Between the Slavery of the Law and the Freedom of the Promise in Grace: A Semiotic Reading of the Allegory of Sarah and Hagar

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Abstract: The article analyses the allegory of Sarah and Hagar as a problem of dual forms of religiosity: serving God out of fear and obligation under the Law, or through free and loving adherence under Grace. It aims to conceptually define these two profiles of believers, model the contracts that govern them, and evaluate the ethical and affective effects of each regime. The theoretical framework combines discursive semiotics and sociosemiotics. The methodology applies semiotic analysis to the biblical corpus, mapping the figurative universe, isotopies of fear and love, modal schemas, and the narrative trajectories of Law and Grace. The results indicate two contracts: in the regime associated with Hagar, compulsory obedience predominates, whereas in the regime associated with Sarah, fiduciary adherence prevails. The study concludes that the passage from legalistic servitude to gracious filiation reconfigures the believer's identity and fosters a fruitful relational spirituality, in which love expels fear and sustains freedom.

Keywords: Discursive semiotics, Sociosemiotics, Sarah and Hagar, Narrative contract, Modalities of wanting and duty.

1. Exegetical Context

In chapter 4 of the Epistle to the Galatians, the apostle Paul presents an allegory involving Sarah and Hagar to illustrate two types of relationships with God. Sarah, Abraham's free wife, and Hagar, his servant, bore sons under opposite conditions: Isaac, the "son of the promise", born of Sarah, and Ishmael, the "son according to the flesh", born of Hagar (Galatians 4:22-23). Paul interprets these women as symbols of two covenants: Hagar represents the covenant of Mount Sinai, linked to slavery under the Law, whereas Sarah represents the superior covenant of Grace,

associated with freedom (Galatians 4:24-26). In other words, Hagar and her son figure those who submit to God out of legalistic obligation and fear of condemnation, whereas Sarah and her son represent those who serve God freely and willingly, moved by faith and love. The Pauline allegory therefore provides a narrative and conceptual context to distinguish two modes of religious fidelity: one sustained by fear and servitude, the other grounded in trust and freedom. This article develops this theme from the perspective of discursive semiotics and sociosemiotics, seeking to define clearly the characteristics of these "two concepts" of believers – the "children of Hagar", slaves out of fear, and the "children of Sarah", servants out of love – and the effects of meaning that result from each posture of faith. From the viewpoint of theology and religious practice, the distinction outlined in the allegory remains relevant. Many believers today still divide between serving God out of duty, fearful of divine punishment, or serving Him through voluntary devotion, inspired by love and gratitude. In the biblical account titled "Hagar and Sarah" in Galatians 4:21-31, this dichotomy is presented vividly. In contrast, those compared to the "wife" of Christ, just as Sarah was Abraham's free wife, serve out of love "from a pure and sincere heart", without feeling the things of God as a burden. Thus, a fundamental opposition arises: on the one hand, the forced fulfilment of precepts, experienced as a heavy yoke by the believer who fears perdition; on the other, loving and spontaneous obedience, felt as light Grace by the one who has found in God a loving Father. With this proposition delineated, the article presents the theoretical foundations needed to analyse this opposition from a semiotic perspective, in order to break down the mechanisms of signification at work in the allegory of Sarah and Hagar.

2. Theoretical foundations: Semiotics and Sociosemiotics

Structural semiotics offers valuable conceptual tools to analyse narratives and identify underlying relations of meaning. A key concept is that of modalities, which concern the dispositions or attitudes of subjects in a given discourse, such as the modalizations of wanting-to-do, as will or desire to act, and having-to-do, as obligation or duty to act. In the biblical passage, one may interpret that the "child of Sarah" acts above all under the modality of wanting-to-do, that is, serves God because one wants to, moved internally by love and faith, whereas the "child of Hagar" acts under the modality of having-to-do, serving because one feels obliged to, coerced externally by fear of condemnation. The modal structures of power and duty engender distinct values: being-able-to-do is associated with freedom, whereas not-being-able-not-to-do defines compulsory obedience. Put simply, being-able-to-do refers to the capacity to act by choice, the freedom to do or not do something; whereas not-being-able-not-to-do describes the situation of one who cannot help but do what is imposed, in which case the action results from coercion or obligatory obedience. This theoretical distinction illuminates the two profiles of believers: the children of Sarah enjoy freedom, serving because they so desire, whereas the children of Hagar are subject to servile obedience, serving because they do not dare to do otherwise. It is important to note that modal values such as obedience and prescription presuppose each other, composing hierarchical relations of dominator and dominated: "it even seems that the definition of hierarchical relations of dominator/dominated must take into account this modal complementarity", because "obedience, a modal value of the subject, presupposes… prescription" by an authoritarian addresser (Greimas

and Courtés, 2013, p. 153). Thus, wherever there is a subject who obeys because one cannot act differently, there is implicitly an addresser who imposes the order which, in the religious context, may be thought of as God or even the religious institution prescribing commandments under penalty of punishment by establishing a contract of requirement. In this way, modality anticipates two outlines: a voluntary one, of the subject of wanting, oriented by love, versus a coercive one, of the subject of duty, oriented by fear. Every plot can be decomposed into basic actantial roles as actants, which are independent of concrete characters and show the structure of relations and functions present in discourse. In the case of Sarah and Hagar, Paul reconstructs the story in allegorical terms that highlight an addresser and two distinct narrative programs. The ultimate addresser is God, yet manifested in different ways in each covenant: in the Sinai covenant, that of Hagar, He appears primarily as legislator and judge, the one who delivers the written Law with obligations; in the covenant of Grace, that of Sarah, God is the giver of the promise and loving Father who seeks a filial relationship. The value-object at stake is essentially the inheritance of salvation and life with God, figured by Paul as the "Jerusalem above", the free mother of all the faithful (Galatians 4:26), that is, belonging to the people of God and the blessing of eternal life. The subjects are the believers, human recipients of the divine message, who pursue this object.

However, the way of relating to the addresser and seeking the object varies drastically: in the "Hagar" program, the believing subject pursues salvation by fulfilling the Law, by personal merit and servile effort, being motivated by fear, the implicit threat of exclusion and condemnation in case of failure; in the "Sarah" program, the believing subject receives salvation as a gift through faith, being motivated by desire, the attraction of God's promise and love. Narratively, one may say that in the first case there is a unilateral coercive contract in which God imposes conditions and humankind submits in exchange for protection; in the second case there is a bilateral fiduciary contract in which God freely offers the promise and invites humankind to adhere by faith, establishing a relationship of mutual trust. The notion of contract in semiotics refers precisely to the establishment of an initial intersubjective relation that transforms the status of the subjects involved. Greimas and Courtés (2013) define contract, in a broad sense, as "the act of establishing… an intersubjective relationship that has the effect of modifying the status of being and/or seeming of each of the subjects present" (p. 99). In the theological realm, covenant is the term equivalent to contract: the old covenant of the Law constituted the Hebrews as "children of the slave woman", fearful servants whose spiritual identity was marked by subjection to norms; the new covenant in Christ constitutes the faithful as "children of the free woman", participants in the status of children of God, guided inwardly by the Spirit (Galatians 4:7, 31).

This change of status – from slave to child, from fearful servant to loving servant – is precisely the core of the Sarah-Hagar allegory. Semiotics therefore provides a framework to formalize such an opposition that can be schematized in the deictic pair Freedom versus Slavery (or Grace versus Law), from which sub-contraries can be derived: Voluntary obedience versus Rebellion, forced obedience versus Autonomy, and so forth, in order to map systematically the positions possible between these extremes. It is important to consider that the contrary terms "free" and "slave" organize the entire semantic field in question, corresponding to the regimes of faith

through love and obedience through fear. Whereas Greimas focuses on narrative logics, the sociosemiotics developed by Landowski expands the analysis to social interactions and the regimes of meaning that arise from contact between subjects. In *Presences of the Other* (Landowski, 2012), the semiotician explores different ways by which a collective deal with alterity, that is, with those who are perceived as "others". Although Landowski discusses above all intergroup relations, such as natives versus foreigners and majority versus minority, many of his concepts can be transposed, by analogy, to the religious domain and to the relation between the believer and the totally Other in the person of God or between different regimes of living the faith.

Landowski argues that the subject is constituted only in relation to the other, "he needs a he – the 'others' – to reach semiotic existence" (Landowski, 2012, p. 4). In other words, the way someone defines oneself and construct's identity depends on difference in relation to another and on the image that the other reflects back. Applied to our case: the identity of the faithful as a "free child" or a "slave child" is directly linked to how one conceives God as the Great Other and how one conceives the relation between them. If God is apprehended primarily as a severe and distant legislator, the faithful will tend to perceive themselves as submissive and fearful servants; if, by contrast, God is apprehended as a near and loving Father, the faithful may recognize themselves as beloved children and participants in divine intimacy. In both cases, there is an identity construction mediated by alterity: who I am for myself depends on whom I imagine God to be and how I believe He sees me. Landowski describes at least two opposing regimes of relation with the Other that can clarify the difference between serving out of fear and serving out of love. A first regime is guided by identity security and distance: faced with difference, the subject may adopt an attitude of distrust, precaution, and fear, perceiving the Other as a threat to one's integrity. This posture is akin to exclusion or subjugation – either the Other is excluded, or forcibly transformed into the same to neutralize alterity. Landowski (2012) refers to this attitude as an "excess of fear… vis-à-vis a non-self-posited as a threat" (p. 23). At the opposite extreme lies the regime of openness to the Other, which presupposes curiosity, welcome, and even love for difference. This attitude, which Landowski calls "admission" of the Other, implies seeing alterity as something valuable that can complement the "we" Landowski (2012, p. 23) states that such a posture involves "a gesture of openness, acceptance, curiosity, perhaps 'love' for the difference that makes the Other… be other", so that what previously generated distrust "becomes here… a pole of attraction" through its very alterity. In this regime, subjects tend to recognize the Other as another subject, with equal dignity, rather than reducing the Other to an object to be controlled or feared (Landowski, 2012, p. 24).

Transposing these concepts to the religious sphere, one may draw a parallel in which the believer who is a "child of Hagar" relates to God analogously to the attitude of fear and exclusion. One sees God almost as an austere authority demanding absolute conformity, the supreme Other whose power must be appeased. This produces a relation of distance and formalism: the believer seeks to "assimilate" to sacred norms so as not to arouse divine wrath, that is, strives to adapt completely to what one believes to be God's will, suppressing spontaneity. One fears "contamination" by any deviation, like the fearful social group that avoids cultural mixing for fear of corruption, as Landowski analyses. This is a faith lived by precaution and tension: the

individual constantly watches actions, and each commandment is followed not out of the joy of pleasing God, but out of dread of transgression and condemnation. One may say that, in this regime, the believer objectifies oneself and also God, since one sees oneself as a servant without will, an object in the hands of divine destiny, and often conceives God in equally reified terms, as a blind punitive force, almost legalistic, to which requirements must be satisfied. This relation lacks true dialogue or intimacy; the programmatic contract of fixed rules and strict compliance predominates rather than personal encounter.

By contrast, the believer who is a "child of Sarah" embodies the attitude of openness and love outlined by Landowski. One recognizes God effectively as Other, yet an Other with whom one desires communion rather than distance. There is genuine affective exchange: the believer loves God for who He is and trusts that God loves the believer; such trust dispels paralyzing fear. In this regime, divine alterity is not denied, because God remains the totally Other, infinitely superior, yet is welcomed with curiosity and desire. The believer values the difference between human and divine precisely because this difference is a source of learning and transformation; God's holiness attracts rather than terrifies. One may note a kind of reciprocal adjustment in which the faithful seeks to align one's will to God's will not by imposition, but by attunement, by "reciprocal sympathy" in the sense of feeling with the Other. Landowski describes, in the context of intercultural relations, that partners can approach one another driven by reciprocal sympathy, discovering complementarity in differences and "new possibilities for joint action" (Landowski, 2012, p. 23). By affinity, the believer moved by love discovers in the relation with God a complementarity: God offers grace and purpose; the faithful offers voluntary surrender and loving service. There is here a tacit fiduciary contract sustained by trust: unlike the legalistic contract in which each error brings punishment, the gracious contract admits faults yet invites repentance and continuation of the relationship. This interaction approaches the regime of adjustment or presence, in which behaviours are not entirely programmed by rigid rules but regulated by the subjects' sensitivity to one another, that is, a being-with guided more by shared experience than by predefined codes.

Although Landowski treats human interactions, one may say metaphorically that the believer who is a child of Sarah seeks to live in God's presence authentically, "feeling the Other's feeling" (Landowski, 2014, p. 18), that is, seeks to will what God wills and love what God loves. This affective convergence recalls the biblical figure of the slave who, having obtained manumission, voluntarily chooses to remain in the master's house out of love for him, receiving a mark on the ear as a symbol of perpetual dedication (Exodus 21:5-6). This image is invoked to illustrate the transition from the condition of slave-subject to servant and, subsequently, free person, upon accepting to have the ear pierced and, finally, to enter the house of one's lord with love and joy (Exodus 21:6). The servant out of love chooses to serve even when free to leave because one has found in the relationship with the Lord a sense of life, shelter, and incomparable joy.

3. Semiotic Analysis of the Opposition between Fear and Love in Faith

The allegory in Galatians 4:21-31 presents a dual narrative schema. There are two addressers at play, corresponding to the covenants: on the one hand, the Law of Moses, metaphorically associated with Hagar/Sinai; on the other, the promise of the New Gospel, associated with Sarah/heavenly Jerusalem. Both emanate from God, yet represent distinct modes of mediation between God and humankind. The Law acts as an addresser that manipulates subjects by the imperative, using the strategy of duty and the threat of curse for disobedience, as in Deuteronomy 28, where blessings and curses are stipulated conditionally. The divine promise acts as an addresser that manipulates through desire and trust, offering unmerited Grace and the prospect of divine filiation: we receive "adoption as children" and the Spirit who cries "Abba, Father" (Galatians 4:5-7). The subjects summoned are, ultimately, the faithful who respond to one or another call. In the original story, Abraham and his sons figure these subjects: Abraham, upon accepting Sarah's proposal to bear a son with Hagar, assumes the role of a subject who attempts to fulfil the promise by one's own means, a performance motivated by human being-able-to-do, yet outside God's will.

Later, upon finally receiving Isaac from Sarah, Abraham embodies the subject who trusts and receives by faith. In an allegorical key, however, Paul applies the roles of "son of the slave woman" and "son of the free woman" respectively to groups of people: the Jews or Judaizing Christians who wish to remain "under the Law" versus the Christians born of Grace by the Spirit, free from the Law. Thus, the value-object, the inheritance of the covenant, that is, being counted as a child of God and heir to the promise of salvation, is disputed between these two collective subjects. Paul concludes categorically that "the son of the slave woman shall never be heir with the son of the free woman" (Galatians 4:30), indicating that only one of the paths leads to the valued object.

From a semiotic perspective, one may interpret that the narrative program governed by the contract of the Law is structurally deficient, since the subject who seeks justification by the works of the Law does not attain the object, just as Ishmael, symbol of the Law, did not inherit the promise. By contrast, the program governed by the contract of Grace is effective: the believing subject who embraces faith, as Isaac, receives the inheritance freely. This difference is important because it suggests that the regime of meaning based on fear, although it may produce outward conformity for a time, does not lead to the fullness of religious meaning nor to full communion with God, whereas the regime of love leads the subject to the totality of religious meaning. One could say that in the narrative course of "fear" there is a break or failure in final performance because the slave-subject cannot perfectly fulfil the Law nor obtain eternal life by it, since the Law served as a "temporary support", yet could not save (Galatians 3:24; Romans 8:3). In the course of "love/faith", performance is guaranteed not by the subject's competence but by the addresser God who fulfils His promise, thus enabling the subject to attain the value through the adherence of believing. In this way, the narrative structure reinforces the superiority of the relationship of trust over mere servile obedience. Examining discourses through the lens of

modalities, clear isotopies are perceived as recurrent lines of meaning associated with each type of believer.

For the believer moved by fear, words from a negative semantic field stand out: “burden”, “weight”, “yoke”, “prisoner”, “fear”, “obligation”. Such deictic markers generally describe that for these believers “the things of God become a burden, a weight… everything is heavy, because the heart is not involved”, although “bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Here “weight” and “burden” are metaphors of the modal state of undesired obligation, indicating that the person performs religious actions, such as gathering, praying, or praising, merely as impositions, without pleasure or spontaneity. This corresponds precisely to the modalization not being able not to do: the faithful must act because one fears the consequences of not acting, yet inwardly one would not like to do so. The same passage alludes to repressed desires: the individual would like to give in to worldly vanities, such as drinking or gambling, yet forbids oneself from this because one knows that “that door is the wide road to perdition”, which leads to condemnation. Thus, there is an internal dynamic of modal conflict: the wanting-to-be worldly is restrained by the being-obliged-to-be holy through fear. One could represent this conflict on a modal square: on one side, religious having-to-do allied to not being able not to do, that is, not being able to fail to comply as obedience by necessity; on the other, concealed in negation, worldly wanting-to-do constantly denied by the former. The result is tension and spiritual unhappiness.

It is important to note that when having-to-do and wanting-to-do collide, either one must subordinate itself to the other, or a crisis of meaning ensues. In the case of the slave-believer, one subordinates personal wanting to imposed duty, yet without truly integrating this duty into wanting, unlike the free believer. For the believer moved by love, the vocabulary isotopy is the opposite: one speaks of “love”, “joy”, “lightness”, “first love”, “the happiness of being a believer”, “freedom”. The preacher commonly invites: “cease to be a slave to become a servant”, understanding that the beauty of this Grace is marvellous, since “my burden is light, my yoke is easy” (Matthew 11:29-30). Here the invitation of Jesus reverberates, where He contrasts the easy yoke, He offers with the heavy burdens of legalistic religion. The semantic field of lightness and joy signals that for those who serve out of love, religious practices cease to be toilsome and become a source of satisfaction. This indicates a convergence between wanting and duty: the subject wants to do exactly what one ought to do as a believer, not by coercion, but because one has come to value these actions within Grace. There is an internalization of duty transformed into wanting.

Greimas and Courtés (2013) mention that some theorists see the subject’s having-to-do as a “wanting [transferred] from the addresser” or, conversely, wanting-to-do as “a self-destined duty”. In service out of love, one may say that the believer has assumed duty as something self-destining, because one personally wants to fulfil God’s will. Heart and will have aligned with God’s, fulfilling Psalm 40:8: “I delight to do Your will”. In modal terms, a full being-able-to-do now prevails, with freedom, combined with a virtuous wanting-to-do: the faithful has freedom of choice and decides to serve willingly; one does not “need” to stay, yet

desires to remain, like the freed slave who voluntarily decides to remain because one loves the former master. This modal alignment eliminates internal tension and produces a thymic ecstasy of pleasure and joy: "the happiness of being a believer fills the heart", as is often heard in homiletic words.

Regarding regimes of interaction and the value of the Other, one can appreciate how each mode of faith implies a specific type of interaction with the Other, with God and also with the community and the world. The fearful believer tends to relate to God in a contractual-programmed way. One imagines, even unconsciously, the relation as a conditional pact: "If I fulfil everything, God will accept me and avoid my condemnation". This mentality accentuates radical alterity, God there, I here, united only by an agreement of obligations, and reduces communication to a system of calculated exchange, that is, one's works for salvation. Landowski would observe that this kind of bond converges largely toward the regime of strategic manipulation, in which actions are guided by a foreseen logic of cause and effect. The faithful acts "correctly" to provoke in God the desired reaction of not punishing. At the same time, one lives in a kind of moral isolation, avoids the "world", and even within the community may fail to create deep bonds, for everything depends on individual compliance with rules. The alterity of the neighbour may also be uncomfortable, since for this believer it is common for religious views based on fear to slide into judgmental or intolerant postures toward those who deviate from the norm, because difference threatens the security of the code.

Indeed, Landowski (2012) comments that the subject who lives according to rigid rules tends to find strange and disapprove "those who think and act according to worldviews different from one's own". Thus, the child of Hagar risks assuming the role of the assimilator: the one who, secure in rectitude, demands that all conform, since one cannot bear difference. In the religious sphere, this manifests itself in legalistic and exclusionary stances; for example, the believer who serves out of fear often seeks to impose on others the same strict observances, believing that only thus will they be saved. Spiritual experience, in this regime, depends more on norms and doctrines than on persons and relationships. It is therefore unsurprising that the predominant image of God is that of an impersonal legislator or judge, concerned more with rules than with relationships. Ultimately, this way of living results in the cooling of the "first love", similar to a couple whose relationship has fallen into mere routine obligation; when everything becomes an obligation, the believer who serves out of fear often practices Grace without enthusiasm and mechanically, where God is honoured with the lips while the heart is far away (Isaiah 29:13).

The loving believer relates to God in a more interactive and dialogical regime, close to what Landowski would call adjustment or presence. Here, in place of a cold contract of exchange, there is a relational commitment comparable to a spousal or filial covenant. The believer understands oneself as a subject in dialogue with another subject, God; recognizes the divine alterity that God is not identical to the believer, yet without attempting either to distance oneself or to dissolve entirely, but maintaining a healthy tension between intimacy and reverence. Landowski (2012) speaks of the need, in admitting the Other, to balance two tendencies: neither to merge completely, losing oneself in the other, nor to reify the other, as if to possess

completely. Applied to theology, one perceives that the believer who serves out of love does not wish to lose identity, because God does not require the annihilation of personality, but voluntary transformation, and knows that one cannot possess or domesticate God, because God will remain sovereign and different; even so, one seeks spiritual union while maintaining the Creator-creature distinction. It is a relation of mutual presence: the believer lives in God's presence and invites God to be present in daily life, while God, according to Christian faith, truly makes His dwelling in the heart of the faithful by the Holy Spirit.

This constant exchange of presences produces adaptability, the believer shapes actions according to how one senses divine direction, and trusts that God welcomes prayers and works that are imperfect yet sincere. In semiotic terms, it is a less predictable regime, since it involves personality and spontaneity. It is not anomy or absence of rule; the believer who serves out of love is not antinomian and fulfils the commandments, yet the motivation for fulfilling them has changed: it ceases to be the guarantee of avoiding punishment and becomes the desire to please the Beloved and resemble Him. This produces affectivity and transformation as central values. Landowski (2012) suggests that passionate relations, in the sense of being guided by passion and affection, have their own dynamic, distinct from instrumental rationality, and that even in collective contexts it is useful to think of idealized models of relation inspired by personal loving relationships.

At bottom, the biblical metaphor of the Church as the Bride of Christ points precisely to this model, where faith is lived as a love story. The child of Sarah, then, is the one who has sustained or recovered the "first love" (Revelation 2:4), preserving that initial devotion characterized by enthusiasm, intimacy, and voluntary surrender. Everything one does, whether praising or serving the neighbour, one seeks to do "with all one's soul and heart, because one loves". Consequently, one's spiritual life is marked by graciousness and fruitfulness: lightness, because "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17) and love casts out fear (1 John 4:18); fruitfulness, because service done in love tends to persevere and bear abundant fruit for the benefit of others, whereas service moved by fear is often sterile or superficial.

4. Implications and Contrasts between the Two Modes of Serving

Regarding identity and motivation, the children of Hagar, a metaphor for believers who serve out of fear, build their religious identity along the path of servitude; they see themselves fundamentally as sinners in danger, forgiven conditionally and always on the verge of punishment if they slip. Their primary motivation is to escape punishment, fear of hell, judgment, and divine disapproval. Therefore, they conform to a strict standard of conduct, often without understanding it in depth or internalizing its values, but accepting it as the price to pay for spiritual security. Psychologically, this posture can generate religious anxiety, excessive guilt, and even a distorted image of God, conceived more as authoritarian than as merciful Father. In addition, by the mechanism of projection, such believers tend to judge others with the same rigor by which they believe they are judged, which results in legalistic religious environments that often show little grace toward deviants. By contrast, the children of Sarah, believers who serve

out of love, build their identity in the key of divine filiation. They see themselves as God's adopted children, unconditionally loved by Him thanks to Christ's work of salvation. Their main motivation is gratitude and love; they obey because they love the One who first loved them (1 John 4:19) and because they wish to honor Him. They have a more balanced and benevolent image of God; they recognize His justice but also His mercy in Christ's Grace, which allows them to have confidence and joy in the life of faith.

In place of paralyzing anxiety, they experience peace and security in knowing they are accepted; rather than chronic guilt, they live healthy repentance when they fail, trusting in heavenly forgiveness; before judging others harshly, they tend to exercise more compassion, for they know they have been the targets of mercy. Linking norm and ethics in this proposition, it is striking that both groups can, superficially, fulfil the same religious norms, such as attending services, abstaining from vices, and practicing similar moral precepts. However, the difference lies not so much in what they do as in how and why they do it. For the believer moved by fear, the norm is heteronomous and coercive, an external command followed by imposition. This can generate uncritical conformism, blind obedience without understanding the spirit of the law, or at times hidden rebellion: as the saying goes, "forced obedience makes many into hidden revolt". Not infrequently, when external surveillance disappears, individuals who have known only fear as motivation abandon religious practice altogether, since they never incorporated it as something valuable in itself.

On the other hand, for the believer moved by love, the guideline becomes almost autonomous and desirable: one assumes the values underlying the commandment. For example, one does not remain honest merely out of fear of hell, but because one loves justice and wishes to reflect God's character, guarding holiness not only out of dread of the "world", but because one values purity and communion with God, which sin disrupts. This internalization of ethics makes one's morality solid over the long term, since it does not depend exclusively on oversight or threats, but on conviction and on the internal work of the Holy Spirit, according to the theology of the new covenant, "I will write my laws on their heart" (Hebrews 10:16). Therefore, although an outside observer may see two equally upright believers, God "who sees the heart" values more highly the one whose rectitude proceeds from faith working through love (Galatians 5:6) than the one whose rectitude is merely fear in disguise. Indeed, from a semiotic standpoint, the "contract" established in Grace generates more proactive and creative agent-subjects, since they act out of love and go beyond the minimum required, whereas the contract of fear produces reactive subjects limited to what is strictly necessary to avoid sanction.

Thus, the communal and social consequences within the faith community can generate tension in the coexistence of these two profiles. The children of Hagar tend to be bothered by the freedom of the children of Sarah, just as in the biblical allegory Ishmael persecuted Isaac (Galatians 4:29). This can be interpreted as the enduring tendency of those who are insecure in their faith to criticize or persecute those who live the faith with freedom and joy. Historically, this dynamic appears in relations between legalism and movements of spiritual renewal. While legalism accuses the free of "licentiousness" or heresy, the latter lament others' legalism. Paul instructs

the Galatians symbolically to "cast out the slave woman and her son" (Galatians 4:30), indicating that, in the context of the Church, the servile mentality should entirely give way to the filial mentality. In other words, the new community in Christ should be characterized by Grace, not by slavery to the law. Yet churches to this day struggle between these two tendencies. Semiotics helps us understand that these are distinct regimes of signification in confrontation: a more rigid regime, based on explicit rules of programming, and a more relational regime, based on interaction and the trust of adjustment.

Landowski (2012) suggests that, even socially, "confederation is worth more than fusion", that is, maintaining autonomous identities in harmonious relation is better than obliterating differences. In the ecclesial context, this could be read as an appeal to respect the gradual growth of each person: ideally, the "children of Hagar" should be pastorally led to become "children of Sarah" without simply being expelled or marginalized. After all, many begin serving out of fear and only later discover love, and part of this process involves living with those who already serve out of love, learning by example and convivence in the regime of adjustment. Conversely, it is important that the leadership and the official theology of a community clearly affirm the supremacy of Grace over legalism to prevent fear from again enslaving those who have already been freed, since "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). With regard to the semantic and symbolic dimension, it is important to emphasize the symbolic richness of this dichotomy. Sarah and Hagar are not only historical characters but semiotic archetypes of two modes of relation with the sacred.

This allegory reverberates in other classic binaries of culture and religion: grace versus law, spirit versus letter, intention versus forced action, child versus slave, Eros/agape versus Thanatos/fear. Greimas emphasizes that meaning arises from structured differences and oppositions, and here the opposition between fear and love creates a fundamental semantic axis around which several other contrasts gravitate: living faith versus dead religion, authenticity versus hypocrisy (because where there is no love, hypocritical observance easily arises merely as self-protection), joy versus sad servility, initiative versus resignation, experienced presence of God versus felt absence of God (since fear often implies the sense of a distant God, whereas love experiences God's presence). In semiotic terms, each deixis gains full meaning only in relation to its contrary, love understood not as a mere abstract feeling but as that element that expels fear and transforms the quality of action, and fear understood not only as emotion but as that state that inhibits love and negatively reconfigures action. In this sense, the rhetorical question asked in sermons, "Whose child do you wish to be, Sarah's or Hagar's?", constitutes a way of calling believers to metasemiotic awareness, the awareness of which regime of signification they are effectively adopting in their life of faith.

Conclusion

Returning to the central question of Sarah and Hagar as the allegory of two concepts, these concepts can be clearly defined in light of semiotic and sociosemiotic analysis. In sum, Hagar/Sinai presents the concept of a heteronomous religiosity marked by servitude out of fear.

Her spiritual "children" are believers whose relationship with God is based predominantly on duty and fear of condemnation. They serve God not so much out of appreciation of the good or free desire but because they feel obliged to do so to avoid eternal punishment. This type of believer lives in a condition analogous to that of a slave, fulfilling orders without enjoying intimacy with the lord, obeying without true communion of will. Semiotic ally, this corresponds to modal subjects defined by obligation (having-to-do) and forced obedience (not being able not to do), within a hierarchical contract of dominator and dominated. By contrast, Sarah/Jerusalem symbolizes the concept of a spirituality autonomous in God, characterized by service out of love. Her "children" are believers whose relationship with God is founded on trusting faith and filial love. They serve God voluntarily, moved by gratitude, salvation, and the delight in fulfilling the Father's will. They live as free children in the Father's house, participating in His intimacy, knowing His heart, and making Him their "treasure" (Matthew 6:21). Modally, these subjects act under the inspiration of wanting-to-do in consonance with the being-obliged-to-be of the good, experiencing the freedom (being-able-to-do) of those who are not under condemnation (Romans 8:1) and the joy of God's strengthening presence (Psalm 16:11). In terms of interaction, they have established with the divine Other a contract of mutual trust, where punitive fear has been surpassed by the bond of a covenant of love.

Therefore, with plausible arguments, we conclude that serving God out of fear and serving God out of love are qualitatively distinct, almost opposite experiences, although outwardly they may share similar practices. Semiotic analysis has shown that these two modalities of faith operate according to different logics, one governed by imposition and code, the other by adherence and a living bond. In light of Landowski's sociosemiotics, it is understood that only the second modality, that of the regime of openness and love, allows a subject-to-subject relation with the divine, that is, a mature faith in which the believer assumes filial identity and lives God's alterity as a source of positive meaning, not as a threat. Whereas in the modality of fear the believing subject remains in an objectal, subjugated position, which may even preserve from gross errors – fear, although not ideal, is "something" in the absence of love – it does not promote growth in the quality of meaning or spiritual fruitfulness.

Ultimately, as Scripture points out and the analysis confirms, "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18), that is, the fullness of the relationship with God expels the need for coercion by terror. The ideal proposed, in the biblical text and in semiotic studies, is that believers should not remain children of the slave woman but become all children of the free woman, enjoying the freedom for which Christ has set them free. In discursive language, it is a matter of leaving the regime of prescription for that of voluntary adherence; in sociosemiotic terms, of transcending the defensive logic of fear toward a loving "admission contract" in which, amid the differences between Creator and creature, what emerges is not anguish but attraction and communion. In short, Sarah and Hagar continue to challenge us today: if Hagar warns us about the limits of a servile and methodical faith, Sarah inspires us to embrace filial faith, sustained in grace and truth, where we serve God not as terror-stricken slaves but as beloved children and devoted servants, joyful co-participants in the divine promise.

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