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# *Applying the Science of Correspondences*

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One Sunday, I consulted the *Revised Common Lectionary* to determine the weekly readings for church, as do Christians around the world. The passage that week was from Exodus, about liberating the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. I thought to interpret the passage in the light of Swedenborg's correspondences.

In many places, Swedenborg interprets Egypt to mean "memory knowledges". Following this line of thinking, I intended to discuss the possibility of becoming caught up in knowing alone, and thus enslaved in the lowest form of intellect. But when I researched the correspondences of Egyptian slavery, I discovered that there are different meanings in Swedenborg. The idea that Egypt means "memory knowledges" is not the whole story. So correspondences themselves now became my interest. This article is the product of my reflections on correspondences.

I think that correspondences can be problematic. I grew up with an understanding that correspondences were a kind of translation: "This means that". My understanding was that in Swedenborg, the Bible is a set of fixed symbols. Each image in the Bible stands for some spiritual reality: "This means that"...

For instance, the sun stands for God, or for love; the moon for truth, flowers for the beginning of regeneration or rebirth; a tree stands for a person; the leaves of a tree stand for knowledge; gold stands for celestial good; bronze for natural good; the earth stands for the natural person; the Holy Land for the regenerated person; and so on. I believed that part of Swedenborg's revelation was to explain what each thing in the Bible stands for. Swedenborg seems to say this in *The White Horse*. The idea that a Biblical image corresponds to a spiritual reality is thus called "correspondences," because every Bible image "corresponds" to a spiritual reality. This means that. The first indication that my understanding needed modification came from George Dole. In an introductory class way back at the Swedenborg School of Religion, he told us to put aside our Orphan Annie decoder rings when we think about correspondences.

Swedenborgians can be rather tedious and simplistic in the way they approach correspondences. Some even call it the "science of correspondences" as if it were some empirical discipline one could apply to the Bible. This simplistic approach Swedenborgians sometimes use to interpret the Bible may have figured in Ralph Waldo Emerson's criticism of Swedenborg. Emerson wrote a lengthy essay called, "Swedenborg: Introducing the Mystic." Emerson praises Swedenborg lavishly in the beginning of the essay, only to turn almost angry with Swedenborg toward the end. One of Emerson's complaints against Swedenborg's system of correspondences is that symbols are too fixed to ideas.

"This design of exhibiting such correspondences, which, if adequately executed, would be the poem of the world, in which all history and science would play an essential part, was narrowed and defeated by the exclusively theologic direction which his inquiries took. His perception of nature is not human and universal, but is mystical and Hebraic. He fastens each natural object to a theological notion;- a horse signifies carnal understanding; a tree, perception; the moon, faith; a cat means this; an ostrich that; an artichoke this other;- and poorly tethers every symbol

to a several ecclesiastic sense.”<sup>1</sup> (I was unable to find any references to ostriches or artichokes in Swedenborg.)

Emerson liked the idea of Bible symbols and nature corresponding to spiritual realities. What he didn't like, is a formula that dictated what each symbol must mean spiritually. I don't like that either. And I'm not even sure that's what Swedenborg intended. Emerson's Swedenborgian acquaintances in the 19<sup>th</sup> century may have influenced his understanding of correspondences. And we still teach that method, today.

Consider what it could look like to try to apply Swedenborg's correspondences to liberation from slavery in Egypt. First, Egypt is usually associated with a certain kind of knowledge. Swedenborg uses the Latin word *scientia* for the kind of knowledge represented by Egypt. The green Standard Edition of Swedenborg's works translates that Latin word with the abominable English word, “scientifics.” I'm not even sure that is a real English word. And it is a problem because it gives the impression that Swedenborg is talking about scientific things, which he is not. Another translation is “memory knowledge.” That's a whole lot closer to what Swedenborg means, and you can see that it is not about science. Finally, John E. Elliott has maybe the best translation, “factual knowledge.” So Egypt stands for factual knowledge.

In the *Arcana Coelestia*, Swedenborg talks about what enslavement in Egypt could look like. He says that we can get too tied up in factual knowledge, or in facts that we store in our memory. Facts are of all kinds. They are historical data, technology, literature, religious doctrines can be factual knowledge, too, and science. We start our learning by acquiring facts. Children memorize all sorts of facts, such as sports heroes' statistics. For some reason, I memorized the heights of mountains (the Matterhorn is 14, 780 feet high). Every Bible verse we memorize is factual knowledge. Every doctrine we learn is factual knowledge. Every homespun saying we learn is factual knowledge, “A penny saved is a penny earned.” The fact that Sir John Alexander Macdonald was the first Prime Minister of Canada is factual knowledge. Without these facts, we have no foundation for reasoning. We have no foundation for making decisions. We have no beginning in wisdom.

But we can get stuck in facts. We can never progress beyond them. We can devote our lives to mere knowing, not even to independent thinking, still less to wisdom. We can also get stuck in factual knowledge that doesn't help us spiritually. We can, for instance, devote ourselves to science, as Swedenborg did. He had a real psychic crisis when he tried to reconcile his interest in science with religion. He called scientific knowledge sensual. He had devoted his entire life to science. In his mystical vision, Swedenborg saw the room he was staying in crawling with frogs and slithering with snakes which signified his sensual, scientific factual knowledge. These facts don't tell us how to become spiritual. They don't tell us what matters eternally, versus what dies with this world. They don't lead us to heaven. Even religious doctrines can be mere facts. So liberation from Egyptian bondage means release from a craving for facts. It means drawing on inspiration, on intuition, it means figuring things out for ourselves, it means making choices from spiritually inspired wisdom. Swedenborg does say this, and says it extensively, in the *Arcana Coelestia*.

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<sup>1</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Swedenborg: Introducing the Mystic*. London: The Swedenborg Society, 2010.

That's one application of correspondences. But it's not all there is to it. Swedenborg uses the correspondence of deliverance from Egyptian slavery in a different general sense and in several specific senses that do not deal with factual knowledge at all.

One correspondence Swedenborg uses is general liberation from the slavery of sin. By this, Swedenborg means the very broad concept of becoming spiritual from our natal condition of natural and worldly life:

“Who caused you to come up out of the land of Egypt’ means which led them. This is clear from the meaning of ‘causing to come up out of the land of Egypt’, when those whose interest lies in external things and not in what is internal are the subject, as being self-led; for ‘the land of Egypt’, when they are the subject, means slavery, while ‘causing to come up’ means leading themselves out of it. [...] In reference to the latter, those words mean being led by the Lord, thus being raised from the natural man to the spiritual man, or from the world to heaven, consequently passing from slavery into freedom.”<sup>2</sup> (AC §10409).

A second correspondence for liberation from Egyptian bondage is deliverance from molestation from hell, which is a form of spiritual captivity:

“Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slaves’ means deliverance by Him from hell. This is clear from the meaning of ‘bringing out’ as deliverance; from the meaning of ‘the land of Egypt’ as molestations by those from hell, dealt with in §7240, 7278; and from the meaning of ‘the house of slaves’ as spiritual captivity, dealt with in §8049. The reason why ‘the house of slaves’ means spiritual captivity and also hell is that being held captive by those in hell and being led by them is slavery, whereas being led by the Lord is freedom...” (AC §8866).

A third correspondence of deliverance from Egyptian slavery is liberation from falsity by Jesus’ incarnation in the world. Swedenborg explains this correspondence in a discussion of the three feasts that God instituted in the Jewish calendar.

“Furthermore, the feasts which had been instituted among those people, three a year, are also said to have been instituted in remembrance of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, by which in the spiritual sense is meant in remembrance of deliverance from molestation by falsities through the Lord’s Coming into the world” (AC §7093).

A fourth correspondence of deliverance from Egyptian slavery is acquisition of celestial good and truth after temptation.

“And afterwards they will go out with great acquisitions’ means release, and that they will possess celestial and spiritual goods. This is clear from the meaning of ‘going out’ as being

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<sup>2</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. Translated by John Potts. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1998.

released, and from the meaning of 'acquisitions' as celestial and spiritual good, for this is what those people acquire who suffer forms of persecution and undergo forms of temptation, oppression, and affliction or slavery, dealt with in this and the previous verse" (AC 1§851).

A fifth correspondence of deliverance from Egyptian slavery is the second coming of Jesus into the souls of people of the New Church.

"[. . .] by 'visiting to visit you,' in the sense of the letter, is here signified liberation from slavery in Egypt, and introduction into the land of Canaan; but this is not the spiritual content of the Word, but the natural. The spiritual of the Word treats of the Lord, of His kingdom and church, and of love and faith; and therefore by "visiting to visit" in the spiritual sense is meant liberation from falsities, and thus initiation into what is of the Lord's church and kingdom, thus the coming of the Lord in love and faith with those who will be of the new church" (AC §6895).

None of these five correspondences of deliverance from Egyptian slavery are about factual knowledge. They are variations on the general theme of liberation from slavery—which could mean a lot of kinds of deliverance. It means deliverance from all kinds of evil. This could mean deliverance from addictions to substances, or from unhealthy behaviors like argumentativeness, or from more serious sins like lying and addiction to conspiracy theories, and all manner of worldly attachments and sinful cravings. Liberation from slavery symbolizes all kinds of spiritual advancement, moving from one lesser state of soul to a more advanced one. That is what the Sunday benediction means, "May the Lord bless our going out and our coming in." Going out means going out of a lesser spiritual state and coming in means coming into a higher spiritual state. This is regeneration: going out of natural life and coming into spiritual life. This, too, is what liberation from Egyptian bondage corresponds to.

Now, an unreflective application of Swedenborg's correspondences could rest in the idea that slavery in Egypt means preoccupation with factual knowledge only. One could think that if Egypt means factual knowledge, liberation from Egypt is only intellectual. Overcoming addictions would not be in the story. Nor would the other ways of going out and coming in be considered. It would all be about knowledge and worse, about science, and that would be all there is to it. This is the kind of tediousness that made Emerson so mad at Swedenborg. Probably due to his encounters with members of the Swedenborgian church, Emerson got the idea that Swedenborg's system was that slavish. Emerson said that "The slippery Proteus is not so easily caught." And I think a good reading of Swedenborg shows that Swedenborg doesn't fix Proteus so methodically. Liberation from Egyptian slavery can also mean breaking the bonds of a slavish reliance on "the science of correspondence."

The problem with a slavish dependence on the science of correspondences is that it does violence to Bible stories; it tears them apart. For me, interpreting a Bible passage begins first with prolonged meditation on the Bible passage. I let the story speak to me, inspire my thinking. I ask questions like, "What is a leading theme in this story?" or "What's this story about?" or "How do the characters interact with one another in this story?" or "What is the emotional/spiritual center of gravity in this story?" and/or "How do these themes relate to my life experience?"

I find that the Bible speaks to me more when I meditate on the story and open my mind and heart to influx, than it does when I dismantle the story and reassemble it according to the science of correspondences. I may or may not consult what Swedenborg has to say about the imagery in the story. Remember, Swedenborg gave correspondences for only Genesis, Exodus, and Revelation. We're on our own for the other 63 Bible books. And if we want to use Paul, we're clean out of luck. I do consider Bible stories in the light of general principles of Swedenborgian doctrine such as regeneration, or uses, or heaven and hell, or the emotional life called lusts or affections in Swedenborg, or God's relations with humans, or the life of charity, or any of the other general principles in Swedenborgian theology. Swedenborg writes that when a person devoutly reads the Bible, God enlightens the mind and kindles the heart with warmth. Does God do this when we take the story apart and reassemble it according to the kind of factual knowledge we might find in *The Dictionary of Correspondences*?

So, I do not use, nor do I think it appropriate to use, the "this-means-that" method of Bible interpretation, which some people call "applying the science of correspondences". My Orphan Annie decoder ring is now only a cast-off collectible relic. I think that the internal sense is largely what happens in a person's heart and consciousness when she or he meditates on a story from the Bible. This, I believe, opens the soul for influx. But attacking scripture with facts stored up in the memory, as I think is the case in a slavish application of the science of correspondences, might not.