

WIVES OF THE BIBLE

A Cross-Section of Femininity

by

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CHAPTER TWO

A SURPASSINGLY BEAUTIFUL WOMAN SARAH—ABRAHAM'S WIFE

She was very fair (Genesis 12:14).

COUNT TOLSTOY in his volume *What Is Art?* asks the question “What is beauty?” and says: “This day that question remains quite unsolved, and that after whole mountains of books have been written upon the subject by the most learned and profound thinkers during 150 years; . . . After thousands of learned men have discussed it, the word ‘Beauty’ remains an enigma still.”

It is still difficult to define. Many men have attempted to define it, and many women have sought to illustrate it; and the success of each sex has been variable and uncertain.

If indefinable, it is nevertheless God-given. To recognize this makes for progress: to ignore it makes for sensuality. Cleopatra, the most beautiful of women, employed her superlative charms in sensual ways and for selfish ends; but Esther, equally irresistible, made her graces honor God and bless the good. Goethe, the god-like in face and form, engaged both in seducing and dragging down. Even his literature is spoiled with an endless vein of lust. Moses, his peer in personal appearance and attainment, made both tell on all ages for men and morals.

The story of Abraham or—Abram—is one of the most interesting of the Old Testament, and the influence of his life is profoundly felt to this hour.

The story of Sarah, while incidental, is interesting. From the meager glimpses given us, we face certain facts and should learn certain lessons.

IN FACE AND FORM, BEAUTIFUL

Her beauty bewitched Abram.

We assert this positively, notwithstanding the fact that we have no information on the subject. By inference it must have been so. She was Abram's half-sister; she had grown up in the house with him. “Familiarity commonly breeds contempt.”

The average boy thinks less of his sister than he does of any other girl in the community, and for Sarah to hold her brother's heart against all competitors and bring him to believe that life without her would be a drab thing, is an unusual victory and tells the story of charms more potent than language could ever express.

Someone may say: "What about the sin of marrying a half-sister?" The answer is: There was little or no sin in it at that time! The objection to marriage by close relatives is a scientific one, necessitated by sin itself. We know now that the marriage of a brother and sister or half-brother and half-sister tends to accentuate all the weaknesses inherent in the family. But Abram and Sarah were nearer the pure fountain of life as it came fresh and sinless from the hand of God, and that danger was then but slight.

After the thousands of years that have since intervened and in spite of both scientific proofs and legal enactments, cousins who are enamored still take this risk for possible offspring, proving the power of personal charm—beauty!

That is why no woman is indifferent to that grace! In fact, it is supposed to be a weakness of the sex to want to be beautiful, and that is because they know the attraction of beauty itself.

Some years ago a young woman going through a facial operation to remove freckles through the use of powerful drugs, died in the operating room of a Chicago fake doctor. The newspaper reporter, hurrying to the scene to pick up the facts for the press, found outside in the corridor, an old woman, well dressed, but deeply wrinkled by age. When she was told of the untimely end of the girl, and asked by the reporter if she did not fear to attempt the treatment, she answered: "I have pretty good health, and I think I am strong enough to stand it."

That is a woman's estimate of good-looks, and little surprise that it should be so, since as that newspaper reporter said: "From the days of Helen, men have gone daft over feminine beauty."

But we need not go back to Helen of Troy, since the modern woman strives by powder and paint to hide every wrinkle or freckle and effect that combination of "color and form which causes delight in the beholder." The Abrams of this present hour are still susceptible, and the Sarahs seducing!

But her beauty endangered her husband.

He knew the heart of man and he also understood the lusts of the flesh and he feared the effect of both upon the Egyptian men, and said: "**They will kill me, but they will save thee alive.**"

That there was occasion for such concern, history has made clear. Since David secured the death of Uriah in order that he might appropriate Bathsheba as his very own, thousands, yea, tens of thousands of men have known kindred experiences, and even in cases where their death was not plotted by their secret competitors, it has frequently been accomplished. It would be a gruesome book that recorded the suicides of husbands whose beautiful wives had broken their hearts through illicit alliances. There is scarcely a great Daily that now emanates from the press that does not carry the report of one or more such instances.

When I was yet pastor in Chicago; a bridge-tender and two policemen fished from the murky waters of the Chicago River the body of a well dressed, middle-aged man. The remains were conveyed to the morgue and were never identified, but went finally to the Potter's Field. In the pocket of the coat found on this corpse was a stained and crumpled paper upon which an extended poem was written. In that poem he gave his reasons for committing the act of suicide.

Some of the verses ran as follows:

*In a day or two my body will be found out in the lake;
The coroner will get a fee, the printer get a "take."
The casual verdict, "Suicide from causes yet unknown,"
And Golgotha draws another blank—a mound without a stone.*

*To change the usual verdict, I will give the reason now,
Before the rigid seal of death is stamped upon my brow.
'Tis the old, familiar story of passion, love, and crime,
Repeated through the ages since Cleopatra's time—*

*A woman's lips, a woman's eyes—a siren all in all;
A modern Circe fit to cause the strongest man to fall;
A wedded life, some blissful years, and poverty drops in,
With care and doubt and liquor from whiskey down to gin.*

*The story told by Tolstoy, in comparison with mine,
Is moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine,
The jealous pangs I suffered, the hideous nights of woe,
I pray no other mortal may ever undergo.*

*But I've said enough, I fancy, to make the reasons plain—
Enough to show the causes of shattered heart and brain.
What wonder, then, that life holds not a single thread to bind
A wish or hope to live for, an interest in mankind!*

*Already dead, but breathing—a fact that I regret—
A man without desire now, excepting to forget:
And, since there is denied me that, why should I linger here,
A dead leaf from the forest of a long-forgotten year?*

*So, au revoir, old cronies! If there's a meeting place beyond,
I'll let you know in spirit, and I know you will respond.
I'm going now, old comrades to heaven or to hell;
I'll let you know which shortly. Farewell, a long farewell!*

Many husbands have been the martyrs of conscienceless but beautiful wives!

Sarah's beauty tempted kings.

It was not the Egyptian men who menaced Abram's interests, but Pharaoh instead. In that day among "the divine right of kings" was that of appropriating the "beauties" of their kingdom as wives and concubines. We well remember the insatiable appetite of Solomon. We have already referred to the sinister method of securing Bathsheba by David; but with Solomon, the son, this sin took on more enormous proportions. How often it is true! The father sows to the wind; the son is caught in the whirlwind!

The Book of Esther also records this kingly custom. When Vashti, the virtuous queen, refused to expose her person to the lustful gaze of the king's drinking and drunken associates, Ahasuerus punished the act by a selection of the most beautiful of the land's virgins and her exaltation to the high office of sharing with him the throne. The fact that God overruled that deed in the interests of His people never justified the deed itself; it only illustrated that He maketh all things work together for good to His own.

There are few points indeed at which world monarchs have marked moral progress. The majority of them are still men of the world and sufficiently surrendered to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. But Christianity has so far influenced their open conduct, at least, as to require the average one to be content with one legal wife.

And yet, when two divorces, even, will not deter the king of the world's mightiest monarchy from such complete surrender to charms of face and form as to forsake his throne rather than be cheated out of the life-companionship of this modern Circe, it is little wonder that women still covet and seek, even by artificial means, this surpassing grace to which Sarah, like Esther herself, was heir. But of Sarah, learn another lesson!

IN FACT, A TYPICAL WOMAN

There are a number of touches in this inspired report that find their very similitude in life's experiences.

She was embarrassed by barrenness.

In Old Testament times the Jewish people entertained ideas most remote from the modern birth-control philosophy. The divinely-delivered sentence— **Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it** (Genesis 1:28) was to them a sacred command as well as an agreeable philosophy.

No happier announcement could come to the Jew of that day than the language of the Psalmist:

Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table (Psalm 128:3).

He accepted as true—**Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate** (Psalm 127:3-5).

Sarah, then, counted her childless estate an unspeakable sorrow. In fact, to her it became a moral guilt described as “**my wrong**” (Genesis 16:5). So deeply did she grieve her failure that in an endeavor to compensate for her lack, she did the thing most difficult for the true woman—offered to surrender her office to, and share her husband’s affections with another. This physical infirmity has its spiritual counterpart.

Arthur T. Pierson once said: “There is for life no middle choice between fertility and sterility, and barrenness has the double guilt of doing no good and doing real harm. An unfruitful life cumpers the ground. Itself sterile, it sterilizes the soil for, while it yields nothing it exhausts the nutritious properties of the ground it occupies. A useless man uses up what would make some other of service to the race . . . The process of decay sends the elements which compose our bodies back to dust to enrich the chemical properties of the soil and supply its exhaustion; so that many a man who only did harm while he was on earth will begin to be of service in the grave. It has been said of Cleopatra that she deserved the thanks of mankind for applying the asp to her bosom, because it was the only thing she ever did which was a blessing to the race.”

Since the highest function of woman’s physical existence is to bring children to the birth, and since through that her power and influence are most certainly felt, failure at that point is commonly her grief, as sterility is the somber disappointment of any life that experiences it.

Little wonder, then, that the record reveals Sarah’s strategic endeavor.

She sought success by adroit scheming.

. . . she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her (Genesis 16:1-2).

Christianity has changed the method from the off-spring of concubines to the adoption of social waifs. The modern method is the more moral, but it lacks the feature of physical descent—blood of one’s own blood—and consequently can never quite accomplish the desired objective.

Chicago has recently been treated to a curious case of this sort. The parents to whom the child was born and who felt their inability to give him proper bread and breeding, consigned him to the care of others, and permitted them, even over a physician’s certificate, to claim him as homeborn. Little wonder that blood, which is always thicker than water, should later have asserted itself and clamored for the child’s return. It is not always true that one’s own generation gives him satisfaction and delight; but it is always true that the affections never fully surrender flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood.

The story of Sarah and Hagar, with the competitions that waxed between them, and the mutual jealousies that were indulged in, stands on the sacred page as an eternal illustration of the difficulties of bigamy, or even the dangers of attempting to house two families under one roof.

There is also here another hint that makes clear to the informed the possible fury of this increasing fight.

The text reads: **And it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women** (Genesis 18:11).

That would make Hagar the subject of Sarah's most bitter enmity. Thousands of homes have split in that circumstance and have been disrupted at that critical period of feminine fear and at times unprovoked jealous fury. It is a period that gives fiery wings to feminine imagination. It is likely to dismiss reason and surrender to King Rage.

Doubtless Solomon could speak of this subject from bitter experience as a husband. In The Song of Solomon we read: **Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death: jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame** (8:6).

From this typical woman—and such Sarah was—we turn to the grace of God and find in this our last lesson.

IN FAITH AND TRUST ONLY ORDINARY

She became the subject of gracious promise.

When the angel visited Abram he asked: Where is Sarah thy wife? (Genesis 18:9). And when shown to her tent, he said: **I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life, and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?** (Genesis 18:10-12).

Unfortunately, it was the laugh of incredulity. But who are we, to blame her for that? She followed the course of natural reasoning; she believed—as most of us do—in the process of natural law; and she knew that the time for maternity had long since gone.

If we say, “But, on the word of the angel she ought to have believed,” the question turns back upon each of us, “Do you believe what the divine writers have set down in the form of promises for you? Do you believe all that the angels from heaven have affirmed in your behalf?”

We have “**the word spoken by angels,**” but we have a better testimony still, namely that of His Son. Do we accept it?

Sarah had no closed corporation on cynicism and unbelief. Her partners in that investment are so many there is no wonder their dividends are meager, or even minus.

Take New Testament instances recorded in the Gospels. When Zacharias was an old man and his wife well stricken in years, an angel came, saying: **I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings** (Luke 1:19).

It is not recorded that either Zacharias or Elisabeth believed the promise, “**She shall bear thee a son.**” It was only when the child was within three months of birth that Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost and rejoiced.

We have always marveled that Mary accepted the promise made her and shouted: **My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden, for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed** (Luke 1:46-48).

We have also in the Book of Samuel another record, namely, that of Hannah, whose barrenness was her bitterness, and who, in her anguish, challenged God to give her a manchild by pledging, Then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life (I Samuel 1: 11). The plea seems to have been attended by the spirit of expectation; and expectation is faith.

The difficulty with the average church is at this point. Its barrenness is due to the fact that it does not expect to bring children to a spiritual birth; it does not expect that God will grant increases to its family; and according to our faith it is given unto us.

Sarah's skepticism was expressed in a smile.

The whole text goes to show that the smile was the product of her incredulity. It seemed to her nothing better than a joke that she should be declared a prospective or even possible mother!

Here again Sarah stands not alone. The skepticism of this day is the very ground of spiritual sterility. University professors are wondering why the morale of schools is on the descent. Modern pastors marvel that their churches mark no progress. Denominational leaders search the sea and land to explain decline in missionary enthusiasm, and after sleepless nights indulge in oratorical appeals and sometimes in bitter tirades against the close-fisted confessors of faith, little dreaming that this prevalent sterility is all the product of smiling skepticism.

The opinions of Rousseau, Diderot, Voltaire, Bolingbroke, Hobbes, and Hume have survived their burial. These men were rejected by their generation, but our age has opened their graves and permitted the air to be polluted with the stench that rises from their coffins. Like them, the children of this generation refuse to believe in the Bible, refuse to affirm the deity of Jesus Christ, refuse to accept the Virgin Birth, refuse to assent that Christ wrought miracles, and seek to explain away His physical resurrection from the grave and His ascension to the right hand of God, and even scoff at His promised Second Coming. Sterility is the result.

Like Sarah, we cover our sorrows with an enforced smile, but we know full well that that covering is a pretense, and the sorrow of sterility still holds its subjects in the iron embrace of unbelief.

God loves and favors His own above their faith.

Sarah did not expect a son, even after the angel's promise; and when it is remembered that the Lord was one of the three men who appeared and, doubtless, THE One who said, **I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life, and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son**, her skepticism becomes all the more serious.

But that very circumstance makes it all the more akin to your unbelief and mine. We have the Word of the Lord on many matters; in fact, on all matters of vital import. How many of us receive it by faith? How many of us believe it in fact?

The unsaved man has the word of the Lord: **Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon** (Isaiah 55:7), but he does not believe it. If he did he would be saved instantly.

The saved man has the word of the Lord: **But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus** (Philippians 4:19), but the majority do not believe it; hence their poverty and need.

The successful man has the word of the Lord: **It is more blessed to give than to receive** (Acts 20:35). Give, and it shall be given unto you (Luke 6:38), but as a rule he does not believe it. That is why the man who pays tithes and adds love offerings to the Lord's work is so seldom found.

The "would-be" spiritual man has the word of the Lord: **If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?** (Luke 11:13), but he does not believe it. That is why so many are not Spirit-endued.

The professed saint has the word of the Lord: **And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament: and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever** (Daniel 12:3), but he does not believe it; that is why the soul-winner is so uncommon.

The truth is, our blessings are never measured by our merit. They are the grant of God's grace instead.

Sarah's experience, then, in getting more than she expected was not at all exceptional, nor was it unusual that she was favored above her deserts.

In the last years of my theological seminary course at Louisville, Dr. Frank H. Kerfoot became our teacher in Latin, Theology and one or two other studies. In a sermon one day he told the story of a woman who waited upon his ministry while he was yet pastor in Baltimore. She was highly cultured, the principal of the Young Ladies' Seminary, and was of middle life. For her to accept Christ as a little child by simple faith was not easy, but under a sermon one morning she broke down and wept her way to the penitent form.

Instead of bearing oral testimony she had already committed to poetry the soul's struggles through which she had passed, and Dr. Kerfoot found on the sheet of paper handed up to him by her, these words:

*I sought the Lord, but afterwards I knew
He moved my soul to Him Who sought for me.
It was not I that found, O Savior true;
No; I was found of Thee.*

*Thou didst stretch forth Thy hand and mine enfold,
I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea.
But not so much that I on Thee had hold
As by Thy hold on me.*

*And now I wake, I love; but the whole
Of love is but my answer, Lord, to Thee;
Lord, Thou wast long beforehand with my soul,
Always Thou lovedst me.*

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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