

Sara and Hagar

A Christian perspective by Ursula Rudnick
and a Jewish response by Dalia Marx

Sarah und Hagar

Exegesis is not beyond time, nor place or context. Thus, reading the story of Sarah and Hagar and being in a dialogue with You Dalia, an Israeli rabbi and professor, immediately conjures up Paul's interpretation of this story in the letter to the Galatians in the New Testament.

Paul, the apostle to the peoples of the world, as he saw himself, wrote the letter to the newly found believers in Galatia, a landscape in Asia Minor, today a part of Turkey. Paul presumably wrote this letter from the megapolis of Ephesus, probably around the year 53-55 C.E:

When I read the text of Paul, that is a part of my Bible, I feel shame. For Paul quotes from Genesis "Drive out the slave and her child..." and in his train of thought, this refers to Sarah and her children. These words seem to nullify the covenant between God and the Jewish people, Am Israel, sealed at Sinai. Sentences like this conjure up images from the time of National-socialism in Germany, when this admonition indeed was heeded. Jews were marginalized and exploited, their property was stolen and they were driven out. Those who did not or could not flee were murdered.

I take a deep breath and try to focus on the text. What is the message that Paul tries to convey in his letter to the Galatians and in which way does he use the story of Sarah and Hagar in his line of thought?

To understand Paul's allegorical interpretation and use of the story of Sarah and Hagar, it's important to grasp his train of thought. In this letter, Paul fights for the right of non-Jewish followers of Jesus not having to take the yoke of Torah upon themselves to have part in the world to come. According to Paul, those believers who have a non-Jewish background do not have to obey all the Mizvot, the 613 commandments. What is common sense among Christians today, was not undisputed among the followers of Jesus Christ in the first century. From the context of the letter to the Galatians, it becomes clear that there were those who advocated that Non-Jews must also take all the mitsvot – and not only the seven Noahide laws – upon themselves. However, it was very important to Paul that men and women who had become believers of the God of Israel via Jesus Christ did not have to follow the Mitsvot of the written or the oral Torah.

Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. For it is written,

‘Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children,
burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs;
for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous
than the children of the one who is married.’

Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? ‘Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.’ So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman. (Galatians, 4. 21-32, New Revised Standard Version)

What does Paul do here? He interprets the story of Sarah and Hagar in an allegorical way and uses the text to make his point. Unfortunately, it does not suffice for Paul to claim “equal status” for the new comers, but he vilifies Hagar and her children, i.e. the Jewish people. As a consequence, the Christian church which subsequently came into being, heeded the advice of Paul: “Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.”

Paul takes the figures of Sarah and Hagar and interprets them as representing two covenants: The children of Hagar represent Judaism, whereas the children of Sarah represent the non-Jews who have come to believe in Jesus Christ. How does Paul justify this representation? Those children who were conceived in a “natural way” via sexual intercourse represent Judaism: any person who has a Jewish mother (or has converted) is Jewish. Those, however, who do not have a Jewish mother are – according to Paul – “the children of promise”, just as Isaac was a “child of promise” since Sarah and Abraham were much too old to conceive a child without divine intervention.

Jerusalem – the place of God’s presence with his people – is equally claimed by Paul for the “the new ones”. According to the tradition, there is an earthly as well as a heavenly Jerusalem. According to Paul, the earthly Jerusalem is held in captivity, whereas the heavenly Jerusalem represents the “city of freedom”. This latter city is called “the mother” of the new ones. And as someone who is familiar with the rabbinic exegesis, Paul quotes from the prophet Isaiah (54.1) to give more weight to his thought.

The problem of Paul's line of argument is very clear: those who keep the Torah are characterized in a very negative way as the children of Hagar who need to be driven out. The price that Paul has to pay for his claim (that the new ones are Sara's children) is that the already existing children of Sarah are deprived of this title of honor and the rights and privileges that come with it. And furthermore, they are vilified as the children of Hagar, who is characterized as a slave and who is "bearing children for slavery." Unfortunately, Paul does not only advocate the legitimacy of a relationship to the God of Jacob without Halakha, but at the same time he rejects and vilifies other positions.

Recent Pauline scholarship suggests that this paragraph should not be read as rejecting Halakha for Jews, but as rejecting Halakha for Non-Jews. Such a reading would have implications for the appreciation of observant Jews through Christians today. Yet, no matter how these lines are interpreted today: in the past the Christian exegesis used these sentences to reject all forms of Halakha. Furthermore, very early on Christians developed a replacement theology in which we saw ourselves as the "true Israel", claiming the chair of the matriarch Sarah for ourselves and relegating Jews to the position of Hagar. And what was nothing but a phantasy in the first century C.E., became a bitter truth in later centuries. The motif of "ecclesia and synagoga", which arose in the early middle ages, gives witness to this. It depicts two women: one is blind, the other is beautiful. Superfluous, to say which woman represents Judaism.

Over the past decades, changes have taken place in the Christian theologies, especially in Europe and North America. Christians reject the model in which one tradition represents Sarah and the other Hagar. The "theology of contempt", as the French historian Jules Isaac, called it so aptly, has come in many – yet not in all - churches to an end. Christians are learning that advancing a theology does not entail the vilification of other positions. Yet, it means disagreeing with Paul at times and standing in opposition to some sentences of the Bible.

P.S. After Hagar and her son were driven out by Abraham, the Bible reports no further communication between the women, understandably. However, their sons, Isaac and Ishmael, came together to jointly bury their father Abraham. Isaac and Ishmael are the children of the second generation. Were they able to talk about the painful family history? We do not know. However, after the rupture the subsequent generation managed to resume communication.

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Dalia's response to Ursula's reading

Obviously, reading about Paul's identification of the Jews with Hagar, is not an acceptable one to me, especially due to the negative value ascribed to this identification. However, if we look back to the Jewish existence throughout the history, we see that most of the time, Jews lived in a complex reality – they identified themselves as the descendents of Sara but they lived in a reality that placed them, in many cases, in the position of Hagar: they were a minority, lived under foreign rule, and occasionally subject to persecutions.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the wheel has turned; we are no longer a minority, depended on the good will of others, we are a sovereign (and normal?) state, dwelling in our historical land. We are "Sara" again, and in our midst there dwell the descendents of Hagar. The common past of the children of Sara and the children of Hagar requires both of us to correct the ancient balance of Terror.

Ursula, I believe that Christian people can fulfill a crucial and just role in the reconciliation between Jews and Moslems.