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The First Lie

by Jacob Adamson

Deep in the Algor valley nestled between the Tigris and the Euphrates sometime between the discovery of fire and the invention of the wheel, an important discovery was made. This discovery is undoubtedly one of the most useful in human history. It is the tool of kings and religious leaders, as well as fathers and sons. Surely it can be said that every single human utilizes it to a varying degree in daily life. The effects of this invention throughout history indeed cannot be overstated. Given this incredible history, it is shocking that it has gone almost entirely unstudied by historians. The invention I am referring to is the invention of the lie.

Many many years ago, I began an inquiry into the origins of this human invention. I spent years searching for any document or book about its discovery. I was systematic in my search. I read books from Dewey Decimal 900 — History, geography, and auxiliary disciplines — to 999 — extraterrestrial worlds. I consulted professors in every major university. I went to every country in the world, from Algeria to Zimbabwe. Still, I found nothing but trial, tears, and trivialities.

I was on the verge of ending this search, until an unlikely encounter in a Baghdad market. I met a friendly looking merchant with a great curly beard and greater belly. I told him of my journey. He listened intently, smiling and nodding. When I finished he scratched his beard ponderously. “My friend,” he said in his playful Arabian accent, “I believe I have something which might aid you in your search.”

“I would be tremendously grateful if that were the case, but I believe that’s impossible.”

He then pulled out an intricately carved box from beneath the stall. “Now, my friend” he said to me, “I do not know very much about this item, but I do believe it is of incredible historical value. I have been waiting for an intelligent man such as yourself to examine it.”

He smiled, opening the box. Upon a velvet cushion sat a single dusty, ancient scroll.

I seized it greedily, only to discover that it was covered in unintelligible scribbles, a language that I did not recognize. Luckily, the vendors happened to know a man who could translate it, for a nominal fee.

So I found myself everyday as the sun rose over the sandy Baghdad city sitting on a pillow in Mr. Ghorbani’s humble apartment listening and writing as he read. At times he struggled to find the correct English translation for a word, but overall I was incredibly impressed with his mastery of this ancient dialect. Moreso I was impressed by the detail and humanity expressed in this ancient historical account. It took many weeks, and a substantial portion of my fortune, but I have here for you the reader what is the only known translation, the most accurate history, and the sum of all my endeavors: a true account of the invention of the lie.

“Oog did you remember to get kalugah berrys on way home?”

Now, this was the third time that week that Oog’s wife had asked to pick up the berries, but each time he’d forgotten.
On the day before last, which we would now call a Tuesday, Oog had intended to get the berries. He had been walking to the grove, but he was distracted. Oog had been walking in the tall grass close to the kalugah grove, when he came across his friend Tog. Tog was banging a rock and a stick together. The sound was so enthralling that a crowd began to form, gyrating their bodies in an awkward spasmodic way. They danced and grooved to the beat. Oog, excited, asked Tog, "What you have there?"

"Rock," replied Tog.

The name stuck.

By the time Tog made his way home, he had forgotten all about the berries, but this story, he told his wife.

The next day Oog was walking the river again, when he plum forgot.

Today he'd heard the unmistakable sound of laughter in the river. He'd laid down on a small cliff that overlooked the water. There were Rah, Yak and Sheä. They were naked. Of course everyone went topless in those days. He'd lied there for a little longer than he should have until one of them screeched and pointed in Oog's direction. Oog shot up like he'd just been shocked in the pecker.

The women then erupted in laughter upon seeing Oog's wooden club standing at the ready. He'd run all the way back to his cave. This story, he could not tell his wife.

"Yes," said Oog.

"Oog, this why I love you. Many hunter proud. Do not gather. We, do together. You hunt and gather. I gather and hunt. It good." She gave him a kiss on the cheek and smiled revealing teeth as speckled as the leopard skin she wore. "Now, put berry in salad."

"I don't have them"

The cave felt familiar to Oog. There was straw bedding in the corner, and a portrait of him and his wife hunting on the wall. It was an anniversary present. Remains of a fire were at the mouth of the cave. Cooked bits of chicken lingered in the charcoal.

"Huh" replied Oog's wife, "Ahooogah."

Oog was unsure of what was happening, and scrambled to reply. As so often happens with lies, one followed another.

"Well, I picked them, then... then... saber tooth come. I fight, but run. Lost all berry." This was not true.

"Big saber tooth come. Oog sure?"

"Yes," said Oog.

And so Oog's wife went and told all the other caves, becoming the second person to ever lie in the history of mankind, albeit, unwittingly. The other cave-dwellers, never knowing anyone to ever say anything but the truth, believed. They formed a hunting party to chase the nonexistent Saber-Tooth. At first Oog was reluctant to lead, as it would mean continuing to repeat his lie, but, with the pressure of the village neighbors at his back, he raised his club, the one made of real wood.

After all, he lacked the vocabulary to explain what he'd done. He hardly understood himself.

So the Neanderthals searched after the tiger until the sun was an angry red mole in the sky. They didn't find him. When they were investigating the spot where the alleged attack occurred, some of the cave dwellers brought up questions. For instance: If there was a saber tooth tiger, why weren't there any tracks on the ground. And, if Oog had been attacked by the saber tooth tiger, why didn't he have a scratch on him. And moreover, why was there a saber tooth tiger here, when there hadn't been one in this area since the last ice age, 250 years ago. Oog's answers were as follows: The tiger was no larger than a dog. Oog was a very good fighter. Perhaps this was a new kind of tiger, a dog sized one that could survive in the heat.
He made up some intelligent sounding reasons for this, and scared the cave dwellers even more.

Word spread of Oog’s heroic deeds around the cooking fires. The Neanderthals and the Neander-dolls all wanted to hear more from the great warrior who'd fought off a tiger. Oog told and retold the story, inventing an increasingly elaborate course of events.

Oog found that each lie was easier than the last.

It was also incredibly enjoyable. He’d never had such a captivated audience. Normally when Oog would tell some humdrum story the other Neander-thals would look at him disinterestedly until he finished, whereupon they’d tell him, “That wasn’t very interesting.”

They hadn’t learned to lie yet.

Now when one of them told a story he would smile and say, “how interesting” or “tell me more.” He became terribly charming.

A sort of small cult began to form around Oog. They gathered around a large limestone boulder in the village center to listen intently to his inventive-ly heroic exapedes about the tiger. He invented new and fanciful lies about how he had fought it off with his bare hands and had saved a woman from a near by village from the tiger – a woman who was quite a looker as well. They oohed and ahwed at his tales.

Then one day Oog mentioned that Ogh had also seen the tiger on the very same day, but had run away like a coward. This untruth upset Ogh very much. He grabbed Oog by his deerskin collar and pulled their faces together. From here Oog could see the bits of rotting old flesh in Ogh’s teeth. His breath smelled like the rancid peaches in Oog’s rub-bish heap.

“I not run from Tiger!” yelled Ogh.

Oog was nervous. He had been challenged for his lies before, but never so directly, and it had always been easy to come up with another lie.

“Ugh” cried Oog.

“What?” Ogh asked.

Oog seized this opportunity in a moment of brilli-ance “Ugh, Ugh, I said ugh, not Ogh. Ugh run from Tiger.”

Ogh relaxed a bit, relieved he was not the object of ridicule for something he had no part in. “Who Ugh,” asked Ogh.

“Ugh from other village, Ogh probably never heard of,” said Oog.

This answer satisfied Ogh.

The next day he was with his wife. “Darling you are the love of my life. You are like a cool splash of water on a summer day. You are the first bite of fresh fruit. You are like big boulder that falls off cliff face and crushes tiger just in time. You are like–”

“Wait, where are you going!” I asked.

“I must go, my flight leaves in an hour,” Mr. Ghor-bani said.

I rose from my pillow, anger rising. “So you’re just going to leave me here, never knowing what hap-pens to Oog, not really sure what the point of the story was, what lessons are to be learned, what great truths hide in the annals of history. I must say I feel quite cheated.”

Mr. Ghorbani grappled with his conscience for a moment. “Okay, because we are friends, I’ll give you a quick summary of rest.” He glanced rapidly at the old manuscript before him and I readied my pen, desperate to get every last word. [im]

[continued on the Inklings blog]