

Gender and Agency: Moses' Nativity Story and its Transformations in Patristic and Rabbinic Texts

The biblical account about Moses' birth and childhood shows an interesting structure of relations of power and gender. The Egyptian Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the narrated world is powerless compared to the women in the story. Through their non-violent resistance the midwives, Moses' mother and sister, and Pharaoh's daughter save the life of Moses, the future saviour of his people. Patristic and rabbinic texts transform the structures of the biblical text and present power and gender relations according to their own ideas and necessities. Origen's second homily on Exodus, Ephrem the Syrian's Exodus commentary, Midrash Tanhuma, and a lengthy passage in the tractate Sotah in the Babylonian Talmud each find their particular way of interpreting the Exodus narrative. The paper asks for the ways in which the different interpretations take up the structure of power, agency and gender presented in Exo 1-2. Furthermore, it tries to analyse the implications of these transformations for the respective communities.

The biblical narrative in Exodus 1-2 aims at the birth and salvation of the future saviour, Moses. In the narrative women play a crucial role. They all are closely connected to the birth and care of children. The sister, one of these women in Exodus 2, is in all interpretations identified with Miriam. In the biblical text Miriam appears only as an adult and as a prophet. In Exodus 1-2 the women are the ones who are active and initiative, who perceive God's plan (the midwives do, at least), who promote life and through their resolute resistance change the plans of Pharaoh who is the representative of death. The active figures, who at last really have power over life and death, are the women, the midwives, the mother, the sister, and Pharaoh's daughter. They act according to God's intentions; they are empowered and supported by God, primarily in the proliferation of the Hebrews. To fear God means here: to be on the side of life and to struggle against the power of death. Together the women contribute to Israel's salvation from Egypt. At the moment Moses becomes an adult, the women leave the story. But without them he would not have survived and would never have had the chance to become the saviour of them all.

The patristic and rabbinic texts take up the narratives about the women in Exodus in quite different contexts. They interpret them according to their own ideas about women, their ideals of social relationships and relationships between males and females, men and women. Origen's allegorical interpretation results in a depreciation of the female as representative of everything earthly, fleshly and non-Christian. Ephrem the Syrian, in contrast, keeps close to the biblical text. The importance of the women is further enhanced, probably with respect to a female audience. Yet at the same time, Ephrem enhances Moses' significance. Midrash Tanhuma reduces the women's part considerably. God's powerful acting and the person of Moses are central to this interpretation. The Talmud concentrates on genealogy and the constitution and salvation of Israel where the women play a crucial role.

The patristic and rabbinic interpretations, therefore, take different paths. All texts transform the structure of gender and agency as they are presented in the biblical text more or less to adapt and interpret the text for their respective contexts and for their respective interests and ideals. These interpretations were effective in the Christian and Jewish communities who passed them down through the centuries. They shaped the image of women (and men) and their positions and possibilities substantially and sometimes are still powerful today.