Comments on Susan Staker’s Sunstone Paper  
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I’m struck by the irony of us, as descendants of polygamous pioneers, discussing  
Abraham’s deception at the court of the pharaoh. It seems to me that we’re going to have to get  
used to yet another definition for the term “sister-wife.”

Susan Staker presents a curiously one-dimensional picture of the two settings she  
describes in her paper. I would urge her to round out the pictures of the time of Abraham as  
presented in Genesis and in the Book of Abraham as well as the picture of 1842 Nauvoo. Such  
fleshing out, taking advantage of the research and conclusions of many other scholars, will not  
only make the settings she describes more interesting and believable, but it will also make her  
conclusions more accessible.

Let me illustrate my point on adding dimension by first discussing the wife/sister deception  
as described in Genesis and in the Book of Abraham.

The book of Genesis contains not just one, but three accounts of a patriarch’s wife being  
disguised as his sister, to preserve the life of the patriarch. Susan Staker’s paper concerns the first  
of those three stories—that of Abram disguising his wife Sarai as his sister when they traveled to  
Egypt to escape a famine.

Susan Staker has discussed the Genesis chapter 12 account, of Abram deceiving the  
Egyptian pharaoh, and has drawn several conclusions from the text of the ten or so verses we find  
in Genesis chapter 12. She has wistfully called for an account from the point of view of Sarai, an  
account where the wife is shown to be a free agent, in contrast to the chattel-like description in  

-1-
those verses.

She also positively states that Abram conceives the idea for deception "to protect himself from the consequences of anticipated male rivalry." Then she contrasts her reading of the Genesis account with the Book of Abraham retelling, and finds that in creating the book of Abraham, Joseph Smith changed the principal actor from Abram to God, thus making God himself responsible for the deception, rather than Abram the prophet.

Susan's paper would be enriched dramatically by making at least a brief reference to the Genesis 20 and Genesis 26 accounts of similar wife/sister deceptions. In Genesis 20, unbelievably enough, Abraham and Sarah, their names having been changed to reflect the new covenant they have made with God, play the same ruse, this time deceiving King Abimelech of Gerar. In chapter 26, Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac plays the same deception, also against King Abimelech, pretending that Rebekah, his wife, is really his sister. In each case, the king suffers for taking another man's wife; in Genesis 26, King Abimelech himself harangues Isaac for putting him at risk.

To say that it strains credulity that such a ruse would take place three times within two generations is to put it mildly. One scholar has succinctly stated, "The unknown scribe or scribes who put together Genesis from earlier narratives made no effort to produce a consistent story...he or they simply included everything that was thought to have the authority of antiquity." That's one explanation.

Another explanation that resonates with students of Mormonism is that there was a selection or an abridgement process at work in creating the text of Genesis, and that the compiler wanted future generations to know certain details, so he included them in his text. Such an
explanation would force us to ask what moral point is being made in these three supposed incidents. Why is the wife/sister motif repeated three times? How should our lives be different because the motif appears in our canon? Is it repeated three times to emphasize to us that deception for the Lord on sexual matters can sometimes be justified? Susan's paper would be much richer if she explored such questions.

By the way, the explanation that works best for me is the notion that Abraham uses the plagues and healings that accompany the defilement or intended defilement of Sarah to demonstrate the power of Abraham's God, even when Abraham moves with little authority into other, established kingdoms, which have their own gods. This story seems to be a way to demonstrate the primacy of Abraham's God. I realize that this explanation does not allow Sarah to act as an equal with Abraham, so if his God set it up, it raises questions about that God's view toward women. But, to quote from Susan's paper, "it is unwise to bring our twentieth-century wishes for an egalitarian structure between men and women to our interrogations of Mormon history." It's unwise to do so in considering events of the 1840s, how much more difficult is it to use our constructs to examine male/female relations in Abraham's time?

So, I believe this paper would be improved by discussing the other accounts in Genesis that cover the same topic.

It would also be improved by including a discussion of the wife/sister deception as found in the Genesis Apocryphon, a scroll found in Cave One at Qumram. A translation of this document, which, like the book of Abraham, enhances God's involvement in the decision to deceive the pharaoh, was published in 1966. To say the least, it's interesting that a document of unquestioned authenticity and antiquity, does some of the same things that Joseph Smith did in the
1840s when he published the book of Abraham. This needs to be discussed, it's well within the scope of this paper. Omitting any reference to the Apocryphon contributes to the lack of dimension that I mentioned at the outset.

Plus, the Apocryphon provides the only account of the wife/sister incident as told by Sarah! We do have the woman's point of view, as Susan has called for in the conclusion of her paper, although the details in her retelling, like those in Genesis and the book of Abraham, are sketchy and open to much interpretation.

Finally, there's another source on the wife/sister deception that Susan should incorporate into her study. Gaye Strathearn published a paper on this very topic in the 1983 Sperry Symposium on the Old Testament. Strathearn covers the Apocryphon and also rabbinic and Christian commentators on the wife/sister incident, and her article includes many interesting bibliographic notes.

Just as Susan omits valuable sources on the wife/sister account, she presents a similarly unidimensional picture of Nauvoo.

I agree with her that in early 1842, Smith attempted the first efforts to implement a church-wide correlation program. And just as the late-20th century correlation program produces some unintended consequences, so did the 1840s version.

Ebenezer Robinson turned over the printing office on February 5, and was paid $7000 for his interest in the printing business, a princely sum on the prairies in the 1840s. On February 6 occurred a marriage in Nauvoo, and according to custom, the bride and groom sent a piece of wedding cake to the paper, along with a notice of the wedding. Lyman Littlefield, a worker in the shop, wrote up a puckish wedding notice apparently done as a joke within the print shop, and

-4-
never intended for publication. The notice acknowledged the gift of cake, and wished the newlyweds that “when life wanes and they find a peaceful abode in the ‘narrow house’ [apparently a reference to a coffin], may the many outs and ins they have made, leave to the world an abundant posterity to celebrate their glorious example.” Warsaw Signal editor Thomas Sharp assailed the Times and Seasons for publishing an obscene reference, which prompted the disclaimer Susan refers to, where Joseph Smith says his role in managing the paper began with the March 1 issue.

But high anxiety in Nauvoo is not solely due to marriage practices—Susan advances the idea that the major advances in Mormon theology during Joseph Smith’s last years were increased secrecy. Secrecy was important to the Mormons during 1842, as church leaders first became freemasons and then were participants in the endowment and plural marriage.

But that secrecy came in the face of greatly increased hostility to the Mormons from their neighbors in Hancock County, from Missouri officials intent on prosecuting Smith for treason against the state of Missouri, and lawmakers and other leaders throughout Illinois. In addition, there were continuing defections of church leaders, including not just John Bennett but the Laws, the Higbees, and others. Another contextual element was the expulsion from Missouri which the Mormons had suffered, which had to color their views of all their antagonists.

Secrecy led to the Council of 50, plural marriage, and the endowment’s bloody oaths and penalties. But at the same time that those innovations were being introduced, Joseph Smith was publicly starting the Female Relief Society, publicly preaching his funeral sermons for Judge Elias Higbee and King Follett, and expounding scriptural passages in public sermons. Much of the uniquely Mormon theology was publicly introduced in Nauvoo during the period from 1842 until
Smith's death in 1844. And it's not just the secrets of Nauvoo that the RLDS movement rejected when they took shape in the 1860s.

It's the nature of a response like this one to focus on areas where I believe Susan Staker's paper could be improved. But she has provided a valuable service by bringing to our attention some fascinating parallels between Genesis and the book of Abraham, and she has raised some provocative questions about lying and deception in furtherance of a religious cause. I want to thank her for giving me the opportunity to study these issues.

I have little or no time to discuss those advances. But she will greatly improve her paper by expanding her contexts to create recognizable, fully developed settings in both the Old Testament times and in her description of Nauvoo.
Bibliography


