

SARAH AND HAGAR IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: A REREADING OF Ga4,21-31

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Ga4,21-31 is an interesting text because it summarises the family life of Abraham in (Gn16,15; 21,2) Cf. (Ga4,22b-23) and quotes Gn21,10 Cf. (Ga4,30b). This invitation of the OT in the NT expresses the intention of the author which is to interpret the OT. In this case, Paul writes to the Galatians who are threatened to return back to slavery. He uses an argumentation which is based on two characters from the Old Testament: Sarah and Hagar (Cf. Gn16,5; 17,6; 21,2.9). According to the Scriptures, Sarah the free woman is blessed by God then she will give birth to the real heir of Abraham. While Hagar, the slave and her child Ishmael *is to be rejected*. Here we apparently have a dichotomy of character: the good one on the one hand (Sarah) and the bad one on the other hand. The Galatians are said to be the children of the free woman (Sarah) and not the one of the slave (Hagar) Ga4,28. After establishing the difference between these two women and their sons, Paul uses a quotation from the Scriptures to conclude his argumentation: “Send the slave woman and her son away » (Ga4,30a).

Can we, from this instruction of Paul say that he is against any form of dialog between the two women (Israelite and Arab) and their descendants? Does the letter to the Galatians contain any form of anti-Semitism as said by Gale A. Yee¹ ? Hagar is not to be paint so negatively: To consider her like the worst person who is to be rejected is a misunderstanding of the real problem behind the text. We have many reasons to sympathise with her or allegorically, to establish a link between Arabia and Jerusalem². The aim of this paper is to testify that Paul in this text does not want to increase the hole that exist between Sarah and Hagar, he has another problem to solve, which is that of his authority that is being trampled upon. The text talks about the Galatians rejecting Jews missionaries and not God rejecting them. In a nowadays context of globalisation and ecumenism in our African context which is

¹ GALE A. YEE, « Sarah » in David Noel FREEDMAN, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, V 5, New York- London-Toronto-Sydney-Auckland, Doubleday, 1992, p. 982: “In Gal 4,21-31, a text with much supersessionist anti-Semitic potential, Hagar allegorically represents those in slavery under the law”

² According to Ga4,24b-26, Hagar is the mount Sinai which is in Arabia : it is the symbol of the perverted Jerusalem , while Sarah represents the holy Jerusalem.

made of many tribes, we want, from the text to highlight on openness relationship between persons who are apparently different and opposed. We think therefore that, to understand the real problem of this text, we should make the difference between the sentiments of the man that Paul faces in his authority being trampled upon, and God's will that condemns nobody. I am going to render this assertion, by studying the characterization of the two women according to the Old Testament text (Genesis); then I will go into the interpretation of Paul, and finish by my reading.

I- HAGAR AND SARAH ACCORDING TO GENESIS

Hagar (Genesis Chap. 16 and 21)

Sarah is Egyptian (Gn16,1), her name derives probably from an Arab root « Hegira »³ which means «to run ». Her story in Genesis is derived from the sources P, J and E. According to P (Gn 16^{1a,3,15s}; 25¹²), Sarah, unproductive gives Hagar, her servant to Abraham so that they should have a child. Abraham gave Hagar's child the name of Ishmael. Derived from J (Gn16^{1b-2,4-11}) Sarah had an absolute right over her servant and over the children which she may give birth to. Here, in the hope of being a mother, Hagar despises her mistress to the point where she may run far off from her. Hagar sees an Angel appearing to her near a stream in the desert where she has found refuge. This angel gives her an order followed by a promise: she has to go back to Sarah and humble herself, and then she will be blessed by having many descendants. According to the source E (Gn21⁸⁻²¹), the day that Isaac was weaned consecrate the breaking off between the two women: in fact, after seeing the son of the slave « laughing », Sarah seems worried and ask of Abraham to drive away the servant and her son because they would not inherit his property. Abraham, shocked first by the reaction of Sarah will later do what she asks because God tells him to obey his wife.

Sarah (*Genesis Chap. 12,16,17,18,20,21 and 23*)

Sarah and Abraham are closely related endogamously: they have the same father but different mother (Gn20,12). In Hebrew, her name means "**princess**". She is the lawful wife who will bear the son through whom God's promises to Abraham will be realised. She is Abraham's only beloved wife who exerts considerable control over Abraham's household

³ Alexandre WESTPHAL, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de la Bible : les Choses, les Hommes, les Faits, les Doctrines*, T. 1, Paris, Je Sers, 1932, p. 20.

affairs (Gale A. Yee, p.982). But her advanced age seems to prelude any hope for a son. This barrenness is a twofold stigma. It represents a loss of status in a patriarchal system where the important woman is the one who can bear many sons and it is the impediment to the fulfilment of God's promise of posterity to Abraham. She gave birth to a son Isaac when she was 90 years.

The two women together

The women are not from the same country: Hagar is from Egypt (Arab) and Sarah is from Israel (Israelite). The first is a slave and the second a free woman. The difference between both of them is based on their nationalities and their social condition. The determination or the choice of the people of God depended on those parameters. What is worth pointing out is the identification of the meaning of the story of these matriarchs: this story aims at showing in which region and family God did choose His people. A difference should be made between the choice of God's people and salvation. The genesis text teaches us that Sarah is the mother of God's people but it does not tell us that Hagar and her descendants are destined to perdition.

It is our opinion that God's choice of Sarah is not linked to any merit, and this is proven by the lack of faith which led her to give her maid-servant to her husband. Consequently, there is no reason to link this choice to whatever consideration of worth. Besides, we think that Sarah's tribal connection should not be considered given that, it is impossible to choose which family one should be born into.

Beyond the issues differentiating Sarah and Hagar, both women have a common problem. As Gale A. Yee⁴ put it, we think that they are victims and victimizers within the patriarchal system in which they live: Here, Sarah is defined in her capacity to bear sons. Hagar is a double victim by virtue of her class as well as her sex. She is exploited by a privileged woman for her fertility. She is victimizer in regarding Sarah and her barren condition not with compassion but with contempt. Sarah mistreats her servant and ruthlessly cuts her and her son off from the source of their economic well-being.

As regards both women in the text of Genesis, we will like to know whether their ethnic difference is a problem in itself. In other word, is Sarah's parting from Hagar a tragedy?

⁴ Op. Cit. p. 982.

The genesis text in fact shows that there was no serious tragedy, since everything that has so far happened seems to fall within the plan of God: “Do not be distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring” (Gn21,12-13).

Let us note that God in His plan, had in mind to create two nations through one man. These verses show us clearly that, there is a nation who shall be Abraham seed by Isaac, and another his offspring by Ishmael. Both verses hinge on two words which, to our opinion; do not make a separation between the two lineages: “It is through Isaac that **your offspring** will be reckoned” and “He is **your offspring**”. The possessive adjective “your” used in both verses links Abraham to his two sons Isaac and Ishmael. We think that, the text at this level does not sever the link between the father and his sons, but distinguishes between the latter’s and their maternal roots⁵. Thus, what ever the conflicts and the divisions of the two sons, they will not separate from each other’s view, and their sanguinity will remain a verbal link. We think that, Alexandre WESTPHAL is right when he says that “the Ishmaelites, like the Israelites are descendants of Abraham but they are illegitimate sons. Besides, their blood is mingled with those of the Egyptian”⁶. The author of the genesis text uses the same words **your offspring** to qualify both sons because he wants to testify that, for him, there is no way to consider one of them more than the other. Some versions (The LXX, the Syriac and the common Latin version (vulgate)) express this opinion by translating verse 13 in this ways: “Besides from Ishmael a great people will come forth”.

We can remark that at first sight, the two women seem to be quite different: one is Arab and the other an Israelite. The Israelite (Sarah) and her husband (Abraham) have the same blood because of their common father. We can say that, the son of the Arab who is the slave (Ishmael) also has a mixed blood with Sarah, because he had the blood of Abraham which is the blood of Sarah. Finally, Sarah, like Abraham can recognise herself in Ishmael who is also an Arab. Then, Sarah is in a certain way linked to an Arab (Hagar), because Ishmael’s veins contain her blood which is mixed to the one of her slave. In this way, the text uses a special rope which relates apparent opposite characters one to another.

⁵ A close connection of the couple Sarah-Abraham should be made: Abraham and Sarah had the same father but different mothers. But this difference does not stop him from calling Sarah her sister (Gn20,12). The paternal blood flowing in Abraham and Sarah’s veins is equally found in those of Ishmael and Isaac.

⁶ Alexandre WESTPHAL, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de la Bible : les Choses, les Hommes, les Faits, les Doctrines*, p. 20.

II- PAUL'S INTERPRETATION

Paul presents Sarah and Hagar as two symbols: Sarah symbolises the law and Hagar the legal covenant. Drawing inspiration from the story of these two women whom God used to raise two nations, Saint Paul shows the type of relationship existing between grace and law. Through the first woman Hagar, God created the children of the law, and He used the second woman to create the children of promise. What is worth noting however is that, Saint Paul doesn't lay too much emphasis on both lineages. What interest him can be summarized in the points namely:

- Sarah and Hagar had the same Lord who is God
- Through them, Abraham got two descendants Sarah and Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac who are often in conflict.
- God chooses the lineage of the free woman (Sarah and Isaac) to make up His people, but does not completely leave out Hagar's lineage that becomes a foreign people to Israel.

Paul therefore retains only what characterises both women. One symbolises servitude (Hagar) and the other one symbolises liberty (Sarah). Hagar's lineage represents the Jews who were subject to the law and that of Sarah represents believers, Galatians' Christians. Paul thinks that, Galatians' Christians went back into a situation of bondage when they got together with Jews. So, they have to liberate themselves from this bondage.

III- HAGAR MY FRIEND: OPENING UP TO EACH OTHER

There are some difficulties in reading Ga4,21-31 today: in a world replete with religious and different Christian denominations, in a world where Jews, Christians, Muslim and traditional religions are bound to live together, reading this text in a perspective to make a distinct separation between Hagar and Sarah does not argue in favour of cohabitation. We think that the statement in Ga4,30 "chase the servant and her son" Cf Gn21,10 is an appropriation that helps the apostle to solve a personal problem: Sarah asks Abraham to chase Hagar and her son so as to deprive the latter from taking part in sharing the heritage; Paul on his own part asks Galatians to chase the Jews for he does not want to share his missionary territory with them. In a certain way, he tries to renew his authority over the Galatians who

are no longer loyal to him. To better understand this assertion, it is necessary to look into the circumstances of this letter, as well as Paul's arguments.

A Problem of authority

The epistle to the Galatians is an apostle Paul's circular letter to churches in Galatia (Ga1,1). This letter presents a certain number of problems: missionaries other than Paul came and destabilised the order he had established. One notices in the text that these missionaries are presented as Paul's opponents: they are anonymous and are described in the following words. The indefinite adjective "Certain" or "some people" (Ga1,7); the interrogative used in a rhetorical⁷ way "who" (3,1; 5,7); the indefinite pronoun "one" (4,17).

They are accused of several wrong-doings including the spreading of false gospel (1,7); the seduction of Galatians (3,1); the claim to care for the Galatians although their objectives are to enslave them (4,17-18); and to keep them away from the truth (5,1).

As a result, the Galatians no longer follow the Gospel brought to them by Paul (3,1-5); they are subjected to new practices (4,8-11) and betray their loyalty to their apostle (4,12-20).

*** Who are these anonymous missionaries?**

Many assumptions have been made as concern the people who want to destroy Paul's achievements in Galatia: Like Guy Wagner says, some believe that these people are conservative Judeo-Christians like those who follow James's theological trend in Jerusalem. They are attached to the restoration of the law in the Christian communities founded by the apostle. Others think that these missionaries might be newly converted pagano-Christians or tacticians who want to assimilate Christians to the synagogue so as to ensure the political security of churches.⁸ Other people think it might also be Gnostic spiritualistic tendencies found in Galatians' pagano-Christian communities.⁹

We are inclined in favour the first hypothesis, that which assimilates the missionaries to Judeo-Christians of James's surroundings because the problems raised by Ga2,4-5 are related to the law, they are problems raised to an extent by James: "let's write and tell them to abstain from things polluted by idols and from immorality and from strangled meat and from blood (Ac15,20). These prohibitions actually refer to the law: the immorality probably has to

⁷ The rhetorical question here contains already the answer, and the answer refers to the missionaries who are not named.

⁸ Guy WAGNER commented by François VOUGA, « L'épître aux Galates » in Daniel MARGUERAT, *Introduction au Nouveau Testament: Son histoire, son écriture, sa théologie*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 2001, p.220.

⁹ James H. Ropes, «The Singular Problem of the epistle to the Galatians », *Harvard Theological Studies* XVI, 1929.

do with the legitimate unions in accordance with the law (Lv18,6-18); strangled meat and blood refer to animals that are not killed by bleeding (Lv17,10-16). These prohibitions according to our opinion might be aimed at preventing uncircumcised brothers from becoming a source of stain to Jew, particularly during shared meals.¹⁰ (cf. Ac15,23.29 ; 1Co8,10 ; Ap2,20).

If these missionaries are conservative Jews, we can well understand that, to an extent, Paul's assertions in our text stand in defence of his waning authority in Galatia: this aim therefore is not to create enemy brothers (Ishmael and Isaac) or allegorically, to cut the bridge between Sarah and Hagar, but rather to keep those people who are threatening his authority out of his missionary field. This assertion can be verified through a number of arguments:

- At the beginning of the epistle to Galatians, Paul introduces his letter in a strange manner: "Paul apostle, not by a man, but by Jesus-Christ and God the Father who rised him from the death" (1,1). Paul affirms being an apostle, and precises the origin of his apostolic mission: like the twelve before him (1,7), he was sent immediately by the Christ after his Resurrection. We think here that he was asking or claiming the recognition of his authority by introducing in his address the presence in his entourage of believers with whom he preaches the Word of God. It is the only passage of his epistles which mentions, not only Paul, but also a community with him: "and all the brothers who are with me" (1,2). Usually, the responsible of the letter is either Paul alone (Rm1,1), or with Timothy (Col1,1), or with Sostene (1Co1,1). The particularity of the epistle to the Galatians brings out the preoccupation of Paul, of assuring his credibility as a spiritual leader to the people he addresses to. The justification of his apostolic mission is also in Ga1,15-16 where he informs the Galatians that he was chosen and put aside before he was born. (Cf. the vocation of Jeremiah (Jr1,5) and that of the servant (Es49,1)), and above all as he carries out his ministry "without taking any opinion from human being": that means he does not work by the human flesh.
- Paul has not interest to separate the Jews from the Arabs, since his Gospel is incompatible with any definition of the person according to the Jews, Greeks, slaves, free born (Ga3,28), or by his qualification by the means of particular election (Ga1,6-9). Like Pierre BONNARD,¹¹ we think that the favour that God had given to Sarah (Isaac) to the detriment of Hagar (Ishmael) is that of the New

¹⁰ See also TOB, *Nouveau Testament*, full edition, note t, Paris Cerf, 1972, p.403.

¹¹ Pierre BONNARD, *l'épître de Saint Paul aux Galates*, Neuchâtel, Delachaux et Niestlé, 1953, p.99.

covenant (The Church) against the people of the Old covenant (the Jews): Gn20,10.12. This decision does not concern the eternal Salvation of the two people, but edification as a selected people. Ishmael will eventually join the elected people and the Jews, separated from the main line of salvation will one day be reincorporated (Rm9-11).

How then can we understand the other of Sarah taken up again by Paul: “send away this slave and his son” (Gn21,10)? The answers could be various but we think that, according to Paul, The Galatians should dissociate themselves from the Jews who trespass on his way. A part from doctrinal problems, a part from precisions to be added on the notion of law and grace, we are also seeing a problem of authority.

*** Born according to the flesh: Whose fault is it?**

Ga4,23 “But the son of the servant was born by the flesh, meanwhile the son of the free woman was born as a result of the promise” puts a the first sight a value judgement on the two women: this verse make use of two conjunctions: “but” and “meanwhile”. The first is considered as a transition which put precision on verse 22. As a matter of fact, if Abraham hat two children from two women, it is the precision that these two children were not born in the same way. The “meanwhile” which precedes the description of the birth of Isaac brings out the opposition. According to verse 23, Abraham got Ishmael and Isaac in two different ways, and these two different ways indices value judgement. We talk about value judgement because according to Paul, the flesh or the way of birth which he uses to illustrate the nature of the offspring of Hagar has a negative connotation: as a matter of fact, a man is something that knows, understands, can appreciate, can orientate and take position. According to Paul’s texts, a human being so defined is unable of proper independence. For Rm7, he is presented as not having the power to accomplish goodness: he can think, he can want by himself, but this activity remains only at the stage of presentation, of intention, of law. When it comes to practical realisation, he becomes dependent; he becomes the representative, the servant of a power force which is not of him. This power, Paul calls “the flesh”.¹²

The flesh shows the manner of man’s existence in front of God, putting emphasizing on his natural weakness of creature and finitude. The apostle Puts flesh in relation with sin (2Co1,12; Rm6,19). Thus, by establishing a relationship between Hagar and flesh, better and

¹² See Jean Jacques VON ALLMEN, *Vocabulaire biblique*, Neuchâtel, Delachaux et Niestlé, 1956, p127.

sin, Paul makes in a certain way a value judgement on this latter. But the reality is something else. Who is responsible for this birth by flesh? Hagar, Sarah or God?

Hagar is the one who captures a lot of sympathy. She is a victim in a situation she didn't choose: in fact, as a slave, she had no other choice but to obey the wish of her mistress, the wish to give a descendant to Abraham. A certain atmosphere reigned in Abraham's household; it is a scene of rivalry as we find in polygamous homes.¹³ God intervenes then to solve the problem (Gn16,9): Sarah had to go back to Abraham in order that the child should be born under the conditions required by customs¹⁴. Ishmael signifies *God listens or God hears*. God listen to the distress of Hagar and has pity of her. He will bless her descendant even though it is not as that which God promises or Abraham¹⁵. Comparing this assertion to Ga4,23, we think that, it is Paul who implicitly or allegorically make a value judgement on the two women. One is bad and is to be rejected (Hagar) while the other (Sarah) is the good one: "so then my brothers, we are not the children of a slave woman, but of a free woman" Ga4,31. But it is not surely here the reading to be done, since this declaration is at the service o the passion of Paul and not at the service of his preaching (Gospel). We can say that, he did this declaration by *flesh*.

On the point of view of the promise, Hagar is a victim of the voluntary act of God to make two descendants of Abraham. But from the human point of view, she is victim of her own pride. To a certain extent she is a victim of Sarah's jealousy and egoism who, ingrate is afraid to divide with her what had to be inherited. Her child will be "free and rebellion, engaged in fighting against all. But history hold this: "God follows also the one who goes away from the house of Abraham; and it is a great miracle that he watches over his humanity from outside, which He includes in His historic plan and that he created oasis in the desert, also for Hagar and for Ishmael"¹⁶. Hagar is not more to be blamed than Sarah, in front of men and women, and in front of God.

¹³ See also Frank MICHAELI, *Le livre de la Genèse*, Chapter 12 à 50, Neuchâtel, Delachaux et Niestlé, 1960, p.38

¹⁴ According to Frank Michaeli *ibid* p.37, the customs wanted that when a women is not able to give birth to a child, she could adopt one in a way that can be surprising today: she gave her servant to her husband in order to make with him a child that she will consider as her real child. Certain rites followed this custom (for example to deliver on the kneels of the adoptive mother (Gn30,3). The texts of the Babylonian's laws (in the Hammurabi's code) mention exactly this usual customs in the old Orient. Ishmael circumcised the same days as Abraham. He is 13 years old whereas Abraham is 99 (Cn17,24-26). Isaac is born when Abraham is 100 years old. This means that there is a difference of 14 years between Ishmael and Isaac: we thing that, according to the custom Ishmael was the real child of Sarah.

¹⁵ Frank MICHAELI , p 38

¹⁶ Gerhard VON RAD, *La Genèse*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 1968, p. 197.

Conclusion

At the end of this paper, we think it is worth to find in Ga4,21-31 part of Paul's argument which goal is to conquer his authority threatened by missionaries who were trying to create a space on a land already occupied. This way of understanding put out into the thesis of Paul anti-Semitism which is presented by Gale A. Yale, since it makes us to understand that, as well with the text of Genesis and that of Galatians, its not a question of salvation but that of choice: even though from Hagar will not come the elected people, it is necessary to note that she was not doomed to the perdition, since God took her to the desert where she is going to take refuge, a disposition for her survival. She will live forever link to Abraham, because her son Ishmael carries her blood.

Also, the judaisants are to be rejected by the Galatians so that the authority of Paul should be re-established. But they are not rejected by God. God does not reject anybody; he creates space for those who are not accepted.

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