen to favour the version in \( R_2 \) and \( T \) in her edition, since it elaborates further on the moral concepts used in discussing these deceptions. The final section of the commentary, from (26) to the end, is omitted in \( P \).

\( R_2 \) fo. 27va–b, \( P \) fo. 12rb and \( T \) fos. 51va–52rb. The text is divided by sentence. Lemmata in the apparatus follow the number of the sentence in which they appear. Superscript \( ^2 \) following a word indicates that this is the second instance of this word in the sentence. Citations from the Bible are underlined and words quoting the Gloss are in bold type (Gloss: Rusch, i. 45).

1. Dic ergo obsecro Nota Glossam ‘Queritur cur patriarcha’ in qua solvitur obiectio utrum dixerit falsum necne, Abraham dicendo Sarray quod soror sua esset.

2. Et dicitur ibi quod fecit quod potuit, id est, se a morte liberavit; quod vero non potuit, scilicet, castitatem uxoris servare, deo commisit, quia quamdiu restat quod rationabiliter fiat. 3. Non debemus dominum temptare sed debemus curam in deum proicere. Non ergo fecit hoc quod fecit ex desperatione. 4. Sed contra, nonne potius deberet subire periculum corporis quam castitas illius lederetur? 5. Forte in nullo esset lesa castitas illius et si eam vi cognovissent, unde Agatha, ‘Si invitam me pati feceris, castitas mihi duplicabitur ad coronam’.

1. dixerit [dixit] \( R, T \) || necne \( R, T \) || Abraham . . . esset] \( om. \) \( P \) || 2. fecit] facit \( R_2 \), fecit illud \( T \) || id est . . . non potuit] \( om. \) \( R_2 \), || commisit] \( om. \) \( R_2 \), || fiat] sit \( R_2 \) || 3. dominum] deum \( P,T \) || sed] Coram: sed (non in ras.) \( P \), sed non \( R_2 \), id est non \( T \) || hoc] hic \( R_2 \) || 4. potius deberet] debet prius \( R, T \) || subire] sustinere \( P \) || 5. illius] \( om. \) \( R, T \) || 5. eam] illam \( T \) || si’] etiam si \( P \) || pati] \( om. \) \( P \) ||

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59 *Sentences*, bk. iii, dist. 39, c. 11, p. 227. 60 This is where the commentary in *P* ends.