



Hagar and Sarah in Galatians: A Case Study in Freedom

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PAUL'S STORY ABOUT HAGAR AND SARAH IS ONLY UNDERSTOOD IF WE PLACE it in the global context of the Letter to the Galatians. To try to understand the account on its own is difficult, and the text remains incomprehensible. Gal 4:21-31 is an argument from the Scriptures in which Paul feels obligated to convince the gentile Christians of Galatia that the free sons and daughters of Abraham are children of the promise that do not submit blindly to the law.

In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul gives an urgent call to live firmly in the freedom for which Christ has set us free (Gal 5:1). He is insistent, even shocking in this call. If we read this letter all at one sitting we can almost hear the desperate voice of a person very concerned about the situation through which his beloved community is passing. The tone of the letter, disrespectful in some parts and compassionate in others, seems to suggest that the author sees humans playing a game with life when we do not receive the gift of freedom.

The basic problem for the gentile Christians in the Galatian Christian com-

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Paul's argument about freedom and slavery, using the story of Hagar and Sarah, can be translated into the so-called free-market society, yielding surprising results about who is in bondage.

munities (Gal 4:8) is their captivation with the new message to submit to Jewish law (Gal 3:1-6). It is possible that some excellent preachers, maybe better than Paul, convinced them that besides their faith in Jesus the Christ they should also comply with all the requirements of the law, including circumcision. Paul is furious with these itinerant preachers and is very hard on them (Gal 1:8-9). As a scolding mother, he lectures them and takes great pains to convince them that it would be a fatal error and a regression to follow the dictates of the law (Gal 4:8-11). The apostle is very good at managing his argument. And in fact, his is a rhetorical or an apologetical letter;¹ Paul wants to persuade his readers of their error and convince them with his criteria. It is important to notice this rhetorical style so as not to fall into an anti-Jewish ideology. All of Paul's criticism of the law and circumcision has to be considered self-criticism. Paul is a Jew and has never ceased to be one. He is critical of his own culture, as we all should be.

For Paul, in contrast to the other preachers, the preaching of the gospel of faith is not simply a matter of different speeches or different opinions in confrontation. He is dealing with two horizons or visions of the world that lead to two different ways of life: one of freedom and the other of submission. Does this problem of circumcision and the law have anything to say to us today?

I. FREEDOM IN PAUL'S WORLD

Today there is much talk about freedom, especially in the world of the market: freedom of prices, freedom from tariffs, free market, free enterprise, freedom in buying and selling. Some commercial products, such as cigarettes or soap, appeal to the "freedom" of the consumer. But what is this freedom? Institutional norms, be they ecclesiastic or secular, tend to be hard and rigid. In our society, laws (legal, institutional, or cultural) are generally over and above human lives. The fundamental criterion is that the law is to be fulfilled to the letter, not fulfilled in favor of human life. This tendency is contrary to the gospel. When Paul prioritizes grace or faith in relation to the law, he is following Jesus in his affirmation that the Sabbath had been created for persons and not vice-versa.

The correlative of the word freedom is slavery. It is impossible to speak of being free or of freedom if there is no consciousness of slavery. Paul, then, in order to affirm freedom utilizes the metaphor of slavery. This metaphor was well known to his readers, because they lived in the economic system of Rome that was built on slavery, and Galatia itself had a well-known slave market.²

The story of Hagar and Sarah, taken by Paul as figures to typify the condition of slavery and freedom, becomes one of the several important arguments for Paul's position in favor of the freedom we have been given in Christ. Let's look more closely at his argument.

¹Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

²Joel Allaz, François Boron, and others, *Chrétiens en Conflit: L'Épître de Paul aux Galates* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1987) 9.

In the ancient world the children of slaves were born slaves, and the children of free persons were born free. If the mother were a slave and the father free, the child would acquire the status of a free person. The children of freedmen, those who had bought their freedom, were also born free. Never could the children born of a free man be born slaves. But for Paul, it seems that, although Abraham and Sarah were free, their descendants (according to the flesh) were slaves. How could that be?

In Paul's conflict with his opponents, those who imposed the law on those who had received the gift of being sons and daughters of God, both sides used the Scriptures to legitimate their position. The story of Hagar and Sarah was probably one of their favorite arguments.³ Hagar, the foreigner, is a slave, and Sarah, the Hebrew, is free. For the opponents, it was very easy to affirm that Abraham's true free children were the Jews, therefore the gentiles had to become Jews through circumcision and obedience to the law in order to belong to the people of God and to obtain the promises of God to Abraham.

Paul, from the beginning, dedicated his ministry to taking the good news to non-Jews, without demanding they fulfill the law or be circumcised. Little by little his experience of God's grace and the frequent arbitrariness in the application of the law brought him radically to critique the law as a logic that enslaves when it is united with sin and becomes an end in itself. He perceived the law as a logic present in all laws, not only Jewish and Roman laws but also in traditions, institutions, customs, and norms that subordinate the human being.⁴ For Paul, those who blindly submit to the law are slaves. Those who recuperate their consciousness as free subjects are free, thanks to the liberating work of Jesus Christ. They are oriented by the logic of grace, faith, and the Holy Spirit, and subordinate the law to the concrete needs of people and the well-being of all humans. These are the free sons and daughters. Those who are subjected to the law are the slaves and are far from the true lineage of Abraham and Sarah, parents of faith and therefore of freedom. Through Abraham all the peoples of the earth will be blessed (Gal 3:8). Paul feels obligated to take up again the passage about Hagar and Sarah and respond to his opponents in another hermeneutical key, demonstrating that the slaves are those who follow the law, that is to say, those who say they are free.

Sarah and Hagar, wives of Abraham, one free and the other a slave, each had a son by Abraham. The mothers of these sons are interpreted as founders of peoples—one of free lineage (Sarah's son) and the other of the lineage of slavery (Hagar's son). Paul and his opponents omit the fact that at that time the son of a free man and a woman slave was considered free. Therefore, Ishmael and Isaac are both free. But this fact is not important to Paul's reading, because his argument is not

³See C. K. Barrett, "The Allegory of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar in the Argument of Galatians," in *Essays on Paul* (London: SPCK, 1982) 154-168.

⁴Gal 3:28 goes beyond juridical law; it also covers sociological, economic, and cultural matters.

based on the historical events but on the typology represented. What is up for discussion is the true descendency of Abraham, heirs of the promise.

Hagar is fertile and bears Abraham a son. Hagar's son, the non-Hebrew, is born normally, according to the laws of nature. Therefore the descendency is marked for slavery, not for promise. Sarah, on the other hand, is sterile. She is blessed with a son when it seems hopeless, at a time when physical laws deny the possibility. The son is born by the grace of God, through the promise. It is promise and grace that mark Sarah's freedom. True, Hagar's social condition is that of a slave, but Paul is interested in underlining the relationship between the law and slavery and between grace and freedom. When the actual descendants of Abraham according to the flesh submit to the law, and non-Jews accept the gift of grace, Paul feels obligated to invert the story's interpretation.

The inversion becomes clear by placing the origins of the two covenants geographically. Each son represents a covenant. In Paul's day, the covenant that came out of Jerusalem was that of Mount Sinai (Gal 4:24), where the law of Moses was given. According to Paul, this symbolic world is the real slave, and its descendants live in slavery. The readers will understand that this refers to the followers of the law, those who consider themselves the true descendants of freedom: Abraham and Sarah. Paul wants to show that those who belong to that symbolic world really belong to the slave, to Hagar. "Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children" (Gal 4:25). The ancestral Hagar's condition of slavery has been transferred to the descendants (according to the flesh) of their patrons, Abraham and Sarah.

The transfer of the ancestral Sarah's condition of freedom occurs implicitly for the non-descendants (according to the flesh) of Abraham and Sarah. The gentiles are the ones who do not submit themselves to the Jewish laws. Nevertheless, this transfer of the condition of freedom is not given directly and exclusively to the gentiles. Paul extends it to all the peoples of the earth who do not submit blindly to the law but are oriented by faith, grace, and the Spirit, including the Jews. Paul expresses this by affirming that the truly free world is that which corresponds to the "Jerusalem above." This term was familiar to his readers. This Jerusalem is of divine origin. It means an invisible universal people, to whom all races belong in their diversity, who receive the logic of faith as the founding principle of their practices, attitudes, and relations in their own particular world. It is not reduced to the world of the gentiles, but to all people, including the Jews, freed from the law and oriented by grace. It has to do with a covenant that begets free sons and daughters. So then, the true descendants of Sarah are not the Jews, who submit to the law, but those nations, including the Jewish nation, who are free from the law: "But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above: she is free and she is our mother" (Gal 4:26).

Paul's reading contains another important aspect. In Gal 4:27, Paul cites Isa 54:1, which says, "Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout,

you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says the Lord.” Why has Paul chosen this text? Sarah was sterile, but she was married and not abandoned. Hagar was not sterile, but she was socially marginalized and abandoned. Maybe Paul wants to mention here God’s preference for the excluded ones.⁵ Sarah is marginalized by her sterility; God blesses her with a child. Hagar, the abandoned one, is blessed by God in the desert, according to Gen 21. In Galatians, the fundamental point of the discussion is the exclusion of the nations by the Judaizers because of the law. As related in Genesis, Sarah would be the ancestor of the Jews, and Hagar of the nations. Therefore, a coherent reading of Paul’s argument would be to consider Sarah’s descendants according to the flesh as the true descendants of the slave Hagar, and the descendants of Hagar according to the flesh as the true descendants of the free Sarah. But this inversion is deliberately not made explicit, because Paul is against any exclusion. Those who willfully and blindly submit to the law and let it govern their lives are in fact slaves, whether Jews or non-Jews. Gal 4:30 would have to be interpreted to mean that the new life in Christ leaves no room for slavery.⁶

II. REREADING PAUL IN A FREE-MARKET SOCIETY

Today, it is supposed that we are all free, because slavery has been abolished. Yet, some are still being treated as slaves (e.g., the sugarcane workers of Brazil) because of the abuses of some companies. José Roberto Novaes and Angela Schwencker have denounced this, claiming there is no difference between slavery and the lack of respect and exploitation of citizens in the work force.⁷ This enslavement of the work force is seen as an exception by free-market advocates. It is supposed that we are all free, because we are children of a free society. This society, however, imposes upon us a “father” who only functions well when he can count on wide margins and is proclaimed father of all men and women. This father is the market with its patriarchal structure; it is free because it generates its own laws and rejects any interference. Nevertheless this free father produces a generation of slaves.

Our neo-liberal economic society proclaims itself free, but it always demands more freedoms—less state control on pricing and tariffs, fewer environmental rules—so that transnational corporations can expand without restraint. In terms of Paul’s metaphor, this society, which wants to impose itself as our father or mother and proclaims itself free, does not recognize all its sons and daughters as subjects. It excludes some and alienates others. The sons and daughter of the “free woman” become slaves, the same as Sarah’s descendants according to the flesh.

⁵See Barrett, “Allegory of Abraham,” 167-168.

⁶Verses 29 and 30 show the tension between the Judaizers and the gentiles. It is not the gentiles who persecute the Jews, but the other way around. Paul is very firm against the Jews. In Rom 9-11 he will revise his position.

⁷José Roberto Novaes de Almeida and Angela Schwencker, “Retrato do Brasil Canavieiro: Modernização e Trabalho Escravo,” *Tempo e presença* 268 (1993) 27-29.

Blind obedience to law stands in the way of freedom for human beings of flesh and blood. Paul's critique of the law unmasks the false freedoms that are offered. Compliance with the laws of the market prohibits the recognition of human beings as human beings.

Strictly applying the laws of the market has excluded millions of people. This is a well-known fact, one experienced by many of us. The ideologues of the free market themselves recognize it. The promise of a better future, once perfect competition is achieved, is impossible according to available indices. To exclude the other is to deprive him or her of the right to live—truly to live, rather than merely to survive in an inhumane manner. Freedom is not found in the availability of many products; it requires the economic capacity to buy.⁸ Only a few have this purchasing power. There is no freedom to buy when people are unable to purchase. As commerce gains more freedom in the application of its laws, there is less freedom for the majority to be able to buy its products. Freedom has been limited to those few persons who have the possibility to buy.

Nevertheless, many of these few persons are not as free as they think they are. Consumerism has diminished the humanity of persons to such a degree that they have lost their consciousness of being subjects in control of their own destiny. Basically, they are not free to buy what they would truly desire; they buy that which advertisements dictate through the mass media. Desires are manufactured by the publicity machine. False needs correspond to false freedoms. A free person is not one who considers and defines the parts of his or her body as “head, trunk and Nike.”⁹ The task is to recognize ourselves as subjects with our own destiny. When there is a lack of dignity, as there is for the many excluded, when there is unregulated submission to the laws of supply and demand, we have become a society of non-free human beings. To be free implies dignity and the possibility of self-direction.

Fear is another characteristic of contemporary society. The call to “fear not” appears on bumper stickers, T-shirts, posters, and in the title of the Pope's book.¹⁰ The frequency and insistence of this message indicates a high level of fear in our societies, perhaps undecipherable by many. This fear results from the uncertainty of our survival and the precariousness of our existence. The question of survival, says Helio Gallardo, “is internalized not only by the impoverished sectors, but by the global society. No sector or economic function is assured continuity in the new model.”¹¹

The large business sectors that participate in the market have to struggle to defend their space, the middle class has to resort to several jobs and indebtedness through credit cards, and the poorest try to survive in any way they can.¹² Everybody is afraid of everything: of structural adjustments, bosses, criminals, drug ad-

⁸Franz Hinkelammert, *Crítica a la razón utópica* (San José, Costa Rica: Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones, 1984) 242.

⁹This is how a newspaper advertisement for Nike shoes appeared in *Folha*, São Paulo, Brazil.

¹⁰John Paul II, “*Be Not Afraid!*” (New York: St. Martin's, 1984).

¹¹Helio Gallardo, “America Latina en la decada de los noventa,” *Pasos* 62 (1995) 59.

¹²*Ibid.*

dicts, violence in the home (husbands against wives and fathers and mothers against children). Fear takes possession of whole populations, sectors, and persons. The Scriptures tell us that love casts out fear. But fear remains and there is no love, because the need to compete and survive imprisons it.

The situation of instability leads to fear, and fear often leads to an alienating refuge: the horoscope or, perhaps, new religious experiences that falsely fill the emptiness because they are themselves part of the culture of emptiness. These means of escape lead to dehumanization when the reference to real life fades away. Whoever is a prisoner of fear is a slave, and irrelevant escapes are not true freedoms. The genuine escapes of runaway slaves in the past are totally different from the escape mechanisms of the slaves in society today who do not believe they are slaves.

The generalized competition that we observe at all levels and that is produced by ads aiming at consumption is insane. We must fight against it. Such competition is the enemy of solidarity. It intensifies individualism, and it alienates people from the true values of a communal society. This kind of competition deepens envy and greed and turns people into slaves. These people no longer live according to an ethical conscience but according to the rules of the market.

We must recover the true sense of “being free,” of “freedom.” Freedom is not romantic or abstract; human beings are only free in concrete realities, both sad and joyful. We seek freedom from the prisons that we experience in our everyday lives, in our social and ecclesial lives; we seek freedom from the fears and anguish caused by global uncertainty. Also (why not?) freedom through celebrations of all kinds in this world: birthdays, weddings, victories, beginnings, endings. I am interested in specific freedoms for free human beings with specific bodies.¹³ We need always to put an anchor on the words “freedom” and “to be free” so they do not become empty and fade away as they have so many times in history.

We must also avoid an individualistic understanding of freedom like that which comes out of the liberal tradition: noble ideas that in reality are exclusive. We need to be concerned with the right not only to be a person but to know oneself as a person. Such knowledge is given only by the consciousness of being free and of living in freedom the best way possible, within the possible—beginning with the intimacy of the household.

Today’s political and economic situation leads us to re-examine Paul’s critique of the law (as a system of logic), seeking the grace to discern the true freedom in Christ and to ask ourselves how we can live fully in freedom in this society. ⊕

¹³Hugo Assmann is insistent on the necessity of being explicit in the concrete reality of an utopic principle; see his “Por una sociedad donde quepan todos,” *Pasos* 62 (1995) 1-6.