Towards a Poetical Ethics of Interreligious Reading in the Face of Sara and Hagar

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Re-reading the Sara-Hagar story facing Sarai and Hajar likewise describes a hermeneutical struggle: How to deal with two or more contradictory contextual readings? Besides a hermeneutical it is a theological problem and an existential one. If I take a stance in the story as a Christian woman how can my reading be communicated to a Muslim or a Jewish woman? In the process of writing it became more and more difficult to take my own stance as a European Christian teaching Old Testament at the university in this story; whereas Sara seemed to be so easily identified with by my Jewish and Muslim colleagues alike and Hagar by the latter ones as well.[1] It would be much safer and easier to read the story just on my own; or to omit the ambiguous parts in the story, for example, the conflict between Sara and Hagar, as one of the first re-writings of Genesis in Jubilees 17 from the 2nd century BC does. However this is impossible for me, last but not least as we are indebted to the kinship between the so called Abrahamic religions.[2]

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[1] Hibba Abugideiri, Hagar. A historical model for "Gender Jihad" in: Yvonne Y. Haddad and John L. Esposito, *Daughters of Abraham. Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Gainsville 2001, 81-107, 82 stresses that "To be the daughter of Hagar discards the Islamic lineage of Sarah. Muslim affinities extend to *both* matriarchs quite comfortably and without contradiction".

[2] Cf. Volker Küster, Indebted to Kinship –The project of Abrahamitic ecumene contested, in: *Islam in the Netherlands*, 163-180. Cf. initiatives like: www.sarah-hagar.net; http://sarah-hagar.org/index.html or www.interkultureller-rat.de/projekte/abrahamisches-forum.

And to put it from the other side of the coin: the story would not be this story without these troubles.[3]

This article explores the Sara/Hagar stories from different scriptures and religions, wrestling with the challenges of a contextual, intercultural and interreligious reading of one's own scriptures and figures which are sacred to other religions or with whom wo/men of other religions identify as well. In the analysis of the texts I shall therefore not follow a strictly historical order as we face them simultaneously in the interreligious dialogue.

This story with its diverse prominent characters such as Abraham/Ibraim, Sara, Hagar/Hajar, Ishmael and Isaac belongs to at least three religious traditions, implying that their stories are told in different contexts where the protagonists already have different spellings/pronunciations of the names. Interestingly, these are often explained symbolically, as in the case of Hagar/Hajar being derived from the Hebrew *ger* (foreigner) or the Arabic word *hijrah* (migration); her name seems therefore to be "a symbolic description of the woman"[4]. In every tradition, religion or cultural context, the story is retold differently. Next to the context, therefore, it seems helpful to take the narrative structure into consideration.

My study is indebted to earlier manifold readings of the story/stories.[5] It shares with them several goals, such as first of all making sources available and engaging in counter-readings. Finally these counter-readings may serve as empowerment and reconciliation. Letty Russel and Phyllis Trible phrase it this way in their introduction to "Hagar, Sarah, and their children": "we can advocate as women of diverse faiths who refuse to allow those faiths to be used against us or against outsiders"[6]. The aim of the study is thus not just to present

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[3] After the presentation of my paper I was asked why I made it so complicated. Couldn't we stick just to one side of the story?

[4] Martha Frederiks, Hagar in Islamic Tradition, in: *On the Edge of Many Worlds.* Festschrift voor Karel Steenbrink, ed. by Freek L. Bakker and Jan Sihar Aritonang, Zoetermeer 2006, 237-247, 240.

[5] Cf. Martha Frederiks, Hagar in Islamic Tradition; Phyllis Trible and Letty Russel (eds), *Hagar, Sarah, and their Children. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, Louisville 2006; the more empirical study of Anne Hege Grung, *Gender Justice in Christian-Muslim Readings. Christian and Muslim Women in Norway making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Quran and the* Hadith: http://www.uio.no/english/research/interfaculty-research-reas/culcom/publications/phd/2011/grung.html.

[6] Phyllis Trible and Letty Russel, Unto the Thousand Generations, in: id., *Hagar, Sarah, and their Children*, 1-29, 25.

another contextual Christian reading of the story but to derive from the different conflicting readings strategies/conclusions for an interreligious hermeneutics. As it is about reading and retelling narratives, narrativity shall play a core role on a methodological level.

Narrativity[7] comes to play a core role in a twofold manner: How do we read the narratives and how do they read us? The concept of narrativity refers to the fact that we live our lives by stories; while conversely stories are capable of engaging us to the point of making us feel part of them. Therefore, the narrative structure of any story is more than just a quality of the text, it is an anthropological reality. Telling stories is crucial to the way we open up our world. Stories not only allow us to put our own experiences into words, to sort and interpret them, they also enable us to take part in other worlds, even to project alternative realities. With the help of the concept of narrativity and intertextuality I shall try to develop an po/et(h)ical approach to interreligious reading.[8]

1. Encounters and Confessions

Before re-reading the story I want to describe briefly the place from which I am reading and writing: I am a "philo-log", a woman who has fallen in love with texts, biblical texts in particular. While absorbed by the aesthetics of the texts, at the same time I struggle with these texts, which are rooted in a patriarchal setting. Even as scholar applying methods from the field of literature and cultural anthropology I am affected by the so-called historical-critical methods I was brought up with.

My re-reading starts and ends with re-translating. My awareness of its contextuality has been sharpened through participation in a Bible translation project rooted in the German speaking context ("Bibel in gerechter Sprache").[9] Facing injustice (social, religious, gender) two main endeavors were: How to translate an androcentric text (the Bible) in a way which shall empower wo/men? And how can we do jus-

[7] Cf. Dorothea Erbele-Küster, A Short Story of Narrativity in Biblical Studies, in: R. Ruard Ganzevoort et al. (eds), *Religious Stories we live by. Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies*, Leiden and Boston 2014, 75-87.

[8] Referring to a concept from the studies of literature, the question has been raised in the discussion whether we can read the Quran as literature.

[9] Cf. *Bibel in gerechter Sprache*, Ulrike Bail et al. (eds), *Gütersloh*, 4th revised ed. 2011 and www.bibelingerechtersprache.de.

tice to the fact that the Hebrew Bible is a Jewish book and is read in Jewish communities? Dialogue as in our case and the question of the other were central.

Having described my reading room it becomes clear that even if I am engaged here in Christian-Muslim Dialogue focusing on Dutch (European) and Indonesian Perspectives, the third dialogue partner, Jewish readers from different cultures, is present at the (my writing) table.

I want to allude to some personal reading experiences of the story of Abraham, Sara and Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21. During my studies of theology at university in the early nineties I felt "emancipated" when I identified with Sara. The focus came on Sara and not on Abraham her husband, the male figure who has been called "patriarch" in the exegetical commentaries. Against this background there seemed to be reasons to be proud of Sara, the newly discovered matriarch. Consequently, they were labelled no longer patriarchal stories but ancestor stories.[10]

When I became acquainted with the Mexican theologian Elsa Tamez in a personal encounter in 1997 and her interpretation of this story[11] I had to realize that I had made a choice that was restricted by my perspective, by my white middle class situation. Sara fits into it.

This theologian working in Costa Rica identified herself with Hagar, the woman who is oppressed threefold:[12] in terms of gender, as a woman; in terms of her class, as slave; and in terms of race as Egyptian.[13] Black African American Christians like Dolores Williams argued in this vein as well.[14] Blackness was regarded as a uniting concept for reading together and rediscovering Hagar and their "Wilder-

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[10] Cf. Irmtraud Fischer, *Die Erzeltern Israels. Feministisch-Theologische Studien zu Genesis 12-36*, Berlin and New York 1994 and id., On the Significance of the "Women Texts "in the Ancestral Narratives, in: id. and M. Navarro Puerto (eds), *Torah. The Bible and the Women* Vol. 1, Atlanta 2011, 251-293.

[11] Cf. Elsa Tamez, The Woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation, in: *New Eyes for Reading. Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women of the Third World*, John S. Pobee and Bärbel von Wartenberg-Potter (eds), Geneva 1986, 5-17.

[12] Elsa Tamez, "Worship Service: This Hour of History," in: Virgina Fabella and Sergio Torres (eds), *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, Maryknoll, NY 1983, 183-185.

[13] A member of the group identified Hagar easily with the position of migrant workers in Indonesia.

[14] Cf. Dolores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness. The Challenge of Womanist God-talk*, Maryknoll, NY 1994 and id.; Hagar in African American appropriation, in: Trible and Russell, *Hagar, Sarah, and their Children*, 171-184.

ness experience" in the diaspora. Tamez' reading alerted me to the implicit criticism of Sarai's role that the text contains. The messenger of God promising at the end of his speech in Genesis 16:9 that God has overheard the oppression of Hagar recalls the same word which was used for Sarai's behavior in v6 thus thereby criticizing it implicitly.

It is time for Sara to see this and to confess that she has oppressed Hagar! Phyllis Trible, for her part, after a feminist-rhetorical analysis of the repudiation of Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21 designates them therefore in her early groundbreaking work as 'texts of terror'.[15] In her latest contribution to this issue in a volume on interreligious dialogue this classification is missing.[16] Is it too harsh to pronounce facing Jewish women and/or has it after 9/11 other overtones?

Years later when I presented the interpretation of Elsa Tamez in a meeting on Jewish-Christian encounter, one of the Jewish colleagues, a female rabbi in the Netherlands, felt offended and defended Sarah while stressing that Hagar did wrong. According to this colleague, Hagar showed no respect for Sarah and her position. She reproached me for not taking into consideration the rabbinical commentaries on Sarah.[17] Even if I had not misused Sara by identifying myself with her and appropriating her as Christian, as has been done in Christian reception history starting from Galatians 4, I did wrong – according to her perception and likewise according to the rules of the dialogue to which I subscribe: to understand the other as s/he understands her/himself.

While studying rabbinical sources from the Talmud and Midrash I read: "Sarah was perfect in wisdom, in beauty, in innocence, in accomplishment, in consistency", referring to Rashi (Medieval Jewish commentator from Northern France), which explains the note on Sara's lifespan in Genesis 23:1 that all her years were equally good.

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[15] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror. Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Philadelphia 1986.

[16] Phyllis Trible, Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing, in: Trible and Russell, *Hagar, Sarah, and their Children*, 33-69.

[17] Cf. for a discussion of them: Adele Reinhartz and Miriam-Simma Walfish, Conflict and Coexistence in Jewish Interpretation, in: Trible and Russell, *Hagar, Sarah, and their Children*, 101-125; Irene Pabst, The interpretation of the Sarah-Hagar-stories in rabbinic and patristic literature. Sarah and Hagar as female representations of identity and difference, lectio difficilior 2003, *http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/03_1/pabst.htm* and Gianfranco Milleto, ... nur wegen Sara ... Sara in der rabbinischen und mystischen Tradition, in: Rainer Kampling (ed.), *Sara lacht... . Eine Erzmutter und ihre Geschichte*, Paderborn etc. 2004, 157-167.

The way she treated Hagar comes to my mind (Genesis 16:6, 21:10) and her laughter of disbelief (Genesis 18:12). The critical question rises in my mind: Is Rashi blind to her faults, to the physical and psychological abuse she has committed? Rabbi David Kimichi (medieval Provence), however, condemns Sarah's treatment. Ramban (Spain 1194-1271) states "the matriarch sinned by such maltreatment and Abraham too by permitting it"[18]. I restrict myself to these quotes that display two different assessments of Sara within one tradition.

Thus applying one basic rule of interreligious dialogue – that the other should recognize herself in my description of herself – I search for the strengths of the reading strategies of the Jewish tradition. Sara serves as a positive identification figure next to Abraham. She is the matriarch. Her contribution to the history of the "children of Israel" is not muted as it has been in western Christian exegesis up to the nineties but praised. As it is promised by God in Genesis 17:16: "I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her". In the Jewish tradition the life of Sara is remembered. In what follows I shall likewise unfold how I was challenged by the Muslim readings of the story.

Therefore the question arises: How can we wo/men from different religious backgrounds read the story together? Can womanhood serve as a common place to start the reading community, as the Swedish feminist theologian Helen Egnell has argued?[19] In the case of the Sara-Hagar story it becomes even more complicated, as the two women are rivals.

2. Deciphering the narrative structure

In this article I can't provide a close reading of the whole story in the Bible and in the Hadith and the verses in the Qur'an which allude to the story of Abraham and Ishmael. I focus on Genesis 16 and its reception history. Form-critical and source-critical studies brought to the fore the different perspectives and themes in Genesis 16. Whereas the

[18] Cf. the quote of Ramban by Nahum Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with* New JPS Translation, Jewish Publication Society (Philadelphia, PA), 1989. 120; Cf. as well the discussion in: Reinhartz and Walfish, *Conflict and Coexistence in Jewish Interpretation,* 112-114.

[19] Helene Egnell, Dialogue for Life. Feminist Approaches to Interfaith Dialogue, in: Viggo Mortensen (ed.), *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue,* Grand Rapids and Cambridge 2003, 249-256.

first part of Genesis 16 seems to be about a rivalry between two women, the second part is labelled as an announcement scene of offspring to a woman. The final verse (from the so-called priestly layer) is a closing genealogical remark. Perspectives and themes vary thus within one story. If we address this issue from the standpoint of narrative and rhetorical studies we explore the different persons and perspectives with the help of questions like: Who speaks up? Who is acting? How are the persons introduced?

The story starts with Sara and her problems; however, from the beginning she is introduced as woman of Abraham. Hagar is introduced as the Egyptian slave of Sara. There is thus clear social and economic dependency. "Beginning with Sarai and ending with Hagar, the sentence opposes the two women around the man Abraham".[20]

Abram consistently refers to Hagar as 'your (i.e. Sarai's) maid' (Genesis 16:6). Neither Sarai nor Abram ever mention Hagar's name. Apart from the narrator, the messenger of God is the only one to do so (Genesis 16:8). Through the dialogues (verses 2.5.6a) we have insight into the thoughts and emotions of Sarai and Abram. Then in verse 6b the perspective switches to Hagar and her actions, her flight. The very fact that the messenger of God addresses Hagar gives her the possibility to speak up.

At the very end it is about Abraham and his offspring: "Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram" (v16). The whole narration seems to be reduced (Hagar's pregnancy) to Abram and the son born to him.

In Genesis 16 we face three speech acts of God's messenger (in verses 8.9 and 11), each begun with an introductory formula:

> 7 An angel of the ETERNAL found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur, and said:
> 8 Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?
> And she said: I am running away from my mistress Sarai.
> 9 And the angel of the ETERNAL said to her:
> Go back to your mistress, and submit to oppression.
> The angel of the ETERNAL said to her:
> Behold, you are with a child and shall bear a son;
> You shall call him Ishmael,
> For the ETERNAL has paid heed to your oppression.
> He shall be a wild ass of a man;

[20] Trible, Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing, 38.

> His hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him. He shall dwell alongside of all his kin.

Each address has a different meaning. Whereas in v9 Hagar is asked to return to her mistress and to submit herself to oppression, in his last speech the messenger announces: God has overheard your oppression.

It becomes obvious from this short analysis of the narrative structure of Genesis 16 that the story itself encompasses different, indeed even rival, perspectives. The gaps, contradictions, comments and interruptions in the biblical stories, and I would say others likewise, make it possible to identify with the different parties.[21] I argue that the rival perspectives or the conflict is part of the story from the very beginning. Ambiguity and changing loyalties, however with a clear loyalty to justice, are rooted in the narrative structure. It invites the reader to encounter the Other – while foreclosing any once-and-for-all reading.

3. From contextual to postcolonial readings

I come back to two conflicting readings: one by the Christian theologian Elsa Tamez, who stresses the threefold oppression of Hagar, and the other by the Muslim scholar Hibba Abugideiri, who interprets Hagar as a role model of faith and women's liberation. Hagar as God-chosen is a symbol of *taqwa* (reliance on God/God consciousness).[22]

We can see that a contextual reading is about making sense and being relevant in one's own context. However, if one chooses the position of justice and empowerment one is alert in general to injustice. Once you have identified with the powerless or your power position you will be able to identify with other powerless people, even those over whom you dominate; this is at least the hope. To quote once again Phyllis Trible and Letty Russel: "To ask about the presence of women in the grand narrative is, by extension, to ask what the voices of all marginalized people can contribute to overcoming division and hostility."[23] There is therefore a consequent move from liberationist contextual hermeneutics to intercultural and postcolonial hermeneutics

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[21] Cf. Frederiks, *Hagar in Islamic Tradition*, 247 stressing the popularity of Hagar I in the devotional life of Muslims: "Exactly because the story of Hagar is not a smooth and easy tale, people identify with her and recognize in the Hagar story their own hurdles in life".

[22] Abugideiri, Hagar: A historical model for "Gender Jihad", 85-88.

[23] Trible and Russell, Unto the Thousand Generations, 25.

which shows us our blind spots as they relate the colonizer/dominant culture and the colonized in liberationist interdependence.[24]

Post-colonial exegesis has provided an angle from which to critically examine the narrative perspectives of biblical narrative allowing dissident readings. Basic questions in this line of research, according to Musa Dube, are: 'how does this text construct difference: is there dialogue and mutual interdependence, or condemnation and rejection of all that is foreign?' In fact, these questions include the gender issue: 'does this text employ gender representations to construct relationships of subordination and domination?'[25]

Musa Dube has coined the term *Rahab's Reading Prism* to refer to this new reading strategy, which uncovers the colonial traits of texts and their common interpretations. The biblical figure of Rahab from Jericho (cf. Joshua 2; 6) symbolizes the protest against the encroachment of her story by the West. In this line I would like to speak of *Hagar's Reading Prism*. The first step is to re-discover Hagar as a figure of one's own tradition. The second step is to discover Hagar as the figure of another tradition/religion to which you do not belong. The third step would be to try to combine these readings of the Hagar story/to read the Hagar stories together while noticing the conflicting and common reading strategies.

Indeed we can observe acts of hijacking of the tradition of the other: From the very first beginnings the story was claimed by different traditions. Figures were said to belong to one's own tradition. For example the church father "Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) argues that Jews, contrary to their claim, descend from Hagar while Christians are the 'seed of Abraham'".[26]

Having the questions of Musa Dube in mind we were struck as we read by the note in Genesis 25:11 almost at the end of the Hagar/Ishmael/Isaac story that tells us that after the death of Abraham Isaac settled near Beer Lachai Roi.[27] It seems to be an act of occupying a place that in fact belongs to the other, his brother Ishmael's

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[24] On the relation between contextual and intercultural/postcolonial hermeneutics/theology cf. Volker Küster, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie*, Göttingen 2011, § 2 and 3.

[25] Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Saint Louis, Missouri 2000, 57.

[26] Trible and Russel, Unto the Thousand Generation, in: id., *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*, 7.

[27] Gen 25:11: "And it was after the death of Abraham that God blessed Isaac his son, and Isaac settled near Beer Lachai Roi".

family, as it is the well where Hagar was found by the angel of God. This well is named after the revelation of Hagar, the mother of his brother Ishmael (Genesis 16:13f.).

Hagar gives God a name in accordance with the experience she has had. She is the first person in the Hebrew Bible to name GOD. Her act inscribes itself in the landscape and gives the well the name Beer Lachai Roi, meaning "the well of seeing" or "well of my (Hagar's) vision of the living one", referring back to Genesis 16:13. Does Isaac expel Hagar's offspring from their sources (of water)? Or is the remark in Genesis 25:11 that Isaac settled near Beer Lachai Roi a sign that he is looking for Hagar and her experiences? Will drinking from this well allow him to see the injustice his mother Sara has done and the promise that was given to his brother?[28] This short analysis around Genesis 25 unfolds the ambiguity of one text and the interrelatedness of texts.

4. Intertextual Readings[29]

Thus we never read just one text. Texts dialogue with each other. Intertexuality describes this phenomenon of interrelatedness of texts:

> The notion of intertextuality is also an extension and concretization of the philosophical position that there is no such thing as a true, objective mimesis of reality in language. Reality is always represented through texts that refer to other texts, through language that is a construction of the historical, ideological, and social system of a people.[30]

Allusions in texts presuppose the alluded to story as one that is known.[31] For example Sura Ibrahim/14:37 was connected to the Hagar-Ishmael story. The hadith told by Sahih Al-Bukhari (died 870) in book 55, Number 583 on the prophets (*anbiya*) quoting Sura Ibrahim

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[28] According to Genesis R.LX,14 Isaac came to the place to look for Hagar. Cf. Magdalena L. Frettlöh, Isaak und seine Mütter. Beobachtungen zur exegetischen Verdrängung von Frauen am Beispiel von Gen 14,62-67, in: *Evangelische Theologie* 54, 1994, 427-452, 447-449 on the importance of the well.

[29] For the use of intertextuality regarding the interreligious reading practices cf. Grung, Gender Justice in Christian-Muslim Readings, 26-28 basing herself on the studies of Lissi Rasmussen.

[30] Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, Bloommington and Indianapolis 1990, 14.

[31] For example regarding biblical texts: Psalm superscriptions shorten down narratives, like the one in Ps 51: "When Nathan comes to David after he had come to Bathseba". This short notice would not be understandable if one would not know the story in 2 Sam 11.

14:37 links it to the situation after Abram had just expelled Hagar and her son:[32]

> Abraham brought her [Hagar] and her son Ishmael while she was suckling him, to a place near the Ka'ba under a tree on the spot of Zam-zam, at the highest place in the mosque. During those days there was nobody in Mecca, nor was there any water. So he made them sit over there and placed near them a leather bag containing some dates, and a small water-skin containing some water, and set out homeward. Ishmael's mother followed him saying, "O Abraham! Where are you going, leaving us in this valley where there is no person whose company we may enjoy, nor is there anything (to enjoy)?" She repeated that to him many times, but he did not look back at her. Then she asked him, "Has Allah ordered you to do so?" He said, "Yes." She said, "Then He will not neglect us," and returned while Abraham proceeded onwards, and on reaching the Thaniya where they could not see him, he faced the Ka'ba, and raising both hands, invoked Allah saying the following prayers: 'O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring to dwell in a valley without cultivation, by Thy Sacred House; In order, O our Lord, that they may establish regular Prayer. So fill the hearts of some among men with love towards them, and feed them with fruits: so that they may give thanks.' (14.37)[33]

Ishmael's mother went on suckling Ishmael and drinking from the water (she had). When the water in the water-skin had all been used up, she became thirsty and her child also became thirsty. She started looking at him, tossing in agony: She left him, for she could not endure looking at him, and found that the mountain of Safa was the nearest mountain to her on that land. She stood on it and started looking at the valley keenly so that she might see somebody, but she could not see anybody. Then she descended from Safa and when she reached the valley, she tucked up her robe and ran in the valley and reached the Marwa mountain where she stood and started looking, expecting to see somebody, but she could not see anybody. She repeated that (running between Safa and Marwa) seven times. The prophet said: "This is the source of the tradition of the walking of the people between them (i.e. Safa and Marwa). When she reached Marwa (for the last time) she heard a voice and she asked herself to be quiet and listened attentively. She heard the voice again and said: "O! You have made me hear your voice; have you got something to help me?" And

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[32] The *Sahih* of Bukhari, Volume 4, Book 55, Number 583 quoted by Frederiks, Hagar in Islamic Tradition, 243f.

[33] A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'ān. Text, Translation and Commentary*, Maryland 1983, reprint of the first edition from 1934.

behold! She saw an angel at the place of Zam-zam, digging the earth with his heel (or his wing) till water flowed from that place.

The name of Hagar and her story are missing in the Qur'an, therefore an intertextual reading with other sources written and oral alike is needed in order to understand the prayer from Ibrahim and to give Hagar a voice. In terms of reader response criticism the gaps open a lot of freedom to narrate and interpret the Hagar-Ismael story.

5. Re-enacting direct speech

Reading the texts (aloud) is performative. The gap of time and space between readers and texts blurs then, as it often happens in dialogical imaginative retellings of the stories[34] and in (interreligious) reading groups. We are invited to listen to the dialogues within the stories in order to perform our own interreligious dialogue. Dialogue generally is an important way of presenting the protagonists in any narrative.

Specifically, direct speech allows the reader to take varying internal focalizations, through its one-to-one representation, which establishes a close connection between the character and the reader.

In Genesis 21 we hear the desperate voice of Hagar in the wilderness:

> [16] Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, 'Do not let me look on the death of the child.' And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. [17]And God heard the voice of the boy; and the messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.'

The story cites Hagar's direct speech to God. Her prayer opens up a second dimension: reading may become an act of praying. Following Hagar's expulsion into the wilderness and the emptying of the skin of water, she casts her child under one of the bushes and leaves him as she can't stand to watch him dying. Genesis 21 and the Hadith go along with each other on this point. According to Genesis 21 she cries out: "Do not let me look on the death of the child". The text does not say that her outcry is heard – but the voice of the boy is heard by God. An angel intervenes and gives blessings to her and her offspring. After these encounter her eyes can see the well of water. For Abugideiri this

[34] For the term cf. Kwok Pui-Lan and for imaginative retellings in Judaism: Adele Reinhartz and Miriam-Simma Walfish, *Conflict and Coexistence in Jewish Interpretation*, 117vv.

active struggles of Hagar are "integral aspects of *taqwa*, not simply passive faith in God"[35].

According to al-Bukhari, Hagar left her child behind in desperation as she could not endure looking at him and walked up the mountain of Safa in order to look out over the plain and to seek help, but in vain. Then she went up the other mountain/hill Marwa – again, in vain. We see Hajar running back and forth between the hills – seven times. Finally she hears a voice and responds to that voice: "O! You have made me hear your voice; have you got something to help me?" She then sees an angel digging a well at Zam-zam for her.

The Hadith sketches a communication between Hagar and a heavenly voice. Sura 14 Ibrahim, 37 quoted in the same passage by Al-Bukhari contains a prayer as well, but from Ibrahim:

> O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring to dwell in the valley without cultivation, by thy Sacred House; in order, our Lord, that they may establish regular Prayer, so fill the hearts of some among them with love towards them, and feed them with fruits: so that they may give thanks.

The prayer of Ibrahim expresses his wish that his offspring – why does he not explicitly mention Hagar as well? – may find a place and way to pray alike even in the wilderness. The placement of this prayer in the mouth of Abraham in the narration of the Hagar and Ishmael story by al-Bukhari after he had just sent them into the wilderness could be partly understood as Ibrahim accusing himself. Riffat Hassan gives a different interpretation of the prayer: "Abraham's prayer [...] shows that he believes that in order to fulfill the prophetic mission of building the Sacred House of God [...] it was necessary to leave a part of his family in the uninhabited and uncultivated land. His prayer further indicates his faith that this uninhabited land will become populated and fruitful and that God will ensure that those whom he is leaving behind will find sustenance and love".[36]

We can conclude that direct speech serves as a strong possibility to be part of the story: With Hagar we name God in Genesis 16, with Abraham in Sura 14:37 we express a wish for survival. And in Sara's speech acts we are confronted with her egoism and abuse of Hagar.

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[35] Abugideiri, Hagar, 86.

[36] Hassam, Islamic Hagar and Her Family, 153.

6. Ethics of Reading

As readers we face multiple and often contradictory options and must identify which we will choose, depending on our situation and on the way the narrative is told, for example, in the use of direct speech. Elucidating these different narrative perspectives may help us to understand the different identification options.

The narrative in Genesis 16 uses an all too clear vocabulary to describe Sarai's actions, as it is said that Sarai 'oppressed' her slave Hagar (Genesis 16:6). "Sarai would treat Hagar in Canaan much as she herself was treated in Egypt: the object of use for the desires of others. Like oppressor, like oppressed"[37]. The verb connotes harsh treatment – what the descendants of Abraham shall undergo in Egypt (Exodus 1:11.12). In our story, however, it is used for what the Egyptian slave has to undergo. It is likewise no coincidence that the narrator puts the same root in the angel's mouth as he addresses Hagar later on in the desert. The angel's assurance that 'God has heard your oppression' (Genesis 16:11) constitutes a serious criticism of Sarai's attitude towards Hagar.

There are other points of identification with Hagar. In Hajar, the abandoned mother, Amina Wadud sees a foreshadow of her own experiences and other mothers within the Muslim community.[38] She asks for taking the Hajar experiences into consideration on a legal and social level, arguing for an egalitarian notion of family and domestic/childcare responsibilities beyond a patriarchal bias of the nuclear family. She alludes to the examples of "our modern-day Hajars [the African-American Single, heads of household] the women who have had to do both, while having her role in one sphere make her role in the other sphere invisible or impossible"[39].

Ethical awareness, then, arises through an exploration of the multiple points of identification that a story offers, and their discontinuities. This leads us to an ethical stance in our reading.

As narratology gains importance, interpretation of texts from Bible and Qur'an may shift away from the direct moral application of the text, towards an ethical understanding of the act of reading itself. This 'ethics of reading' realizes that multiple ethical perspectives are

[37] Trible, *Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessings*, 38.

[38] Amina Wadud, A New Hajar Paradigm: Motherhood and Family, in: id., *Inside the Gender Jihad. Women's Reform in Islam*, Oxford 2006, 120-157.

[39] Wadud, *A New Hajar Paradigm*, 157 cf. as well 153.

contained in the contradictions and gaps within narrative structures. In the stories at hand we encounter ambiguity as well in the way we perceive God's action and presence: "God both cares for Hagar and orders her to suffer"[40]. The strangeness of these perspectives makes us aware of the 'other' and its fragility. This provides first of all a framework that allows difference and the encounter with the other within the so-called own tradition. In a second stance it may serve as a fruitful ground for an interreligious reading. Reading stories from the Bible, the Qur'an and the tradition together becomes what might be called committed reading.

In this act of reading we address the (moral) dilemmas in the texts from within our context. We bring in our ethical stances and cultural perspectives. Anne Hege Grung stressed this at a meeting on the eve of Woman's day in Utrecht in March 2012: "Gender *Justice* is a fluid concept and connects to the notion of justice in the Christian and Islamic tradition".

7. Poetical re-writings of the stories

I have moved from one tradition to another in a kind of contrapuntal interreligious reading, as we cannot read the story just from one perspective. The many stories we tell and listen to, are far from consistent in themselves or with each other, reflect our conflicting human experiences. Likewise, the multiple traditions and narratives, Muslim, Christian and Jewish, testify to the fact that there is no such thing as one single (his- or her) story.

If we take the narratives seriously the poetical and esthetical character of these texts becomes important. Listening to Sahiron Syamsuddin and her stress on mystic traditions in order to create space for understanding and dialogue confirms this. Having shown the power of narrativity and aesthetics I want to conclude with *three* poetical re-writings of the stories.[41] One from a contemporary Arab Syrian-Libanese background: Adonis, pseudonym for Ali Ahmad Said Asbar (born 1930) who struggles with war, escape and life in exile.

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[40] Trible and Russell, Unto the Thousand Generation, 25: "... promises Sarah a child but withholds the fulfilment until after problems arise and rejects Ishmael as the child of promise but makes of him a great nation. If Scripture yields no single answer to God's preferences, it does show that human beings yearn above all else to be among God's chosen".

[41] For another poem cf.: Mohja Kahf, 'The Water of Hajar and Other Poems', *Muslim World* 91, 2001, 31ff quoted by Frederiks, *Hagar in Islamic Tradition*, 242.

The second from Nelly Sachs (1891-1970) of European Jewish background, struggling likewise with these issues after the Shoa. For both authors living in exile the search for a "well", in order to survive stands central. Nelly Sachs' poem recalls to the thirsty their wells.[42]

> But your wells are your diaries, O Israel
> You, thirsty in the flesh of the earth
> many encounters are safeguarded for you
> in the fluid prayer shrine of the wells.
> Face of the angel,
> bowed down over Hagar's shoulder
> like a skin of fog
> blowing away her death.

Nelly Sachs addresses her own community – the Jewish post-holocaust community. The wells belong to them. However she wants to dig the wells and drink the water in order that humanity as a whole may survive. Remembrance serves as a means to survive. In the wells the encounters are guarded. The well is like a prayer-niche. The water in the well reflects the face of the angel tenderly embracing Hagar – not Sara. Death can be blown away.

Adonis, the Syrian poet and essayist, after having fled to the neighboring country of Lebanon in the sixties, escaped the Lebanese Civil war in the eighties and migrated to France. His book "Histoire qui se déchire sur le corps d'une femme" is a dialogical re-imagining of the Hagar story written in lyrics.[43] It is a story that tears apart the body of a woman.[44]

> The land which is muted and sleepy
> Begins to talk
> Opens his eyelids

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[42] Translation into English by the author. Cf. Nelly Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose. Gedichte*, Frankfurt a.M. 1988, 98f: Aber deine Brunnen /sind deine Tagebücher / o Israel /Ihr, durch das Fleisch der Erde Dürstenden,/viele Begegnungen sind euch aufbewahrt /im fließenden Gebetschrein der Brunnen. /Gesicht des Engels /über Hagars Schulter geneigt/wie eine Nebelhaut/ihren Tod fortblasend.

[43] Histoire qui se déchire sur le corps d'une femme. Traduction de l'arabe et postface de Houria Abdelouhed 2008.

[44] Translation into English by the author. Cf. Adonis, Histoire qui se déchire sur le corps d'une femme,123: La terre qui fut silence et sommeil / Commence à parler /Ouvre ses paupières / S'engouffre sous mon vêtement / Et ma poitrine palpite avec la sienne [....] / Mes racines sont celle qui se nourrissent dans cette terre. L'eau de Zamzam devient un second sang dans mes veines. /Devant moi en ce moment l univers est clos: mon enfant est crépuscule totale- je m'éparpille en lui / Je contemple un astre et sens que je sommeille dans ses bras.

Opens under my garment an abyss
And my breast aspens with hers
My roots are those who nourish themselves from this land
The water of ZamZam becomes a second blood in my veins
Ahead of me the universe is closed
My child is the dawn of the morning
I get lost in him
I meditate on a star and feel that I fall asleep in his arms

Finally a poem written by one of the Indonesian Christian members of the consortium: In her poem Nancy Novitra Souisa[45] binds the voices of Sara and Hagar together.[46] In their sights and hopes they are united.

That night
the moon shrinks from smile
The night clouds arduous to move
when they see the gloom
two troubled hearts and their daughters[47] burst out
If the birth of a new human being is a gift
Why our womb being so anxious whereas we want to rejoice
If our womb is a gift
Why they put aside into an area where we almost have no choice

Uh - we sigh
Ah - we mourn
Until God defends us one by one
Sarah - in my place God makes me smile
Hagar - on my flight God sees
Wail and lament - let your voices be heard continuously
So that our sufferings enough up here
just end on us
Never again our daughters shall cry
separated by ideological chasms

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[45] Mengapa /Jika rahim kami adalah anugerah/ Kami di sudutkan/ di tempat hampir tak berpilihan/ Uh /Kami berkeluh/ Ah/ kami meratap/Sampai/Tuhan membela kami /satu per satu/Sarah – ditempatku Tuhan membuatku tersenyum/ Hagar – di pelarianku Tuhan melihat/Ratap dan keluh /perdengarkan suaramu terus/ Supaya derita kami cukuplah sampai di sini /Sampai pada kami saja /Jangan lagi anak-anak kami menangis/Karena terpisah dalam jurang-jurang ideologi/ Biarlah mereka bersuka .. karena kelahiran mereka adalah anugerah /Bukan derita – nestapa – kutukan/Biarlah keturunan mereka bercerita /tentang berkat dari kehidupan seorang perempuan /seorang ibu / seorang manusia. For my translation I gratefully made use of the English translation of the poet Nancy Souisa herself and of a translation into Dutch by Josien Folbert/Kerk in Actie.

[46] Or like Letty Russell, 185 puts it: "how can we rewrite the story so that the two women are reconciled?"

[47] Nancy Souisa herself translated *anaknya* with "daughters", unlike the Dutch translator who choose "children". According to http://firefox.sederet.com/translate.php it could mean son, her son, his son, children, daughters and seems therefore not a gendered noun.

> Let them rejoice since their birth is a gift
> No pain - no sorrow - no curse
> Let them tell their descendants about blessings from a woman, a mother, a human being.

The multiple possibilities of identification offered by the texts from our intertwined traditions are the seeds of narrative ethics. In re-reading her and his stories we rewrite history. Hagar and Sara join each other in their care for their daughters. Sharing our wells and their beauty shall be fruitful.