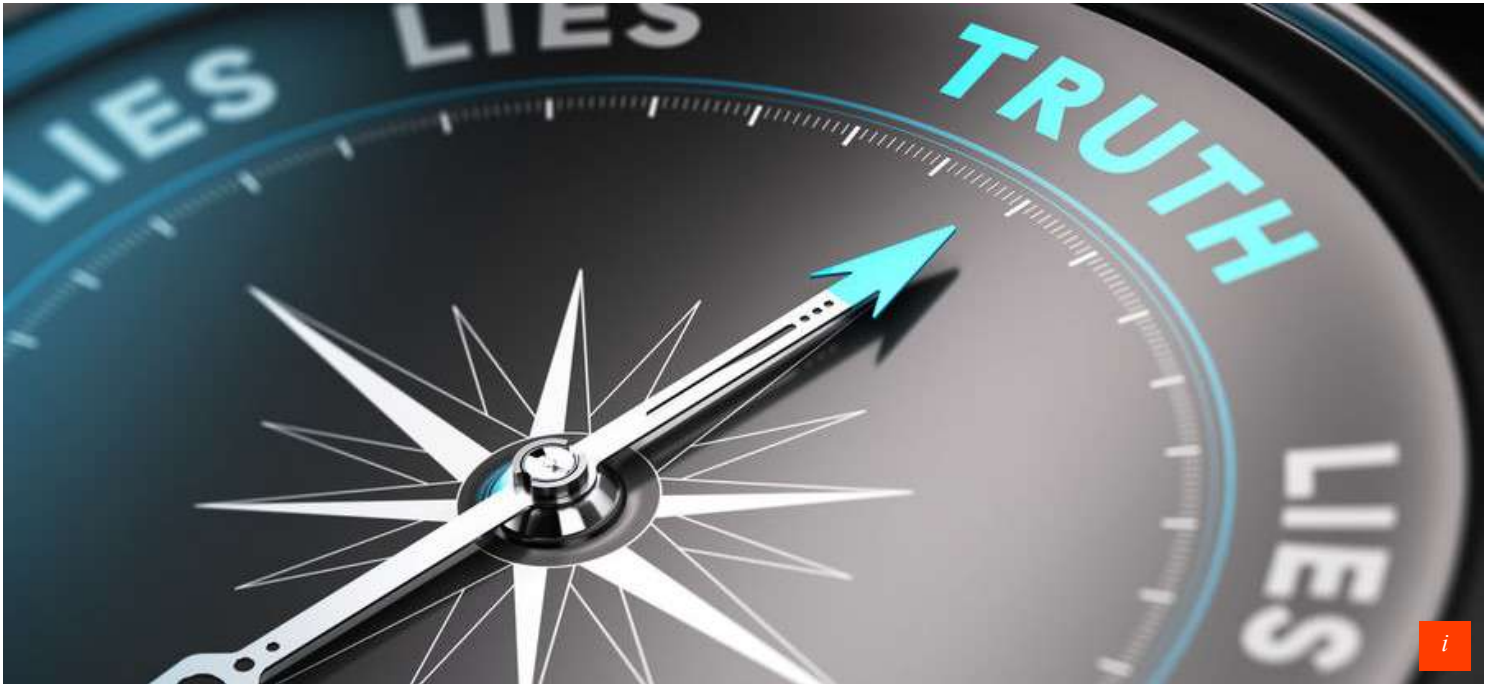Baptist
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# Truth Decay: The Old Testament on truth

**OPINION** DAVID GUSHEE, SENIOR COLUMNIST | DECEMBER 14, 2020



*"All the paths of the Lord are faithfulness and truth to those who comply with his covenant and his testimonies." – Psalm 25:10 (NASB)*

**In my last post, I reviewed philosophical theories of truth.** I concluded that for most everyday purposes the correspondence theory of truth — in which truth is the property of being in accord with reality or fact — serves as an adequate definition.

Turning to Old Testament materials related to truth, we do find times in which the words "true" or "truth" also take a correspondence view. Consider
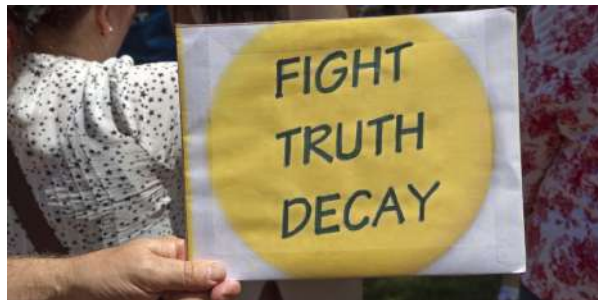


*(Bigstockphoto)*
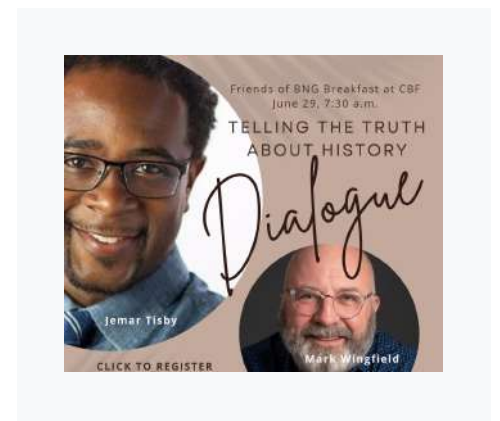
Deuteronomy 13:14 — "You shall investigate, search out, and inquire thoroughly. And if it is true and the matter is certain that this abomination has been committed among you …"

The faint of heart will not want to know what happens next. I use this text merely to illustrate that the notion of truth as correspondence with fact or reality can be found in the Hebrew Bible.

But by all scholarly accounts, this *cognitive* understanding of truth is dwarfed by an *ontological* or *characterological* understanding of truth in the Old Testament. Truth is first a matter of being or character; it is then a matter of knowing; next it is a matter of behaving.

**The Hebrew word that is normally translated as "truth"** in English is transliterated *emeth*. The Hebrew word *emunah* also can be translated as "truth" or as "truthfulness." Bewilderingly, the semantic range of these Hebrew words can support translations that include faithfulness, justice, unchangeableness, solidity, firmness, right/righteousness, soundness, steadiness, loyalty, constancy, lasting and more.

That wide range stems from the varied contexts in which these words are used in the Old Testament. Their core meaning concerns the being — the nature and character — of God, and secondarily, of people. The idea seems to be that in a world filled with false gods, instability, uncertainty and evil, only God is real, firm, certain and good. Only God is True.

"The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful (*emunah*) God, without deceit, just and upright is he," says Deuteronomy 32:4.

*David Gushee*

**Try this comparison:** Where the correspondence theory suggested that truth is a property of a statement corresponding with fact, in the Hebrew Bible truth is a property of being or character. Persons, beginning with the divine, are true (or not). The actions of persons who are true will be truthful. Such people, and their actions, also can be described as faithful, right, just, firm,
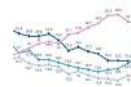
sound, steady and so on. The opposite kinds of people can be described with correspondingly awful terms such as faithless, unrighteous, unjust, wavering, unsound, unsteady, lacking integrity and so on.

If you do a Bible word search on "true" or "truth," you will find that English translations vary considerably. Take Genesis 32:10, where Jacob prays: "I am unworthy of all the favor and of all the *emeth* which you have shown to your servant."

*Emeth* is usually translated faithfulness in this context, but in its literalistic way the NASB footnotes "truth" as a translation option here, which is right. But if that is the choice of English word, it can only mean truth as true-ness, reliability, firmness — a character quality of God that makes God the one (the only one) we can "truly" rely on in life.

**This is a staggeringly important discovery.** If truth at its core is about character properties, and not about statement properties, then our thinking about the subject is turned on its head. The main question moves from, "*What* is true?" to, "*Who* is true?"

The Hebrew Bible clearly teaches that God is Truth and God is True. God sustains and supports all reality. God is firm, solid and reliable. God is faithful, and this proves out when God is tested. God is steady. God is trustworthy. God is sound. God is just.

> **"The main question moves from, '*What* is true?' to, '*Who* is true?'"**

These character qualities of God then undergird God's commands. God's commands to humanity come out of God's character and can therefore be relied upon as reflecting God's goodness.

**The reason God commands** is to invite humans whom God has made to enter into God's true-ness, God's truth-fullness, in our character and consequently in our actions.

"Behold, you desire truth (*emeth*) in the innermost being, and in secret you will make wisdom known to me" (Psalm 51:6).

God's goal is to form people whose moral being and moral action look like Psalm 15:2 — "One who walks with integrity, practices righteousness, and speaks truth (*emeth*) in his heart."

**The correspondence theory of truth** disciplines the statements and actions of human beings through submission to external realities.

I may not like the fact that, say, Joe Biden won more votes in Georgia than did Donald Trump, or that Donald Trump won more votes in Florida than did Joe Biden, but I submit to these facts and to their consequences.

I may not like the fact that COVID-19 is now the No. 1 cause of death in the United States, but I submit to these facts and to their consequences.

My desires are not more important than reality itself.

**"My desires are not more important than reality itself."**

But this foray into the Old Testament's treatment of truth suggests that the ultimate reason why believers, at least, walk with integrity, do justice and speak truth is because God is like this. We should want more than anything else to participate in God's reality, imitate God's character and practice God's commands. Refusal to live in truth, to speak truth and to submit to truth is ultimately rebellion against God.

In my next post I will turn to what the New Testament adds to the understanding of truth.

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