

The Challenge of Misapplied Rules: The Capture of Lot

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And it came to pass in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of nations, that they made war with Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). Genesis 14:1-2

The teachings for the New Church present the idea that the tiniest details of the stories of the Old and New Testaments have an inner meaning like a parable. This is true even when the story reflects historical events like today's reading from Genesis.

The story I read today of northern kings fighting southern kings, defeating them and then carrying off Abram's nephew, Lot, as they returned north is part of a much longer story of Abram's life. The teachings for the New Church assert that all the stories of Abram's life can be seen as parables presenting two closely related progressions. The one nearest to our lives is that these stories describe the spiritual progress we can make to become better, more useful human beings.

The second progression might be a surprise to some people. That second one is the spiritual progress Jesus Christ made from early childhood continuing on through His life. A key concept in New Church teachings is that the Lord Jesus Christ, came into the world taking on a natural mind and body from being born of Mary that was as empty of knowledge as yours and mine was when we were born. Throughout His life Jesus learned the true ideas of the Old Testament and fought spiritual battles to remove every false idea and evil love that attacked the truth of these ideas and the good things they were to lead to. As the Gospel of John states He became the Word made flesh. This was a process that went on from early childhood to the end of His life. Through it the Lord accomplished the essential goal He had in being born which is that each of us would be spiritually free. This freedom allows each of us to choose a life that leads to a heavenly home or one in hell. If we choose repeatedly to care for ourselves no matter what the impact is on others or dedicate our lives to natural goals and pleasures then we will have chosen a life that leads to the unhappiness of a home in hell. If we repeatedly choose to try to live wisely kind lives we will be preparing for heaven. The saga of Abram helps illustrate the spiritual insights and challenges that both Jesus Christ and each of us can face many times as we live our lives.

In Genesis the story of Abram's life begins with God speaking to him in a town in Mesopotamia and calling him to make the major journey to Canaan. The teachings for the New Church state that this represents a subtle realization that something isn't what it should be in the way we are living our lives. We can recognize that there is something not right with an important relationship. We can get a sense that some area of our life is out of balance. Abram's journey with his wife and nephew, Lot, to Canaan means a growing motivation within us that a change is important.

After Abram arrives in Canaan a famine caused him to take his family to Egypt. Going to Egypt means realizing that to wisely change, we need to understand more clearly what is wrong and what could be better. It means learning. Motivation to change by itself is not enough. But while in Egypt, Pharaoh, the leader of the land, takes Abram's beautiful wife, Sarai, to his palace. While learning is important, we as human beings can get so caught up in learning that we do not use our new knowledge to make better choices. Just as Pharaoh's household was plagued for his taking

Sarai, so too the Lord will knock at the door of our minds to help us see that we need to use our knowledge if we truly want a better life. Sarai was returned to Abram.

From Abram's time in Egypt he and his nephew, Lot, had become very rich, including huge flocks and herds. This caused trouble as they traveled back to Canaan because there was not enough good grass and waterholes for all the flocks and herds. Conflict arose among their herdsmen. Abram told Lot that they would have to separate and offered him the choice of where he would like to go. Lot represents the thoughts and attractions in our mind that come most directly from the senses. They are natural, worldly focused, and tend to be self-centered. When a person is young and/or ignorant their decisions will inevitably be heavily influenced by these natural thoughts and attractions. But once a person has learned of broader and higher perspectives and goals especially from the Lord, a conflict within his or her mind is inevitable. Choices have to be made about what to do and not do. This is represented by Lot leaving Abram and going to live near the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah – not good places.

In Genesis 14, which I read for today's service, the story jumps from Abram's family saga into the international politics of that time. We're told of four kings of the north who dominated five kings of the south, including the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, and how after a dozen years the kings of the south rebelled, but that this rebellion was powerfully suppressed. The story reconnects with Abram when we learn that the victorious kings took the spoils of war from the conquered cities and including Lot, his family and his possessions. Abram learned of this from a man who escaped the conflict. Abram responded by organizing a rescue expedition.

The first part of this chapter may seem like an unnecessarily long introduction for why Abram needed to rescue Lot. A person might picture that it would have been preferable to condense the first ten verses of the chapter to a simple statement of, "While Lot lived in Sodom the city was defeated and he was captured by an army from the north." The details and issues that are described in the first ten verses seem unnecessary for what will continue to be the focus of Genesis in this section: the saga of Abram's and his family's lives. But there are important reasons why the Lord guided the inclusion of the additional description of the four kings of the north and their conflicts with the kings of the south.

In the teachings for the New Church, we are told that Chedorlaomer and the other kings of the north represent things that a person believes are good and true but which are in themselves rather simplistic and limited expressions of a far deeper reality (See *Arcana Caelestia* 1661:1). They can be thought of as simple rules for life. We learn them from parents and teachers. We gain them from our juvenile attempts to understand complex interactions and issues. They can be thought of as directives for natural behavior. "These things should be done, those things shouldn't be done." They are both very powerful and useful and can be highly limited. To the extent that they are dictates stored in our memory from others, they can be rather like a short recorded message from a parent or other adult that guides our life. "Mom said, 'We aren't to do that!'" If a young child is questioned about why Mom may have said it, that child may be relatively clueless about why this rule may have importance or value. In this sense the rule is quite external to the young child's own life. It is almost like a voice from outside playing within his mind. On this Mother's Day, I hope you can your mind with gratitude to what your mother did for you, I hope you have fond memories of being loved. You may also remember some of the guidance she gave you for how to be a better person. You may remember she said "Always be nice" or countless other suggestions for what to

do and not do in many situations. Particularly for young children these rules have to be simple statements. Long explanations often go in one ear and out the other.

The kings of the north are like these simple statements we learned from childhood. They also can be other perspectives on life that we gained through childhood, teen years and into young adulthood. They can help us lead better lives, like the northern kings maintaining control for twelve years followed by a rebellion of the southern kings. The northern kings came down and defeated the kings of the south. Their successful battles are like our learned rules or principles helping us avoid harmful choices for us and the people around us. All of this is good, but then comes the problem, Abram's nephew, Lot, is captured.

The "rules of life" that the northern kings represent have their weaknesses. The more external they are, the clumsier they will tend to be. Because of their relatively external nature, they can easily be misapplied in certain situations. Consider the useful rule, "Don't interrupt." There are times when this rule needs to be broken because of an emergency or other pressing issue. There are many other rules, particularly ones that have absolutes within them, "Always do thus and such," or "Never do that," that can be useful in the majority of settings but at times are foolish, dangerous, or otherwise hurtful to some higher good or true thing. When a person blindly applies such a rule, it has captivated a part of our mind. This is what is represented in the story by Lot being captured by the kings of the north.

Fortunately the Lord has given us the ability to reflect and see more broadly than a simple perspective would support. In the story in Genesis, a man escapes from the sack of the cities and reports to Abram that Lot has been captured. Abram, here represents a reflective part of our mind. It is wonderful that the Lord gives us the ability to consider what we are thinking, planning, are doing, or have done. We can sometimes catch ourselves and reflect that a pattern of behavior is rather foolish or destructive even though it is an off-shoot of a rule that has often been valuable in our lives.

Consider the rules of "Be nice" or "Don't hurt people's feelings." Without some form of these rules, particularly starting in childhood, our actions would be badly flawed and anti-social. But as we grow up we can recognize that there are times when protecting something good or true requires us to stand up for it. Sometimes it requires us to object to another's behavior. Sometimes it requires us to point out the destructive effects of another person's words or actions. Doing these things often doesn't fit what is commonly called "nice behavior." Doing these things may result in the other person feeling hurt or angry --particularly in his or her initial reaction. But at times there are far more important things at stake than the other person's peace of mind and happiness in the moment. When we are absolutely controlled by the "don't hurt people's feelings" without the important qualifier "needlessly" we will sometimes not do what is required in a situation.

Abram rescued Lot and all of his goods. We have the capability from the Lord of gradually improving our understanding of what is good, true, and useful in His eyes. He will guide us to see what is truly working or not working within our lives according to His order. The Lord oversees the development of those rules of life in our thoughts. He knows perfectly well what their limitations are. But they are just what we need in certain states and at certain times to guide our behavior. Because of their limits, they shouldn't dictate our behavior at all times. The Lord calls us to realize that the path toward the wisdom and love that He is capable of giving us isn't simple. As we live our lives we will make judgements and choices according to our present best perspective

of what is right and wrong. When we go astray due to the limits of these perspectives the Lord will be there to guide us back to a better path. May we look for an ever clearer understanding of wise kindness as we read and reflect on what His Word teaches. May we daily pray for the light of His wisdom and the warmth of His love as try to follow Him and do the useful things He calls us to do. AMEN.

Lessons: Genesis 14:1-16, *Arcana Caelestia* 1661

Genesis 14:1-16

And it came to pass in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of nations, *that* they made war with Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). All these joined together in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Salt Sea). Twelve years they served Chedorlaomer, and in the thirteenth year they rebelled. In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings that *were* with him came and attacked . . . And the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out and joined together in battle in the Valley of Siddim against Chedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of nations, Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar--four kings against five. Now the Valley of Siddim *was full of* asphalt pits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled; *some* fell there, and the remainder fled to the mountains. Then [the northern kings] took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. They also took Lot, Abram's brother's son who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed.

Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, for he dwelt by the terebinth trees of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner; and they *were* allies with Abram. Now when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his three hundred and eighteen trained *servants* who were born in his own house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. He divided his forces against them by night, and he and his servants attacked them and pursued them as far as Hobah, which *is* north of Damascus. So he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his brother Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the people.

***Arcana Caelestia* 1661**

And it happened in the days of Amraphel, king of Shinar; Arioch, king of Ellasar; Chedorlaomer, king of Elam; and Tidal, king of Goiim, symbolizes just so many different categories of apparent goodness and truth (which are not good or true in and of themselves) in the Lord's outer self . . . The subject is the Lord's combat with evil and falsity and here it is about His first struggle, which took place in His childhood and at the dawn of His adulthood. It was a struggle that He first faced and underwent after He had been trained in both factual knowledge and religious concepts. None of us can possibly fight evil and falsity until we know how to recognize them and consequently until we have been educated. We do not know what evil is, still less what falsity is, until we come into the capacities of intellect and judgment. . . . The very first weapons that any of us wield are the good impulses and true concepts we have acquired by learning about them. These we use as the basis and means for evaluating evil impulses and false concepts. When we first start to fight, we universally believe that the goodness and truth we wield are our own; we take credit for them and also for the power to resist. Such an attitude is acceptable because at that point we are incapable of knowing any better.