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The interpretation of the Sarah-Hagar-stories in rabbinic and patristic literature. Sarah and Hagar as female representations of identity and difference

In der christlichen Auslegungstradition wurden die beiden Figuren Sarah und Hagar, die in der Genesis Stammütter der IsraelitInnen und IsmaeliterInnen repräsentieren, zu Allegorien für die Kirche und die Synagoge. Sie sind Teil eines Diskurses, der ein hierarchisches Verhältnis zwischen Christentum und Judentum über Jahrhunderte hinweg festgeschrieben und das Judentum als Negativfolie für die Formulierung christlicher Identität benutzt hat. An der christlichen Auslegungsgeschichte zeigt sich darüber hinaus das aus genderkritischer Sicht problematische Phänomen weiblicher Allegorien als Repräsentantinnen kollektiver Identitäten. Der vorliegende Artikel verfolgt die Sarah-Hagar-Allegorie zu ihren Ursprüngen bei den Kirchenvätern und bei Paulus zurück und bewertet sie mit Hilfe genderorientierter Theorien.

Nicht nur in der christlichen Auslegungstradition, sondern auch in der rabbinischen Tradition wurde der Diskurs über Zugehörigkeit zur Gemeinschaft und Abgrenzung von den Aussenstehenden mit den beiden Figuren Sarah und Hagar verbunden. Sarah wird als jüdische Stammutter mit dem Motiv der Erlösung Israels verbunden, während Hagar als Proselytin charakterisiert wird. Der signifikante Unterschied in der Wahrnehmung der Aussenstehenden und in der Definition der Beziehungen zu ihnen, der sich hier zeigt, kann die antijüdische christliche Interpretation korrigieren.

Introduction

In front of the Cathedral of Strasbourg stand two female sculptures representing the Church (Ecclesia) and the Synagogue (Synagoga), dating from 1230 CE (see picture 1 + 2). They are stone witnesses to a claimed Christian superiority about Judaism: Ecclesia is portrayed as a proud and victorious queen holding the signs of victory in her hands – the cross and the cup of Communion – whereas Synagoga is shown with clear signs of defeat, her head bowed down, without crown, a broken lance and the tablets of the law pointing downwards in her hands. They are impossible to ignore at the entrance to the Church, and as most people were not able to read in the 13th century, they must have had a significant influence on Christian self-understanding and on the Christian perception of Judaism and Jews.¹ The growing social

suppression of Jews in the Middle Ages in Europe under a dominant Christian culture proves that images like these were not merely symbolic, but were a powerful political instrument.²

They are part of a Christian cultural identity shaped on a negative perception of Judaism which has a long tradition.

The two statues point not only to the problem of Christian anti-Judaism, but to the no less problematic phenomenon of female embodiments of collective identities within western patriarchal societies. The ambivalent use of female figures in public for establishing and maintaining the social order has been subject to gender-critical research. I would like to use these theories as a hermeneutic background for tracing the roots of this allegorical depiction in the Christian tradition, the figures of the mothers of Isaac and Ishmael, Sarah and Hagar. The Church Fathers were the first to interpret Sarah and Hagar as allegories for Christianity and Judaism, and made Hagar a symbol for the Jewish expelled “other”. But the discourse about insiders and outsiders was also connected with Sarah and Hagar also in the rabbinic tradition. I would like to show the significant differences between the interpretations and their crucial meaning for a redefinition of Christian identity within a Jewish-Christian dialogue.

The Christian interpretation

Paul

The line of Christian interpretation starts with the Pauline allegorical-typological interpretation of the Genesis narratives of Sarah and Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21) in Galatians 4:21-5:1. Paul identifies Sarah with the „Jerusalem above“ (4:26): she is the mother of the free descendants of Abraham. On the other hand, he relates Hagar to the Sinai-covenant and the present Jerusalem (4:25): she is the mother of the unfree descendants of Abraham. Paul is speaking about identity and difference since the unfree descendants are to be expelled. But it has to be stressed that Paul is **not** speaking of Christianity and Judaism, as some contemporary interpreters still claim,³ but of the Galatian community (consisting of Jewish and pagan Christians, identified as the children of Sarah) and of his Jewish-Christian opponents⁴ (identified as the children of Hagar). His interpretation is based on the conflict in Galatia about the extent of the Torah’s validity for Gentile Christians. At first glance Paul seems to reject the Torah as enslaving (4:25) but the context shows that it is not the Torah as such, that he opposes, but it is the exclusive interpretation of the Torah by his opponents. In his view, that results in a split within the Christian communities between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, which becomes clear in the Antiochian incident (2:11-14).⁵ This

interpretation is supported by the fact that, elsewhere in Galatians, Paul emphasizes the validity of the Torah (5:14.22f.) It has to be considered that Paul's was apparently the weaker position in that argument, which explains his sharp polemics.⁶ Within this context his offensive interpretation can be seen as somehow subversive.

Paul's way of interpretation is quite close to Jewish tradition. By taking up the idea of representing groups with female figures from the Genesis narratives, where Sarah and Hagar are understood not only as individuals but as mothers of two different people,⁷ and by applying it to his own situation he is following the general midrashic principle of actualization. Nevertheless, Paul interprets the stories in a dualistic and selective way that stresses the conflict between Sarah and Hagar: First, he emphasizes the social function of the two figures, by setting the slave versus the free woman, four times within a couple of verses (4:22.25.26.30.31). Secondly he interprets the opposition between their sons theologically, by the terms flesh and promise/spirit (*kata sarka – di epaggelia*, 4:23; *kata pneuma – kata sarka*, 4:29) stressing the opposition even more. Thirdly he omits important features of the Genesis-story: the promises given to Hagar, and her liberation (Genesis 16:11; 21:18.20f.). The result is the image of an irreversible opposition between Sarah and Hagar and thus between the groups they represent.⁸ By deepening the differences between them he makes Hagar a symbol for otherness that has to be excluded. As he never identifies the protagonists directly he provides an image that can easily be transferred to other contexts – as it happens with a lot of interpreters, at first with the Church Fathers.

Tertullian

The earliest reference to the Pauline interpretation is found in Tertullian's largest work "Adversus Marcionem" (dating from ca. 200-211 CE) which aims to reject Marcion's gnostic understanding of Christianity (V,4,8). He comments on Paul's interpretation in Galatians:

"[...] *for these are two testaments* – or two revelations, as I see they have translated it – the one from Mount Sinai referring to the synagogue of the Jews, *which* according to the law *gendereth to bondage*: the other *gendering above all principality, power, and domination*, and every name that is named not only in this world but also in that which is to come: for she is *our mother*, that holy church, in whom we have expressed our faith: and consequently he adds, *So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free*. In all this the apostle has clearly shown that the noble dignity of Christianity has its allegorical type and figure in the son of Abraham born of a free woman, while the legal bondage of Judaism has

its type in the son of the bondmaid.”⁹

Tertullian understands Paul to identify Sarah with „the holy Church that is above all principality, power and domination“ that „has its allegorical type in the son of Abraham born of the free woman“. He understands Hagar to be identified with the Synagogue that „gendereth to bondage and has its type in the son of the bondmaid“. Even if this reference is marked as a quotation of Marcion, whose rejection of Judaism is known, and is therefore not surprising, it is remarkable that Tertullian does not criticize Marcion for the anti-Judaic content of his interpretation but, on the contrary, seems to share it.¹⁰

This suspicion is confirmed if one looks into his work „Adversus Iudaeos“ (written around 200) which deals explicitly with Judaism and has become a model for a whole literary tradition.¹¹ Tertullian expresses his view of the subordination of Judaism e.g. with the allegorical interpretation of the biblical pairs Jacob and Esau and Cain and Abel: The subordination of the older brother (Genesis 25,23)¹² serves as an image for subjecting Judaism to Christianity. Similarly, the acceptance of Abel’s sacrifice and the rejection of Cain’s¹³ are seen as signs for the replacement of the Jewish cult by the Christian service.

Tertullian’s negative view of Judaism has to be seen in his historical context. In accordance with most of the Church Fathers of his time Tertullian uses the allegorical interpretation of Scripture to prove the truth of the Christian revelation. He has to face the well-founded rejection of Jesus as Messiah by the Jewish side. The existence of a thriving Judaism called the Christian universal truth into question. Allegorical, or spiritual, interpretation provided an effective weapon in the Jewish-Christian debate about the correct interpretation of Scripture.¹⁴ But it has to be said that it served not only apologetical purposes in a weaker position but helped to express the universal Christian demand that could not accept another religion as equal. The interpretation of Judaism as a slave woman, as subordinated and rejected “other”, was a way, retrospectively a wrong way, to deal with these difficulties.

On one side Tertullian found himself in a similar situation to Paul’s 100 years earlier, struggling with a more powerful opponent and searching for identity, and taking up Paul’s dualism of the two female figures. But whereas Paul leaves some possibilities for interpretation open, Tertullian explicitly does not. He develops Christian identity at the expense of a denigrating view of Judaism,¹⁵ – a tradition that would become very influential in Christian history.

Origen

Origen is but one example for the further developed idea of the Church replacing Israel to be God's chosen people by using the Sarah-Hagar-allegory. In a sermon on Genesis 21 he takes up the identification of Sarah with Christianity and Hagar with Judaism by frequently citing from Paul's letter to the Galatians. This understanding of Paul must have been already quite common at that time. At the beginning of his sermon he points out the importance of allegorical interpretation which can be learned from Galatians 4:24. His purpose is that Christians should learn to treat other passages in Scripture accordingly,¹⁶ e.g. some elements in Genesis 21 which Paul left out.

One element is the bottle of water which Abraham gave to Hagar when he expelled her (Genesis 21:14) and which didn't provide enough water to survive.

“But he ‘who is born according to the flesh’ drinks water from a bottle and the water itself fails him and he lacks in many things. The bottle of the Law is the letter, from which that carnal people drinks, and thence receives understanding. This letter frequently fails them. It cannot extricate itself; for the historical understanding is defective in many ways. But the Church drinks from the evangelic and apostolic fountains which never fail, but ‘run in its streets’ (Proverbs 5:16), because they always abound and flow in the breadth of spiritual interpretation. The Church drinks also ‘from wells’ when it draws and examines certain deeper things from the Law.”¹⁷

The purpose of this allegory is to show the “defective” literal understanding of Scripture by the Jews. This understanding does not only differ from the Christian one but there is a fight going on for the right understanding, as Origen interprets the persecution of Isaac by Ishmael.¹⁸ This could be a hint to a competitive situation between Jews and Christians regarding the attractiveness of their religions and to a quite successful stand of Judaism. It also connects the dualistic ways of interpretation with the idea of the Jewish people as a “carnal” people which is overcome by the “spiritual” people of the Christians.

Another element is the inability of Hagar to find a well in the desert.

“After this [...] the angel of the Lord opened Agar's eyes, and she saw a well of living water.

How can these words be related to history? For when do we find that Agar has closed eyes and they are later opened? Is not the spiritual and mystical meaning in these words clearer than light, that that people which is ‘according to the flesh’ is abandoned and lies in hunger and thirst, suffering ‘not a famine of bread nor a thirst of water, but a thirst for the word of

God' (Amos 8:11), until the eyes of the synagogue are opened? This is what the Apostle says is a 'mystery': that 'blindness in part has happened in Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles should come in, and then all Israel should be saved' (Romans 11:5). That, therefore, is the blindness in Agar who gave birth 'according to the flesh', who remains blind until 'the veil of the letter be removed' by the angel of God and she see the 'living water'. For now the Jews lie around the well itself, but their eyes are closed and they cannot drink from the well of the Law and the prophets."¹⁹

In this passage the motif of Jewish blindness occurs, being very common among the Church Fathers and recurring in Christian art as the sculptures of Ecclesia and Synagoga show. Hagar is also a symbol for God having deserted his people who are now starving in the desert. Origen leaves the possibility for the conversion and redemption of the Jews open at the end of time, but different from Paul (Romans 11:25ff.) he rejects the remaining election of Israel as a matter of fact. For Origen, Israel can only be saved by being converted to Christianity, there is no option for an equally accepted Judaism. Consequently he sees the Church as true people of God, represented by Sarah, the mother of the Christians and virtue.

"I think therefore [because of allegorical interpretation, I.P.], that Sara, which means prince or one who governs empires, represents arete, which is the virtue of the soul."²⁰

"But let us see what Paul understood in this play and what angered Sara. Already above in our spiritual exposition we set Sara in the place of virtue. If, therefore, the flesh which Ismael, who was born according to the flesh, represents, attracts the spirit, which is Isaac, and deals with him with enticing deceitfulness, if it allures him with delights, if it mitigates him with pleasures, this kind of play of the flesh with the spirit offends Sara especially, who is virtue, and Paul judges allurements of this kind to be the most bitter persecution."²¹

With Origen, the idea of the Church taking the place of God's elected people becomes more and more shaped, and influences the perception of Judaism seriously.²² Origen's enmity is the more striking as he lived in Caesarea, a famous center for Jewish studies in the 3rd century CE, and as he very likely had contacts to and exchange with Jewish scholars.²³ His works show good knowledge of halakhic and aggadic traditions. In his anti-Heretic work "Contra Celsum" he even defends Judaism along with Christianity against pagan offenses. Polemics like those in the cited examples are mostly found in his sermons. This makes it very likely that Origen tried to prevent Christians from mixing with Jews and from becoming too much attracted by Judaism.

His polemic has to be seen within the complex process of separation between Judaism and Christianity during the first centuries CE, when Christian identity had just begun to develop. Judaism was a “*religio licita*” with a rich tradition that provided the majority in the Roman Empire, compared with the number of Christians. Judaism was apparently very attractive also for Christians and was not seen as a totally distinct religion, as there is evidence that in a lot of cases Christians took part in Jewish services and festivals.²⁴ It is even likely that Judaism and Christianity competed with each other in converting Gentiles. Living next to a flourishing Jewish community Origen must have been aware of this situation. These circumstances make his polemic understandable, but it remains problematic.

Nevertheless Origen’s negative statements about Judaism became part of the theological doctrine of Christian superiority that prevailed even after Christianity had become the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. Later Church Fathers continue this line of interpretation by using the Sarah-Hagar-allegory, e.g. Ambrosius and Augustin.²⁵ The growing legal and social restrictions in the 5th century CE for Jews, like the exclusion from public positions and the prohibition of mixed marriages between Jews and Christians, make clear that anti-Judaism remained not a theoretical doctrine only.²⁶ The negative perception of Jews as “others” of which the Sarah-Hagar-allegory is but one element, has become one of the fundamental teachings of the Church and has had lethal consequences for Jews throughout history.

Allegorical interpretation and representation of the feminine

The examples of the Sarah-Hagar-allegory also show how the discourse about Christian identity and Jewish difference is intertwined with the representation of the feminine within a patriarchal symbolic system. It has an ambivalent effect. On the one hand it is their quality as mothers that make them powerful figures for identification.²⁷ As mothers they embody positive aspects like protection, care, fertility and order, similarly to female depicted cities.²⁸ But on the other hand the allegorization of women is based on a displacement of real women in favor of illustrating an abstract idea. Only if a split is made between real women and the idea of woman, if the depicted woman does not refer to a real woman, she can become a sign for something else. The allegorized woman then represents an idea and neither points to a subject nor to a history behind it.²⁹ This disembodiment is possible because women have no place as subjects in the symbolic order dominated and generated by men, as e.g. Kristeva and

Irigaray observed.³⁰ Within that order woman is defined as “the other”. This allows the application of nearly any idea to the female body.³¹

This way of representation operates as well with another common androcentric split of the female into dualistic images, e.g. in the case of female city-images into woman as nature versus domesticated woman, which is a variation of splitting women into good women and bad women. Hagar takes over the symbolism of the negative “other”, the outside which is perceived as dangerous and has to be subjected. She becomes the “allegory of foreign territory”³². Sarah takes over the symbolism of the positive inside which is perceived as stabilizing order.

Splitting the female always serves male dominating interests. This is the case with Sarah and Hagar, too. The irreversible split between Sarah and Hagar serves to enforce Christian dominating interests and to develop a Christian identity at the expense of Judaism.

The Jewish Interpretation

Sarah as symbol of redemption

In the rabbinic tradition the dualism between Sarah and Hagar plays a minor role. The rabbis clearly have their main interest in Sarah, as she is the Jewish Matriarch; and they especially emphasize the redemption of her barrenness. One of the most powerful images is her connection with Jerusalem in the Midrash Lamentation Rabbah I:2, §26 (5th century) and parallels.³³

“26. SHE HATH NONE TO COMFORT HER. R. Levi said: Wherever it says ‘hath none’, it indicates that there would be in the future. [For instance], And Sarai was barren; she had no child (Genesis 11:30); but she did have one later, as it is said, And the Lord remembered Sarah (ib. 21:1). Similarly, But Hannah had no children (I Samuel 1:2); she did have them later, as it is said, So the Lord remembered Hannah (ib. 2:21). Similarly, She is Zion, there is none that careth for her (Jeremiah 30:17); but she will have one later, as it is said, And a redeemer will come to Zion (Isaiah 59:20). In like manner you say, SHE HATH NONE TO COMFORT HER; but she will have later, as it is said, I, even I, am He that comforteth you (ib. 51:12).”

The midrash explains Lamentations 1:17: “Zion spreads out her hands, and none is there to comfort her, the Lord has commanded against Jacob adversaries around him; Jerusalem is like a menstruating woman among them.” The verse describes very movingly the desperation after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. In Lamentations Rabbah it is a model for the

interpretation of the second destruction of Jerusalem. The rabbis reject the imagination of the desolation of Zion as a remaining situation with the examples of Sarah and Hannah. As the two of them have been redeemed of their barrenness, so, “qal wa-chomer”,³⁴ of course, Zion will be redeemed in the future by God himself.

The figure of Sarah works as a representative for Jerusalem, similarly to Paul’s interpretation, but here Sarah is identical with Israel. Paul and the rabbis continue a tradition already found in the Prophets, where Jerusalem is frequently depicted as a female figure. Especially in Second Isaiah 54:1, the connection with Sarah is made: “Sing aloud, o barren woman who never bore a child, [...]”.³⁵ The rabbis strengthen this interpretation and make Sarah a powerful symbol for the redemption of Israel. For them she embodies not only a glorious past but hope for the future, too. As in Paul’s and the Church Father’s interpretation Sarah symbolizes belonging to a specific group, but the confrontation with an allegorical outsider is missing. The rabbis leave no doubt that Sarah belongs to the Jewish side and the midrash speaks only about Israel, not about other people. As it points out the remaining sympathy of God for his chosen people it is probably a theological reaction to the Christian claim to Sarah as matriarch, because the destruction of Jerusalem was interpreted as rejection of Israel by the Church Fathers. But the midrash has the perspective on the inclusion of others, found in another reference on the barren Sarah. Her redemption is a sign for the redemption of the whole world: many other barren women and sick people have been remembered together with her:

“8. AND SARAH SAID: GOD HATH MADE JOY FOR ME; EVERY ONE THAT HEARETH WILL REJOICE WITH ME (21:6). R. Berekiah, R. Judah b. R. Simon, and R. Hanan in the name of R. Samuel b. R. Isaac said: If Reuben has cause to rejoice, what does it matter to Simeon? Similarly, if Sarah was remembered, what did it matter to others? But when the matriarch Sarah was remembered [gave birth], many other barren women were remembered with her; many deaf gained their hearing; many blind had their eyes opened, many insane became sane. For ‘making’ [HATH MADE] is mentioned here, and also elsewhere, viz. And he made a release to the provinces (Esther 2:18). As the making mentioned there means that a gift was granted to the world, so the making mentioned here means that a gift was granted to the world. R. Levi said: She increased the light of the luminaries: ‘making’ is mentioned here, viz. GOD HATH MADE FOR ME, while elsewhere it says, And God made the two lights (Genesis 1:16).³⁶

In the rabbinical interpretation of Sarah the overlapping of the two discourses about identity and the feminine can also be observed. On one hand, the comparison between barrenness and a situation of political destruction takes up female experience. The Hebrew word “aqarah”, barren, which is only used for female infertility means literally “uprooted” or “without roots”. It recalls the image of destruction, of no future, and mirrors the low social standing of barren women in ancient societies. The comparison of redeeming a whole people with redemption of a woman of her barrenness shows compassion for this severe female experience and makes hope possible.

On the other hand, the interest in redemption of barrenness is the reverse of a male interest in female fertility within the frame of the patriarchal order.³⁷ Sarah and the other barren matriarchs represent the male idea that women want to have children at any cost. They are portrayed as pious women who are redeemed from their barrenness because of their exemplary belief and provide empowering role models for real women, but the images remain within the patriarchal system since barrenness is not accepted as such.³⁸ It is evident that the rabbis operate with patriarchal imaginations of women, too, especially concerning female sexuality.

Hagar as symbol of proselytism

Although Hagar is not mentioned as often as Sarah, she bears remarkable features in the interpretation of the rabbis. She is depicted as a stranger, as Egyptian, but of noble descent, as she is the daughter of Pharaoh (cf. Bereshit Rabbah 45:1), and as a bondmaid, but not as exclusively as in the Christian tradition. In Bereshit Rabbah 53:13 one can find the image of a praying Hagar in the desert. It follows the description of her expulsion from Sarah’s and Abraham’s home (cf. Genesis 21:10ff.) which leads her into the desert, a desperate situation where the water runs out and she is crying. The midrash explains:

“Thus it is written, Thou hast counted nudi (Psalm 56:9): which means, Thou hast counted my wanderings. Put Thou my tears into Thy bottle (ib.). [Estimate them by] that woman of the bottle (nod). Are they not in Thy book (ib.)? as it is written in the Book of Psalms, Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear unto my soy; keep not silence at my tears (39:13): Thou didst not keep silence at Hagar’s tears; wilt Thou keep silence at mine! And shouldst Thou reply, ‘Because she was a stranger (gijoret) she was more beloved,’ then I too am thus, For I am a stranger with Thee, a sojourner, as all my fathers were (ib.).

The verses from Psalms 56:9 and 39:13 are related to Hagar through the word “bottle” according to the hermeneutic rule “gezera schawa ”: She is the woman with the bottle, the bottle that Abraham gave her when he expelled her. The midrash interprets her crying as prayer to God and parallels her with the speakers of the psalms. Like them she addresses God in her distress and asks to be saved. The conclusion is: If God listened to Hagar, who was a stranger, then, “qal wa-chomer”, he will listen of course to the problems of people now. Regarding the prayer, she is paralleled with important Jewish female figures like Rebecca, Rachel and Sarah, who are also portrayed as praying women in desperate situations. As one purpose of the midrash is to provide role-models for their readers and listeners, Hagar becomes like them a model for the personal prayer to which women, according to the Mishnah (Berakhot 3:3), were obliged. She is not only an example that God does not remain silent towards the suffering and thus a symbol of hope for being saved; the midrash also stresses her active struggle for redemption.

This becomes even more clear in the following part, commenting on Genesis 21:16 (and she went and sat her down over against him, a good way off, as it were a bowshot [ki-metahawe keshet]):

“R. Isaac observed: The phrase As THE SHOTS OF A BOW [shows the distance, for] two bowshots cover a mile. R. Berekiah said: The phrase connotes, as a woman who impugned God’s justice, saying, ‘Yesterday Thou didst promise me, I will greatly multiply thy seed, etc. (Genesis 16:10), and now he is dying of thirst!’”³⁹

By interpreting “ki-metahawe ” as “ke-matcheth”, like one who doubts in God’s reliability, the rabbis portray Hagar as a strong character who is not afraid to judge God, as the biblical character Ijob does.

The motif of Hagar’s piety is even more pointed in the name “gijoret ”, translated as “stranger”, which means literally “proselyte”.⁴⁰ Even if the interest behind this interpretation might have been that Abraham’s wife should not be a Gentile woman (like the wives of Moses and Samson in the midrash), this attribute stresses Hagar’s faith and strengthens her positive image.⁴¹ Remarkably the midrash narrows the difference between Hagar as non-Israelite and Sarah as Israelite, contrasting Paul’s and the later Christian interpretations. In the rabbinic interpretation Hagar becomes a symbol for outsiders (not only Christians, but in general) who can have access to the community. This interpretation reflects the openness of Judaism towards proselytes and also its interest in attracting them.⁴² It completes the image

we got when examining some of the Church Fathers and indicates the competition between them and the rabbis regarding attraction of Gentiles.

Nevertheless the positive image of Hagar is also restricted. Hagar filling the bottle with water (explanation of Genesis 21:19) is interpreted as unbelief, because it shows that she does not trust in God's care for her.

“[...] AND GOD OPENED HER EYES, etc. (21:18f.). R. Benjamin b. Levi and R. Jonathan b. Amram both said: All may be presumed to be blind, until the Holy One, blessed be He, enlightens their eyes. That follows from this verse: AND GOD OPENED HER EYES AND SHE SAW, etc. AND SHE WENT AND FILLED THE BOTTLE WITH WATER. This proves that she was lacking in faith.”⁴³

Similarly in Bereshit Rabbah 53:15 the fact that Hagar gives an Egyptian wife to her son means that she returns to her origin and to her former gods.

“[...] AND BECAME AN ARCHER – ROBEH KASHOT (ib.). Even as he grew (rabbah), so did his cruelty (kashiuth) grow with him. [Another version]: while a lad (robeh), he trained himself in the use of the bow. [Another interpretation]: Master (rabbah) of all archers. AND HE DWELT IN THE WILDERNESS OF PARAN, etc. (ib.). R. Isaac said: Throw a stick into the air, and it will fall back to its place of origin [the ground]. Thus, because it is written, And she had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar (ib. 16:1), therefore it is written, AND HIS MOTHER TOOK HIM A WIFE OUT OF EGYPT.”⁴⁴

Her image is thus ambivalent, but she is not only a symbol for rejection as in the Christian tradition.⁴⁵

Conclusion

These few examples show that the question of identity and difference, of who belongs in the community and what happens to the outsiders, was differently answered by the Jewish and the Christian tradition. This is not only the result of the given situation where Jews and Christians competed for followers, but reveals a basic difference. Christian tradition kept its exclusive dualism even after having become the dominant religion, and increased its anti-Judaism throughout the centuries. The Jewish tradition held on to a perception of outsiders that does not depend so much on an exclusive dualism as does the Christian perception. It shows that difference can also be perceived as a positive and enriching phenomenon, and that identity is not necessarily constructed by using the other as negative image. In this regard, the

interpretations of the rabbis are closer to the biblical texts than the patristic interpretations. Sarah and Hagar have been misused by the Christian tradition and have been forced into symbols of separation and exclusive difference. Reading the rabbinic interpretation can provide a necessary counter-reading. If we decide to see difference as enriching, and not as a threat to identity, Sarah and Hagar can become powerful figures within an interreligious dialogue today.

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Pictures:



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Picture 1 + 2:

In front of the Cathedral of Strasbourg stand two female sculptures representing the Church (Ecclesia) and the Synagogue (Synagoga), dating from 1230 CE.

¹¹ The representation of Church and Synagogue as female sculptures is a widespread phenomenon and mirrors the complex relation between Christians and Jews at that time. Similar sculptures are found at the entrance of significant ecclesiastical buildings like the Cathedral of Reims in France, at the Cathedrals of Bamberg, Magdeburg, Worms and Freiburg and at the “Liebfrauenkirche” at Trier, all dating from the 13th and early 14th century CE, cf. the pictures in Schreckenberg, *Juden*, 48ff; cf. Scieurie, *Ecclesia*, 243-250.

Depictions of Ecclesia and Synagogue appear in the Christian iconography since the 9th century CE. They are frequently set within the scene of the crucifixion and express more or less sharply the triumph of Ecclesia over Synagoga, cf. Schreckenberg, *Juden*, 31-34. This happens at a time when Passionplays started to appear. They portray the idea of a victory of the Church over Judaism in a very visual way and convey it to a wider audience,

cf. Poliakov, *Geschichte*, 30.

² The fourth Lateran Council in 1215 CE e.g. ordered a special dress code for Jews so that they should be distinguishable from Christians by outward appearance. It was executed in various ways: in France Jews had to put a yellow, round sign on their clothes; in Germany a coned hat was more common (the so-called “Judenhut”). This is an important new development concerning anti-Judaism, since for the first time the otherness of Jews was visibly marked, expressing a suppressing and humiliating distinction. Also in the 13th century, the charge of ritual murder and desecration of hosts came up mirroring a spreading anti-Judaism, even if good contacts still existed between Jews and Christians in some fields, cf. Poliakov, *Geschichte*, 49-70.

³ E.g. Ruether, *Nächstenliebe*, 101; Betz, *Galaterbrief*, 422f.; Wilckens, *Römerbrief*, Bd. 2, 185; Huebner, *Theologie*, Bd. 2, 94. They understand Galatians 4:30 as disinheritance of Judaism and criticize Paul for his extreme view. But this interpretation is not convincing at all, because it ignores the historical and literary context of this text. Firstly, no clear distinction existed between Christians and Jews in Paul’s time. This is a later development, that continued until the 4th century, and it seems clear to me that the modern commentators project their ideas on the ancient context. Secondly, the argument between Paul and his opponents mirrored in the letter to the Galatians is an argument among Jewish Christians who have different ideas about the extent of validity of the Torah, cf. note 5.

⁴ Cf. Bachmann, *Frau*, 134f.; Boyarin, *Paul*, 156; Martyn, *Covenants*, 179; Dunn, *Epistle*, 250; Mußner, *Galaterbrief*, 325.

⁵ There is a big discussion still going on about the meaning of the Torah for Paul that can not be described in detail here. But the two main positions can be stated. A widespread opinion among German scholars is the notion that Paul abolished the Law because it does not have the power to redeem, following the Lutheran interpretation, e.g. Bultmann in his famous article: *Christus des Gesetzes Ende*; Huebner, *Theologie*, Bd. 1, 84f., but who sees a positive development of Paul from Galatians to Romans; Stuhlmacher, *Theologie*, Bd. 2, 266-268; Sonntag, *Nomos*, 300. This view is criticized by scholars who try to see Paul in his Jewish context and attribute a more positive view to him, e.g. Sanders, *Paulus*, 503-518; Dunn, *Paul*; von der Osten-Sacken, *Paulus*, 116-157.

Following these latter scholars, especially Dunn, the position of Paul in the Galatian conflict can be shortly outlined as follows: his Christological understanding, that a radical new era has begun with the death and the resurrection of Jesus, leads him to the idea of the inclusion of the Gentiles into the nation of Israel. The patriarch Abraham serves as his proof for this idea (Galatians 3:8-14,28f.; cf. Romans 4). This does not mean that the Torah, the core of Judaism, has lost its validity. But it poses a problem if it is still functioning as a sign of difference between Jews and Gentiles. This is what Paul is opposing concerning the so-called “Antiochia-incident”: Insisting on the dietary laws prevents the community between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Paul is directing the same critique against his opponents in Galatia, apparently Jewish Christian Teachers, who seemed to ask, if not the fulfilling of the whole Torah at least of the dietary laws, of the circumcision (Galatians 5:2) and of the Jewish festivals (4:8).

⁶ There is no archaeological evidence of any Galatian Christian communities before the 2nd century CE, so it is very likely that Paul lost his influence in these communities which he is addressing in his letter.

⁷ Cf. Blum, *Komposition*, 69ff. HHe established the term „völkergeschichtliche Ätiologien“ for the Genesis narratives about Abraham’s family.

⁸ Cf. Castelli, *Allegories*, 233f.; Callaway, *Mistress*, 94.

⁹ Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* V,4,8.

¹⁰ Cf. Martyn, *Covenants*, 164-167.

¹¹ For an overview of the genre of the “Adversus-Judaeos”-literature cf. Williams, *Judaeos*. The claimed missionary character of these works was rejected by A. v. Harnack, *Texte*, 75ff. who considered them to be a literary fiction, for an apologetic purpose, without any real background. On the contrary, K. Hruby, *Juden*, 417-419, points out that they have to be seen against a historical background, but that their purpose was not primarily to convert Jews but to prevent Christians from converting to an attractive Judaism, similarly Schreckenber, *Adversus-Judaeos-Texte*, 217.

¹² Cf. *Adversus Iudaeos* 1,3ff. and *Adversus Marcionem* II,24,8f.

¹³ Cf. *Adversus Iudaeos* 5,1-3.

¹⁴ Cf. Hruby, *Exegese*, 321-325.

¹⁵ Tertullian also supports the common Christian view that the Jews are rejected by God because of their misdeeds and their unbelief. The destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 and the dispersion of the Jewish people are interpreted as clear evidence for that, cf. *Adversus Iudaeos* 10,19; 11,11 u.a.; *Adversus Marcionem* 3,23,3ff.; *Apologeticus* 21,393; 26,3.

¹⁶ Cf. Genesis-Homilies VII,2.

¹⁷ Cf. Genesis-Homilies VII,5.

¹⁸ Cf. Genesis-Homilies VII,2: “There is yet also another battle more violent perhaps than all these. These who understand the Law, ‘according to the flesh’ are opposed to and persecute these who perceive it ‘according to the spirit’.”

¹⁹ Cf. Genesis-Homilies VII,6.

²⁰ Cf. Genesis-Homilies VI,1.

²¹ Cf. Genesis-Homilies VII,3. The identification of Sarah with virtue might be influenced by Philo, cf. *De Congressu Eruditionis Gratia* 9-10; 12; 14; 23; *Quaestiones in Genesim* 3,19-35 e.a.

²² *Homiliae in Exodum* VIII,2, zit. nach Hruby, *Juden*, 445: “Wenn wir auch dem Fleische nach zu den Heiden zählen, so sind wir doch Israel nach dem Geist [...], unter der Bedingung, daß wir uns durch unsere Handlungsweise würdig erweisen, Gottes Anteil zu sein und zu seinem Erbe gewählt zu werden.” Concerning the replacement of Israel by the Church cf. also Hruby, *Juden*, 445-447.

²³ One of the famous rabbis who had discussions with Christians is R. Abbahu (229-309), a disciple of R. Judah I, cf. Lieberman, *Greek*, 21-33. These contacts have been neglected for a long time by modern scholars. They are very likely not only because of the proximity of Jews and Christians at Caesarea but also because both sides referred to the same Scripture. Origen had detailed knowledge about special rules for the Shabbat which are found in the Mishna, e.g. the rules concerning the distance for an “erub”, the distance within which one was allowed to walk on Shabbats, cf. De Lange, Origen, 40-47.

²⁴ Cf. Origen's warning: “If anyone wishes to hear and understand these words literally he ought to gather with the Jews rather than with the Christians.” Cf. Genesis-Homilies VI,1. Cf. also Feldman, *Jew*, 402f. especially on Origen.

²⁵ Ambrosius: *Brief 77* (PL 16,1263-1267), *Brief 78* (PL 16,1267-1269), vgl. Schreckenberg, *Adversus-Judaeos-Texte*, 306; Augustin: *Epistola CXCVI*, III,13, vgl. Hruby, *Juden*, 422.

²⁶ Cf. Rengstorff / von Kortzfleisch, *Kirche*, 100f., especially *Codex Theodosianus* and *Codex Justinianus*.

²⁷ This is true for Islam, too: There it is Hagar who is considered as “mother of all Muslims”, cf. Stowasser, *Women*, 47.

²⁸ Cities depicted as female figures are already found in the First Testament, cf. Isaiah 49:14-21; 50:1; 51:18; 54:1; 60:4; Jeremiah 50:12; Psalm 85:7; Lamentations 1:16; 2:19. Cf. Fischer, *Jesaja*, 252.

²⁹ Cf. Weigel, *Topographien*, 167-173; Wenk, *Weiblichkeit*, 1, has found the same phenomenon in female sculptures in the public sphere. They are mostly anonymous figures in contrast to the rare memorials for historically known women. It shows the missing presence of “real” women in public and a way of idealized femininity. Consequently male allegorical figures are much rarer.

³⁰ Cf. the basic works of Irigaray and Kristeva on the literature list.

³¹ The representation of abstract ideas as female figures, e.g. sciences, arts or virtues, became especially popular in the 19th century CE, for a critique see the monography of Warner, *Gestalt*.

³² Cf. Castelli, *Allegories*, 228.

³³ Cf. *Bereshit Rabbah* 38:14; *Lamentations Rabbah* I:17, §52; *Pesikta De Rab Kahana* 20:1.

³⁴ This is the first of the seven exegetical rules of Hillel, the conclusion a minori ad maius, cf. *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Pesachim* VI:I, 33a and *Tosefta*, *Sanhedrin* VII:2.

³⁵ Isaiah 54:1 is already an innerbiblical midrash on the Genesis-narratives about the barren wives, cf. Callaway, *Mistress*, 97. The connection with Sarah is evident from Isaiah 51:2.

³⁶ Cf. *Bereshit Rabbah* 53:8.

³⁷ The case of Sarah provokes a halakhic discussion about the duty of woman to procreate, cf. *Mishna*, *Yebamot* 6:6; *Tosefta*, *Yebamot* 8:4; *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Yebamot* 6:6; *Talmud Bavli*, *Yebamot* 64. With one exception women are generally exempted from that rule which is based on Genesis 1:28: R. Jochanan ben Baroka states that the plural form in Genesis 1:28 includes women into the rule. The motivation for the exclusive ruling probably reflects the wish of the rabbis to prevent a possible promiscuity and to execute control over female sexuality. Cf. Baskin, *Reflections*, 103f.

³⁸ The redemption from barrenness is frequently described as a result of prayer, belief and God's answer: cf. *Bereshit Rabbah* 45:4; *Talmud Bavli*, *Yebamot* 64b; *Talmud Bavli*, *Taanit* 2a and *Eliyahu Rabbah*, 18. Cf. also Baskin, *Reflections*, 114.

³⁹ *Bereshit Rabbah* 53:13.

⁴⁰ Cf. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 236.

⁴¹ Cf. also *Bereshit Rabbah* 45:10, where it is said that four respectively five angels appeared to Hagar in the desert.

⁴² The common view that Jewish missionary activities ceased after the Bar-Kochba-Revolt 132-135 CE is rejected by Feldman, *Jew*, 383-445, who cites a lot of examples from Roman, Christian and Jewish sources. The fact that a complete prohibition on Jewish missionary activities was proclaimed by Roman Emperors five times and a prohibition on conversion of slaves to Judaism was proclaimed even twelve times, proves that proselytism was perceived as a problem. Positive remarks about proselytism found in rabbinic literature are e.g. Mishna, Baba Metsia 4:10; Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 87b; Bereshit Rabbah 28:5. Further Abraham and Sarah are portrayed as missionaries in Bereshit Rabbah 39:15, Jacob in 84:4, which gives reason to think that proselytizing was still an interest of the Jewish side and existed throughout the 3rd to the 5th century CE.

⁴³ Bereshit Rabbah 53:14.

⁴⁴ Ebd. Even more sharp are the later Midrashim Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer 30; Midrash ha-Gadol, I, 309; Midrash Aggadah ad loc., I, 48: Hagar worships a stone which is apparently an allusion to the Kaaba, cf. Ginzberg, *Legends*, Bd. I, 265. The tendency to portray her more negatively is probably a reaction to her importance in the Muslim tradition.

⁴⁵ Surprisingly Hagar's image is not as negative as the image of her son Ishmael who embodies the image of a killer: he is identified with the first and the second conquerer of Jerusalem (Bereshit Rabbah 45:9), his descendants kill the Jews on their way to the exile by giving them salty food and no water to drink (Talmud Yerushalmi, Taanit 4:5,XV, M; Lamentations Rabbah II:2, §4).

Irene Pabst, Studium der evangelischen Theologie in Berlin, Hamburg und Jerusalem. Zur Zeit Arbeit an einer Dissertation zum Thema "Die beiden ersttestamentlichen Frauengestalten Sara und Hagar und ihre Rezeption in der rabbinischen Literatur". Seit April 2003 als wissenschaftliche Hilfskraft am Institut für evangelische Theologie der TU Dresden tätig.

In Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives, ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell, 149-167. Louisville: Westminster John Knox. Google Scholar. 2003. The Interpretation of the Sarah-Hagar-stories in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature. Sarah and Hagar as Female Representations of Identity and Difference. *Lectio Difficilior* 4: 1-19. Google Scholar. Palaver, Wolfgang. Pabst, Irene, «The Interpretation of the Sarah-Hagar-Stories in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature. Sarah and Hagar as Female Representations of Identity and Difference», *LectDiff* 4/1 (2003), p. . University of Lausanne. Institut romand des sciences bibliques. Biblical Bibliography of Lausanne - BiBIL. Administration. Contact. Sarah was childless until she was 90 years old. God promised Abraham that she would be «a mother of nations» (Genesis 17:16) and that she would conceive and bear a son, but Sarah did not believe. Isaac, born to Sarah and Abraham in. With respect to the fulfillment of the promise, Sarah embodies the themes of fear and doubt, Abraham those of faith and hope. Her doubt drives Sarah to devise her own way of realizing the promise—she gives Abraham her maidservant, Hagar, so that Hagar might bear a child for them. When the promise is repeated, Sarah expresses her doubt in sarcastic laughter (Genesis 18:12). Be on the lookout for your Britannica newsletter to get trusted stories delivered right to your inbox. Sarah. Quick Facts.