

**A Child by Hagar:
The Promise and Problems of Human Reason**

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Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, "See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her." (*Genesis 16:1-2*)

Following accepted customs of the time, Sarai chose to provide an heir for her husband and herself through her maidservant, Hagar. When Hagar had conceived a child she felt superior to Sarai. She despised Sarai. But this story isn't simply a retelling of a troubled event between two women and in Abram and Sarai's marriage long, long ago. The Lord has directed and chosen each detail of what happened and is recorded to convey universal truths about the nature and development of the human mind and about the pathway to a heavenly life that each of us are called to follow. This story reflects how thoughts in a part of our maturing mind can be contemptuous of key ideas the Lord would like us to believe. As we come to think for ourselves it is inevitable that some of those thoughts contemptuously doubt or deny genuine truth and this can cause harm to us and those about us.

This sermon continues a series on the story of Abram's life. The last sermon in this series focused on Abram's complaint to God that he did not have an heir. Abram said to God, "Look, You have given me no offspring." (*Genesis 15:3*) This complaint represents the state of mind of a person who had learned and is relatively mechanically following rules of behavior for a good life or is almost parroting what he or she has learned to be true. There is something inherently empty or unsatisfying about this state of life. The behavior and ideas don't feel like our own. They tend to be rather rigid and somewhat crude and ineffective when we try to use them. For example, many a parent has read a book on discipline or attended a useful seminar on how to better raise their children and then as the parent has tried to apply this knowledge over a period of days or weeks receives the caustic comment of an older child, "Mom, please don't use that book stuff on me." The child recognizes something distinct and foreign about his mother's new behavior or phrasing. This foreign quality may be felt by the mother herself.

As we follow a pathway toward a heavenly life, we need to develop spiritually through a series of steps. Those described in previous sermons in this series are that we need to:

- recognize issues in our lives that would benefit from change,
- get to the point that we care enough about the issue that we are committed to work on it,
- seek the knowledge or facts that define the issue and a more useful response to it,
- recognize the need to change habits of thought, speech, and action concerning this issue, and establish rules for new habits that we make a conscious effort to follow.

To the extent that the "rules of life" that we have recognized and are trying to follow feel somewhat like an external dictate-- "Do this" or "Don't do that"--they will not really be satisfying to us. They won't feel like our own. They will feel like we have adopted someone else's view and overlaid it on our own life. There is a degree of hollowness to this state.

Fortunately we often do not recognize this hollowness. Many a teacher has been amused to watch upper elementary school children debate political candidates as an election approaches. The children

will expound very strong and emphatic opinions on who is or isn't good and why. But remarkably these children's propounded views with almost no exception reflect the views they've heard spoken by their parents. It would not be a kind act to bluntly tell a child, "You just think what you do because your parents think that way." Inevitably though a child who so strongly asserts opinions in one age will face questions or issues that he or she isn't really able to address. Once the discussion leaves the ground that the child has heard someone talk about before, he or she is very limited in being able to respond. There is a fragileness to the strongly held opinions of childhood. A skilled questioner could relatively easily raise issues or facts beyond the child's understanding. The strength and bluster of the child's opinion can in these situations turn out to be little more than the appearance of a great and powerful Wizard of Oz produced by a small man behind a curtain. Obviously there is a tremendous weakness to this state of life.

Abram and Sarai's childless state represents that a person cannot yet think from the ideas and concepts of a rational or reasoned understanding. It is obvious to anyone who has experience with children that they think differently from the way adults are capable of thinking. Their thought and perspective is very limited and flawed. For example, an infant doesn't apparently know that objects which disappear from view still exist. Their thinking is concrete in many areas. Concerning this state of mind the Writings observe:

The rational person does not exist with anyone when he is first born, only a potentiality to become rational, as may become clear to anyone from the fact that new-born babies do not possess reason but become rational as time goes by through the response of the senses to stimuli from without and from within, as knowledge and concepts are received by them. Rationality does, it is true, appear to exist with children; but rationality does not in fact do so, only something of the first beginnings of it, as may be recognized from the fact that reason resides with people who are adult and advanced in years. (*Arcana Caelestia* 1893:1)

A key step towards sensing life as our own is represented by the child conceived of Abram and Hagar. Hagar represents the affection for knowledge that the Lord gives each human being. The power of this affection for knowing shows itself dramatically in a very young child's capability of learning the complexities of human language and grammar with remarkable skill merely through observation and experience. While a four-year-old may not be able to describe the rules that he or she uses with high accuracy, it is obvious that their use has been learned with little or no direct instruction.

Although we vary as human beings in our curiosity about some knowledge as compared to others, we all have a part of us that likes to learn and know. But learning doesn't come merely through experience. A person can watch a little of a sport for decades and still be quite ignorant about what is happening. All the person sees is a confusing series of behaviors, punctuated by periodic whistles by the referees. Although the person may experience the game in the sense of having their eyes see the players moving around on the field, there is little learning or understanding taking place.

The Lord has told us that the key issue to learning is the affection, motivation, or caring we have about the subject. This is reflected in the following passage:

The rational is not born from knowledge and concepts, as people suppose, but from the affection for them, as becomes clear merely from the fact that nobody can possibly become rational unless some delight in or affection for such knowledge and cognitions burns within him. The affection constitutes the maternal life itself, while the celestial and spiritual within that affection constitute

the paternal life. Consequently it is the degree and the quality of a person's affection that determine the degree and the quality of the rationality that is developed in him. In themselves facts and concepts are nothing other than things that are dead, or instrumental causes, which are made alive by the life that belongs to affection. This is how everyone's rational man is conceived. The reason why the servant-girl was Egyptian and why that fact is mentioned is that "Egypt" means knowledge. (*Arcana Caelestia* 1895:2)

Affection is necessary for understanding to take place. In the example of a person, who has watched but never understood a sport, all of this might change in a short period of time if a son or daughter starts playing that sport. Now, from a desire to know the part a young teen plays in the game, the person may want to understand what is happening.

A statement of fundamental principle is: "when the end is loved the means also are loved." (*True Christian Religion* 43) None of us is born with a wise understanding of anything. Part of what the Lord calls us to is a recognition that there are important goals that we want to strive for in our lives. Focusing on these goals or ends can help foster within us the affection or caring that will focus our mind on learning and from this gaining understanding. This understanding is represented by the child conceived of Abram and Hagar.

The impending birth of an heir for Abram and Sarai was wonderful and was potentially a cause for rejoicing. But a problem arose. Hagar quite clearly showed that she despised Sarai and felt superior to her. The coming of our own understanding or natural reasoning ability that Hagar's pregnancy represents has its own danger. Natural human reasoning by its very nature is inclined to be in conflict with genuine truth. By its very nature it can feel itself superior to that truth. In the section of the *Arcana Caelestia* that deals with this chapter there are many examples of this as in the following quote:

The rational conceived first is unable to acknowledge intellectual or spiritual truth as truth because it has clinging to it many illusions that are a product of what is known about the world and the natural order, and many appearances which are not truths but are a product of things known from the literal sense of the Word. For example, it is an intellectual truth that all life is from the Lord. The rational conceived first does not apprehend this, but supposes that if it did not live of itself it would possess no life at all; indeed it is angry if anything different is asserted. (*Arcana Caelestia* 1911:1-2)

The Lord has given us the ability to be aware of this happening within our own minds. We can sense ourselves scoffing at certain things the Lord has stated to be true. When we recognize that this is happening, we are wise if we are hard on that state of mind just as Abram told Sarai that she was free to hard on Hagar.

An amazing part of how the teachings for the New Church explain this reality is that it is directly reflected in the Lord's life in this world. This was a spiritual challenge that He also faced. We read: "When the Lord's rational was first conceived there were appearances of truth that in themselves were not truths . . . Therefore His rational at its first conception also lightly esteemed intellectual truth; but gradually, as His rational was made Divine, the clouds of the appearances were dispersed (*Arcana Caelestia* 1911:7).

The ability the Lord gives us to think from ourselves is a potential source of great fulfillment and usefulness. He calls us to see the jobs and roles that we can serve through our lives and to focus our

minds on what is necessary to do them well. He calls us to seek an understanding that we can apply to fulfilling those roles justly, faithfully, and honestly. He also forewarns us that by its very nature our own understanding will at first be likely to feel itself superior to some of what He would teach us. May we pray that the Lord ever renew the affections within our hearts that produces the miracle of understanding. May we pray that our eyes focus on the uses that we most need to serve in our lives. May He give us the gifts of His wisdom and love to lead us forward toward an ever more heavenly life.

AMEN.

Lessons: *Genesis* 16:1-10, *Arcana Caelestia* 1902:1-2

Genesis 16

¹ Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no *children*. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. ² So Sarai said to Abram, "See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing *children*. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her." And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. ³ Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. ⁴ So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes.

⁵ Then Sarai said to Abram, "My wrong *be* upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me."

⁶ So Abram said to Sarai, "Indeed your maid *is* in your hand; do to her as you please." And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence.

⁷ Now the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸ And He said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai."

⁹ The Angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand."

¹⁰ Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, "I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude."

***Arcana Caelestia* 1902:1-2**

If human beings were not steeped in any hereditary evil, the rational would be born straightaway from the marriage of the heavenly things belonging to the internal person with the spiritual things belonging to the same; and through the rational the faculty of knowing would be born. This would mean that on entering the world a person would possess straightaway within himself fully-formed faculties of reason and of knowing, for this would all be in accordance with the order that belongs to influx. This may be deduced from the fact that all animals without exception are born into a fully-formed faculty of knowing what they need and what is suitable for them in the way of food, safety, habitat, and producing offspring, because their inborn nature is in accordance with order. For what other reason are human beings born without the same faculties than that in our case order has been destroyed - for we alone is born without any knowledge?

That which causes us to be born without any knowledge is hereditary evil each of us received from our father and from our mother. Because of that evil all our faculties are turned in a contrary direction insofar as good loves and true ideas are concerned, so that the latter are not able through an immediate influx of heavenly and spiritual things from the Lord to be ordered into correspondent forms. This is the reason why each human being's rational has to be formed in an entirely different manner or way, that is to say, by means of facts and concepts entering in through the senses, and so by the external route, thus by what is a reversal of order. In this way, miraculously so, a person is made rational by the Lord.

***Arcana Caelestia* 1911:1-2 (Family Service Reading)**

And Hagar saw that she had conceived, and her mistress was despised in her eyes. That this means that this [first] rational, at its conception, lightly esteemed the truth itself that was joined to good loves, is evident from the signification of the "mistress," or Sarai, as being truth adjoined to good. loves The rational first conceived cannot acknowledge intellectual or spiritual truth as truth, because many false ideas are attached to it from the experiences drawn from the world and from nature, and many appearances from the concepts taken from the literal sense of the Word, and these are not truths. For example: it is an intellectual truth that all life is from the Lord; but the rational first conceived does not apprehend this, and supposes that if it did not live from itself it would have no life; nay, it is indignant if the contrary is said, as has been many times perceived from the spirits who still cling to the false ideas from their senses.