

THREE CURIOUS STORIES
CLUES TO THE LIMITS OF RATIONAL THOUGHT
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Most of us like to think we are rational. "Rational" has a good sound to it; it implies that we think before we act, that we weigh our options and choose what is best in the given circumstances. "Rationality" comes from the same root as "ratio" and means seeing the ratio between two or more things so that the best can be chosen. It is defined in the dictionary as the ability to reason and not be foolish.

I think it is obvious to everyone that we constantly use our rational to judge things. What kind of truck to buy. What color to paint the kitchen. Which job to take. But a question might arise as to what, if anything, the rational should not attempt to judge. That is what this article is about.

Three curious stories occur in the book of Genesis that in a way seem like the same story told three times (Gen. 12:10-20; Gen. 20; Gen. 26:1-4). These are three instances of declaring that the wife is not a wife but a sister. In these stories Abraham (at that time still Abram) first tells Pharaoh that Sarai, his wife, is his sister. The second comes later when he tells Abimelech, king of Gerar, the same thing. The third instance is Isaac (Abraham's son) saying to that same Abimelech that his wife Rebekah is his sister. In all three of these accounts there are striking similarities:

There is a journey toward the south
The wife is very fair to look upon.
The man, Abraham or Isaac, is afraid he will be killed so that
his wife can be taken.
He claims that she is his sister.

The woman is taken, but in each case the Lord leads the king to see that she is the wife before any harm is done.

The man is rebuked, enriched, and the two are released.

The Arcana Coelestia tells us that "...because a like event took place on three occasions, and also these are recorded in the Word, it is clear that it holds an arcanum of supreme importance within it..." (3386). This is the arcanum we would like to understand.

Let's look at two of these three accounts in more detail. Because this article is about the rational, and to keep the length in bounds, I will leave out the first story which is interiorly about knowledges. (References to it are Gen. 12: 10-20 and *Arcana Coelestia* 1461-1498.)

The second recounting fills the entire twentieth chapter of Genesis. At the time Abram and Lot have separated, Ishmael has been born to Hagar, Abram's name has been changed to Abraham, and Isaac has been promised. Abraham journeys toward the south, but only to Gerar. Again, he says that Sarah is his sister. As a result, Abimelech, the king of Gerar, takes Sarah to his house. But before he touches her, the Lord comes in a dream to warn him that she is Abraham's wife. The Lord commends Abimelech for his integrity and explains that He kept him from touching Sarah. As in the first story, Abraham is rebuked but enriched.

The third recounting, in the twenty-sixth chapter of Genesis (verses 1 to 14), comes years later. Abraham and Sarah are dead, but there had been a lasting friendship between Abraham and Abimelech. Isaac has been born and has grown up and married Rebekah. Esau and Jacob have been born. As in the first telling, there is a famine in the land. Isaac travels to Gerar to Abimelech, a journey which the Lord approves since He tells Isaac to dwell there. When the men of Gerar ask about Rebekah, Isaac says,

“She is my sister.” After some time, Abimelech sees them together and realizes that they are husband and wife. He calls Isaac and rebukes him for the deceit since it might have caused accidental adultery. Isaac remains in Gerar and prospers there.

These stories represent three of the Lord’s early temptations that concerned His knowledge and the development and role of His rational. As such, they can tell us something about the role of our rational mind. We have to keep in mind, too, that the Lord never gave in to temptation and always made the right choice. This is not always the case with us as we go through similar states in our very limited way, but we can see how we should act by seeing how the Lord acted.

Abimelech was the king of Gerar, and he was friendly toward Abraham. He represents the doctrine of faith, the kind of faith that that can be grasped by the rational. The Lord’s first rational (signified by Ishmael) had been born already, and the true rational (signified by Isaac) had been promised. Part of this development of the mind is the learning of spiritual truth. Going to Gerar represents that learning. The Lord was then in a state where the developing rational saw an appearance that the things of faith grow—from knowledge, to rational thought, and on to faith. This state of mind was attracted to rational truth (Sarah as sister) because it appears it will lead to faith. Sarah “was beautiful to look upon” because of the wish for that faith to come. But the Lord had an obscure feeling that this was somehow wrong (Abimelech’s dream) and that the doctrine of faith would perish if the rational were to be consulted as to its contents. This perception gradually grew clearer (Abimelech woke up). The Lord had this perception before consulting His rational, so no harm had yet been done as is shown by Abimelech’s protesting of his innocence. Abimelech’s telling his servants all these things means an ordering by the Lord of all the concepts, knowledges, and facts, and the sensory impressions

that serve them, so that they would not harm Abraham or Sarah. The rational was not to harm what is celestial and spiritual. Faith could continue to grow. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 2499-2588) A long time passes between the second story and the third. Again, there is a famine in the land, and now it is Isaac's turn to go to the land of Gerar. Here the Lord speaks to him, telling him to stay in that land and not go down to Egypt. He promises to bless Isaac and to perform the oath that He had sworn to Abraham.

The Lord desired to learn the doctrines of faith. Isaac's dwelling in the land of Gerar and the blessing that is given to him, represent the influx of the doctrines of faith into His rational. But He saw now that ordinary people would not be able to grasp Divine truth as it is in itself. It seemed then that they would not be able to receive Divine good, and so it would perish in them. So seemingly, what had to be presented to people were truths as merely rational: Rebekah as sister. In a way similar to what happened in the earlier stories, the Lord came to perceive, from the very doctrines of faith that He was learning, that this was not right. Abimelech realized that Isaac and Rebekah were husband and wife, and warned the people not to touch either of them. This shows the Lord's realization that the truth that conjoins to His own internal Divine is indeed Divine truth, and that the appearances of truth that men have can also be conjoined to Divine good. As such, these truths must not be considered as being from what is merely rational. Such consideration would be followed by an adulteration of Divine truth. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 3362-3403)

So in each of the three cases, the Lord recognized, from the things that He was learning, the error that He could fall into and He corrected that error. There is no adultery in any of these stories. The rulers that take Sarah /Rebekah into their houses are warned, or see, that she is a wife and, beautiful though she is, is not to be violated, and is to be returned to her husband

unharmful. The Lord never allowed what is lower to contaminate the perceptions that came from His inner Divine. Nor did He allow faith to die because it thinks it only has rational truth to deal with.

What about us? A person who has come into either the “Ishmael” rational or the true rational represented by Isaac will be equipped to argue from that rational about things he is learning from the Word. What should we do to prevent in ourselves the profanation that would be represented by adultery between Abimelech and Sarah or Rebekah respectively?

There are three points that I see in the Writings in regard to this interaction between faith and the rational:

- 1) There is an orderly hierarchy from internal to external (*Arcana Coelestia* 2541, 2543).
- 2) The Lord tries to keep us back from accepting more of His truth as being Divine than we can manage (*Arcana Coelestia* 3398, 3402-2).
- 3) Our attitude toward revealed truth is vitally important (*Arcana Coelestia* 2568, 2588, 3394-3).

The orderly hierarchy is to have as the highest thing in our minds what is celestial or good. The next below this should be truth or what is spiritual, which is to serve that good. Below that is the rational, which is to serve what is above it by supporting what is true. Below that are the things we know that can support the rational and what is above it. Below that are all merely natural facts. All the things that are below are to serve the things that are above, and trouble comes when this order is displaced in any way. Further, in this order, what is celestial comes down from the Lord. The knowledges, including the knowledges from the Word, come through our eyes and ears as we read the Word or hear it. The meeting point is the rational, and it is the mingling of these two inflows that form the rational. The consequence of this is that the rational is contaminated by what is natural. This

being so, it can't serve as an impartial judge as to what is Divinely true, nor should it even try. Yet it is very tempting to allow it to so judge because we trust it and use it daily. Also we are very aware of our intake of reading and hearing but totally unaware of the Divine influx. If we don't keep this influx in mind, we are apt to discount it.

The second point is that the Lord tries to keep us from accepting things from the Word as truths if we will reject them later in our lives. This protects us from profanation, but of course it can limit us to remaining only natural. The cure for this seeming impasse is to live according to truths as we come to know them so that we regenerate.

The third point is our attitude. Hasn't everyone in the church heard about positive and negative attitudes? Interestingly enough there are discussions of positive and negative attitudes in the middle of both of the stories concerning Abimelech (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2538, 2568).

I think the problem is that seeing spiritual truth as merely rational allows us to argue with it or negate it from our rational because we consider it to be on the same level, not from a higher source. Once this equality is allowed, no spiritual truth, truth from the Word, is beyond argument or even denial. So we are taught that "...if spiritual truth was not brought back from him (Abimelech) untouched from the rational the doctrine of truth and good would be worthless in every single respect of it" (*Arcana Coelestia* 2538). Part 2 of the same number explains what is allowable: "It is ...one thing to rely for belief on rational deductions, factual knowledge and sensory impressions, that is to resort to them so as to arrive at belief, but quite another to confirm and strengthen belief by means of rational deductions, factual knowledge and sensory impressions."

The *Arcana*, speaking of Abimelech's servants, points out that rational concepts and factual knowledge are not to be suppressed

“...but [rather] the affections rising up against the celestial and spiritual things of doctrine” (2541). It is the desire to fight against what the Word teaches that we need to oppose and to shun.

The Lord realizes that no person, not even a celestial angel, can receive Divine truth as it is, but that any person at any level needs a rational concept in order to grasp any truth. All the truth that we have is in some way an appearance of truth. Of course, since the Lord provides these appearances in His Word, they must be what we need and must be sufficient, not only for us now, but for all people into the future

Since the angels have an increasingly better grasp of the Divine truth within the appearances, I think it's safe to assume that if and as we regenerate, our rational concepts come closer to reflecting Divine truth. However, if we treat the appearances of truth from the Word, especially the Word for the New Church, as rational truths only, then we will tend to lower them to our level. Then we argue against them, disagree with and reject them, because they do not meet the criteria of our own tainted rational or perhaps the criteria of our selfish proprium.

Earlier, we posed the question: “What should the rational mind not attempt to judge?” I think the answer to that question is that the rational mind cannot judge what comes from the Lord—that which is in the Word.

Our rational does not form Divine Truth nor may it judge it. It should serve. Our rational is to be used to try to understand, to connect one truth to other truths so as to enlarge our picture of spiritual reality, and to see applications. This is the proper use for which the rational has been formed.