

From Sister To Wife: Readings

Genesis 12:9-20: And Abram journeyed, going and journeying, toward the south. And there was a famine in the land. And Abram went down toward Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was heavy in the land. And it was, as he came near to come unto Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, Behold, I pray, I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and it shall be, that the Egyptians shall see you, and they will say, This is his wife; and they will kill me, and will make you to live. Say, I pray, that you are my sister; so that it may be well with me on account of you, and that my soul may live because of you. And so it was, as Abram came to Egypt, that the Egyptians saw the woman, that she was very beautiful. And the princes of Pharaoh saw her, and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house. And Pharaoh did well to Abram on account of her; and Abram had flock and herd, and asses and menservants, and handmaids and she asses, and camels. And Jehovah plagued Pharaoh with great plagues, and his house, on account of the matter of Sarai, the wife of Abram. And Pharaoh called to Abram, and said, What is this that you have done to me? why did you not tell me that she is your wife? Why did you say, She is my sister? I might have taken her to me for a woman. And now, behold your wife; take her, and go. And so Pharaoh commanded the men concerning him; and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had.

Arcana Coelestia 1458: "Knowledges are the things that open the way for seeing celestial and spiritual things. By means of knowledges the way is opened for the internal self to advance toward the external, in which latter are the receiving vessels, which are as many as are the knowledges of good and truth. Into these knowledges, as into their vessels, do celestial things inflow."

Arcana Coelestia 1472: "Knowledge comprised of cognitions...has a certain naturalness within it, as is manifested in children when they first start to learn - that is to say, the higher things are, the more they desire them; and all the more so when they hear that these things are celestial and Divine. But this delight is natural and arises from a strong desire that belongs to the external man. With some that strong desire causes them to take delight solely in knowledge comprised of cognitions, without any other end in view; yet that knowledge is nothing else than a certain means that exists to achieve an end, which is use. That is to say, cognitions exist to serve as vessels for celestial and spiritual things, and when they are performing that service, for the first time they have a use, and from that use receive their delight. It may become clear to anyone, if he pays the matter any attention, that in itself the knowledge comprised of cognitions exists for no other reason than that a person should become rational, and from that become spiritual, and at length celestial, and that by means of those cognitions his external man may be allied to his internal. When this point is reached he has arrived at the use itself, the internal man having nothing else than uses in view. For the sake of the same end also the Lord instills the delight that childhood and youth experience in forms of knowledge. When however a person begins to take delight in knowledge alone, it is a bodily desire that carries him away; and to the extent it carries him away, that is, to the extent he takes delight in knowledge alone, to the same extent does he move away from what is celestial, and to the same extent do the facts he knows close themselves up in the Lord's direction and become materially inclined. But insofar as facts are learned with a view to use - such as for the sake of human society, for the sake of the Lord's Church on earth, for the sake of the Lord's kingdom in heaven, and still more for the sake of the Lord Himself - the more they are opened out towards Him." (Arcana Coelestia 1472)

From Sister To Wife

Sermon by Rev. Matthew Genzlinger

“And Pharaoh called Abram and said, What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?” (Genesis 12:18)

A good question! All the stories in the Lord’s Word have a spiritual sense that on one level is about our own spiritual journey towards the Lord and His heavenly kingdom. When understood on this level, the story of Abram calling Sarai his sister takes on a new beauty and relevance.

This story begins with Abram and Sarai sojourning in Egypt, because a grievous famine was in the land. Very simply, this famine represents the scarcity of knowledge that we all have when we first begin our spiritual journey. And sojourning in the land of Egypt, represents the process we go through of filling our empty minds with many newly learned facts and ideas. Because traveling in the land of Egypt in a good sense represents being instructed from the Lord’s Word, the Lord Himself traveled to Egypt as a child fulfilling the prophecy from Hosea, “Out of Egypt I have called my Son.” (Hosea 11:1) Because learning and filling our minds with many facts and ideas is such an important first step in the process of our own regeneration, elsewhere in the Scriptures Egypt is called, “The corner stone of the tribes.” (Isaiah 19:13) When building the temple, Solomon also built a house for Pharaoh’s daughter (1 Kings 7:8). And in Daniel we read, “He shall have power over the treasures of gold and silver, and over all the precious things of Egypt.” (Daniel 11:43) So again, sojourning in Egypt is a picture of us – of you – being instructed and gathering into your memory many different teachings and ideas from the Lord’s Word.

As Abram came near to Egypt, he recognized something. He recognized that Sarai his wife was beautiful to look upon. Sarai, as Abram’s wife, represents truth that comes from a celestial or heavenly origin. Truth that comes from a celestial or spiritual origin is beautiful, we find it to be delightful both internally and externally, it is the ideal towards which we should be striving. “Behold, I pray, I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance.” (Genesis 12:11)

Later this morning we will define more clearly what “truth that comes from a celestial or heavenly origin” is. But for now, we come back to the story and see that Abram is concerned. Abram realizes that in this current situation, if the Egyptians were to recognize that Sarai was his wife, they would kill him. And so, Abram says to Sarai, “Say I pray, you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, that my soul may live because of you.” (Genesis 12:13)

The reason that Abram called Sarai his sister, is because in its spiritual sense, this story represents the gradual process of our own spiritual growth and development. As this process begins, the truth that we learn does not come from a celestial or heavenly origin – represented by Sarai as a wife; at first, the truth we learn is merely intellectual – represented by Sarai as a sister.

When we first sojourn in the land of Egypt, gathering up many facts into our more external memory, we are gradually able to develop our rational mind. As we grown, we use our rational mind to confirm the truths we’ve learned; and we can even come to have an internal perception that what we have learned is indeed true (see AC 1496). As this process takes place within our own minds, we tend to be motivated by a mere love of knowledge. Learning,

thinking about and simply knowing stuff is fun. What drives us is an affection we have to understand and intellectually perceive what is true and how various teachings connect together. It is this merely intellectual appreciation of truth – this love of knowing – that is represented by Sarai as a sister.

Now although I just used the phrase “merely intellectual,” what is very important to understand is that starting off life with this merely intellectual appreciation for truth is NOT a bad thing. On one level when we hear that Abram told Sarai to tell the Egyptians that she was his sister, we might feel a little bit miffed at Abram. But on a spiritual level, this represents a good and even necessary step in the process of our own regeneration.

It’s interesting to note that while the Egyptians were assuming that Sarai was Abram’s sister, Pharaoh did well unto Abram for her sake. Abram was blessed with flocks and herds and asses and menservants and maidservants and camels. This increase of wealth that Abram experienced represents the way the Lord can multiply and increase the things we know and the truths we understand even when our love for truth is merely intellectual; when Sarai is a sister.

Now we don’t have the time to go into this in great depth, but another thing to notice is that when Abram called Sarai his sister, the idea is that something was being protected. This was protecting Abram from being killed by the Egyptians. Now again, if we’re only looking at the literal sense of this story, we could argue that Abram’s fears were unfounded. But on a spiritual level Abram’s fears were valid. Because on a spiritual level, what we see represented here is a kind of danger that comes when we try to achieve what is celestial and heavenly to quickly or in a disorderly way. It’s kind of like a child trying to drive a car before they’re ready – it’s dangerous and can be harmful. The Lord knows that if He were to allow us to enter into a kind of truth that is genuinely from a celestial or heavenly origin to soon – that’s Sarai as a wife – it would end up doing more harm than good. Instead, the Lord allows us to start off by simply approaching His truth on a more intellectual level – Sarai as a sister.

Now so far, we’ve seen that the Egyptians thinking that Sarai is Abram’s sister, actually represents a normal and necessary step in the process of our own spiritual regeneration. But eventually we read that, “Jehovah smote Pharaoh with great plagues and his house, because of Sarai, Abram’s wife.” (Genesis 12:17)

Even though having an affection for merely intellectual truth is acceptable at times, the Lord is also warning us in this story, that there must come a time when we move beyond this. Because in the end, any knowledge that we gather in Egypt has one purpose and one purpose only: To help us become more loving and useful people. If we do not get to a point in our lives where we eventually realize this, then this love of learning and knowing that was once valuable (again, Abram’s wealth was increased), will now become a plague in our land. If our merely intellectual truth – that’s Sarai as a sister – does not eventually become conjoined with a heavenly love of being useful – that’s Sarai as a wife – then instead of being a corner stone and a place to collect precious things, Egypt will become a land that enslaves us. Listen to the way the Lord explains this vital reality in the Arcana Coelestia 1472: “When a person begins to take delight in knowledge alone, it is a bodily desire that carries him away; and to the extent it carries him away, that is, to the extent he takes delight in knowledge alone, to the same extent does he move away from what is celestial, and to the same extent do the facts he knows close themselves up in the Lord’s direction and become materially inclined. But insofar as facts are learned with a

view to use - such as for the sake of human society, for the sake of the Lord's Church on earth, for the sake of the Lord's kingdom in heaven, and still more for the sake of the Lord Himself - the more they are opened towards the Lord.” (AC 1472) So again, Pharaoh now being plagued and recognizing that Sarai is Abram’s wife, represents an important spiritual step forward from simply having a love for intellectual truth and for knowing things – Sarai as a sister – to a new state where we conjoin or marry this intellectual truth to a heavenly love of use – Sarai as a wife.

Now while recognizing our own need to take this important step forward, there are two details in this part of the story I would invite you to reflect on. First, when Pharaoh was struck by these plagues, He called Abram and said to him, “What is this that you have done unto Me? Why did you not tell me that she is your wife?” (Genesis 12:18) While explaining these words of Pharaoh, the Heavenly Doctrines invite us to note the tone or the emotions behind this question. Pharaoh was not happy. He was grieving over the fact that Sarai turned out to be Abram’s wife. What this represents is the sense of grief and indignation that we feel in the lower levels of our mind when we are told by the Lord that we need to let go of our merely intellectual love of truth. Often when the Lord tells us that it is time to move forward and to receive from Him something new, this involves a willingness on our part to let go of something old. In explaining these words of Pharaoh the Lord says, “The case herein is like that of little children who when they love something their parents see to be hurtful to them, and it is taken away from them, are thereby grieved.” (AC 1492) So I love this imagine in the story and this idea that sometimes in order to help us move forward, the Lord needs to take something away from us that does cause us to grieve for a time. In this case we’ve become comfortable and have been enjoying the process of just learning truth and knowing things. We’re indignant when we realize that some of these mere ideas and knowledges that we’ve learned need to be put aside.

But now the second detail in this part of the story that I really want us to reflect on, is the fact that in the end Pharaoh did the right thing. Even though on one level he was grieved and indignant with the fact that Sarai turned out to be Abram’s wife, Pharaoh accepted this. And in the end he said to Abram, “And now behold your wife; take her and go.” (Genesis 12:19)

We began by pointing out that Sarai as a wife represents truth that comes from a celestial or heavenly origin. One way to understand this is that Sarai as a wife represent truth that comes from a genuine love for the Lord and our neighbor. Sarai as a wife represents truth that has been conjoined or married to a heavenly love of being useful. Think about this in comparison to what is represented by Sarai as a sister. When we begin to bring our affection for and understand of truth together, and conjoin it to a heavenly love of wanting to be of use in our various communities, of wanting to be of use to the Lord’s church on earth, to the Lord’s kingdom and to the Lord Himself; when in our own lives the truth we intellectually know has been conjoined with what is celestial, with what is heavenly, with what is of love and charity; then Sarai has moved from being Abram’s sister to being a wife.

And here’s one last thought that relates to this. A wife is much more beautiful than a sister. Wives in heaven have a radiating beauty that no artist on earth can even begin to imagine. Learning and knowing a lot of truth is fun, it’s delightful, on one level it can be very satisfying and inspiring. However, the delight and joy and the inspiration we will feel in truth that has been conjoined to what is celestial, to a life of love and usefulness, is a thousand times greater.

The Lord wants us to know this. While pretending to be his sister Sarai certainly brought a level of wealth and prosperity to Abram; but it was as a wife that she was truly beautiful. It was as a husband and wife that they left Egypt and continued their journey to the land of Canaan.

This week, reflect on how this story of Abram and Sarai sojourning for a time in the land of Egypt is symbolic of your own spiritual journey. First, sojourn in Egypt. Allow the Lord to fill your mind with all sorts of wonderful knowledges and ideas from His Word. Love to learn and love to know. But also recognize that if we want to enter into the true beauty and power and inspiration of what the Lord is offering us, we need to take our intellectual truth and marry it to a truth that comes from a celestial and heavenly origin. To a truth that is conjoined to genuine love. Once we make this choice the Lord will lead us into a completely new relationship with Him and with the incredibly beautiful teachings of His Word. Reading from the book of Genesis: “And Pharaoh called to Abram, and said, What is this that you have done to me? why did you not tell me that she is your wife? Why did you say, She is my sister? I might have taken her to me for a woman. And now, behold your wife; take her, and go. And so Pharaoh commanded the men concerning him; and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had.” (Genesis 12:18-20) Amen.