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Michal Bar-Asher Siegal / Tzvi Novick /  
Christine Hayes (eds.)

# The Faces of Torah

Studies in the Texts and Contexts of  
Ancient Judaism in Honor of Steven Fraade



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With 2 Figures

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## Introduction

Steven Fraade, the Mark Taper Professor of the History of Judaism at Yale University, was born in New York City in 1949. He entered Brown University in 1966 as a physics major, and left in 1970 with a degree in religious studies, after taking courses with Salo Baron and Jacob Neusner. Steven spent a number of years after college in Israel, first as a member of the group that re-established Kibbutz Gezer, then at Kibbutz Hulda.

Upon returning from Israel, Steven took classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary, then, in 1974, entered the PhD program at the University of Pennsylvania in the Department of Oriental Studies, Near-Eastern Division. His studies there—especially under Jeffrey Tigay (Hebrew Bible), Barry Eichler (Ancient Near Eastern legal literature), Robert Kraft (Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity), Zvi Rin (Aramaic), R. E. A. Palmer (Roman History), and most importantly Judah Goldin (Rabbinics), his advisor—shaped Steven’s academic career. He also took advantage of the presence of numerous visiting scholars from Israel to develop ties with Israeli academia, another determinative influence on his scholarly trajectory. Steven’s dissertation would serve as the foundation of his first book, *Enosh and His Generation: Pre-Israelite Hero and History in Post-Biblical Interpretation*. Finally, and of no little moment, Steven’s stint in graduate school also yielded his marriage, in 1979, to Ellen Cohen. They are the parents of Shoshana, Tani, and Liora.

After graduating from Penn in 1980, Steven took up a position in the history of early Judaism in the Department of Religious Studies at Yale University, which has profited from his presence ever since. In his early years at Yale, Steven benefited from the support and guidance of senior colleagues in Religious Studies and beyond, among them Hans Frei, William Hallo, Geoffrey Hartman, Bentley Layton, Wayne Meeks, and Franz Rosenthal. The poststructuralist moment at Yale in the 1980s, which drew attention to the performative aspect of texts, helped shape Steven’s second book, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy*, which was published in 1991 and won the National Jewish Book Award for Scholarship. Together with his colleagues in the Judaic Studies Program and beyond, Steven has made Yale’s Religious Studies Department a major international destination for the study of Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism.

Steven has contributed in major and enduring ways to our understanding of the legal literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the “halakhic midrashim” of the early rabbinic movement, the dynamics of ancient scholasticism, and an assortment of issues in late antique Roman Palestine: rabbinic asceticism, rabbinic institutions,

literary and orality, translation, targum, and multilingualism. His scholarship is notable for its capaciousness and nuance. It is capacious in its chronological scope, stretching from Second Temple literature to the late antique synagogue. It is capacious, more importantly, in its methodological framework, which combines the philological precision for which Israeli rabbinics scholarship is rightly famous with the theoretical interests more characteristic of American scholarship. If this dichotomy of Israeli philology and American theory is less helpful today than it was in the past, this is in part due to Steven's work and influence. Finally, Steven's scholarship is capacious in its recognition of the impossibility of considering texts apart from history, or, in the areas of interest to his scholarship, history apart from texts. The categories that dominate Steven's work—rhetoric, performativity, translation—inhabit precisely the interface between text and history. The bridging work that Steven's scholarship achieves between periods, between methodologies, between text and history, is distinguished by its uncommon nuance. When Steven asks, as in the title of one of his articles, whether “hermeneutics, history, and rhetoric [can] be disentangled,” you can be sure that his short answer is no, and that his long answer involves an appreciative and instructive analysis of the entanglements. A collection of many of these articles was published in 2011 as *Legal Fictions: Studies of Law and Narrative in the Discursive Worlds of Ancient Jewish Sectarials and Sages*.

Steven has contributed to the field of Jewish studies in ways other than through his scholarship. The relationships that he has cultivated with scholars of early Christianity in the Department of Religious Studies have helped to build bridges between this area and Jewish studies. His long-standing ties with scholars beyond Yale, in America, Europe, and especially Israel, have yielded rich and varied fruit, some easily discernible, in the form of edited volumes and conference proceedings, and some less palpable, but no less important: conversations, collaborations, friendships, insights.

Steven is not only a great colleague but an inspiring teacher and mentor. His seminars model careful, nuanced textual and contextual analysis, and his graduate students can attest to his exemplary concern and support for them in every aspect of their studies. That many of Steven's former students have contributed to this volume is a testament to the closeness of the bonds that he has formed with them. It is no coincidence that much of Steven's research—on Tannaitic midrash, for example, and on 4QMMT—concerns the practice of teaching. Pedagogy, for Steven, is a topic worthy of careful attention, in theory and in practice. Nor does he confine his pedagogical pursuits to the academy. At his New Haven synagogue, Beth El-Keser Israel (BEKI), he regularly leads a class on the weekly Torah reading. He has occupied leadership roles in other capacities at the synagogue, as well as at nearby Jewish schools, the Ezra Academy and the Jewish High School of Connecticut. Many of the community members whom he has influenced joined with some of his students and colleagues at a conference in Steven's honor at Yale

University in May 2014, “Rabbis and Other Jews: Rabbinic Literature and Late Antique Judaism,” at which earlier versions of some of the papers included in this Festschrift were presented.

The articles collected here reflect many of Steven’s scholarly interests. They divide into three sections, one on Second Temple literature and its afterlife, a second on rabbinic literature and rabbinic history, and a third on prayer and the synagogue.

This Festschrift would not have been possible without the help of many people, first and foremost the scholars whose work is contained herein. We acknowledge the numerous other scholars who wished to contribute an article in Steven’s honor but were for one reason or another unable. An incalculable debt of gratitude is owed to Aviva Arad for her copyediting work. Our warmest thanks, too, to Renee Reed, the program administrator for the Judaic Studies Program at Yale, who coordinated the aforementioned conference, and assisted with other logistics in connection with the Festschrift. We thank Professors Armin Lange, Bernard M. Levinson, and Vered Noam, coeditors of the JAJ Supplements Series, for agreeing to publish the Festschrift in the series, and Christoph Spill, the editor for Religion and Theology at Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, for ably shepherding the volume to publication. Finally, we acknowledge the generous financial assistance of Yale University through the Edward J. and Dorothy Clarke Kempf Fund and the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale.

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## “Rejoice, O Barren One Who Bore No Child”: Beruria and the Jewish-Christian Conversation in the Babylonian Talmud

To Steven, a mentor, a role model, and a friend.

### 1. Introduction

A talmudic passage in tractate Berakhot 10a portrays the following short dialogue between a *min*<sup>1</sup> and Beruria, a female figure depicted in several rabbinic texts as possessing scholarly knowledge and as the wife of second-century Tanna R. Meir:<sup>2</sup>

אמ' ליה ההוא מינא<sup>3</sup> ל[ברוריה]:<sup>4</sup> כתי' "רני עקרה לא ילדה" משום דלא ילדה<sup>5</sup>

---

1 For the purposes of this article we will be using the term *min* without translation, since most scholars agree that it denotes multiple nonrabbinic groups. See for example Shaye J. D. Cohen, “A Virgin Defiled: Some Rabbinic and Christian Views on the Origins of Heresy,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36, no. 1 (1980): 3: “The rabbis lumped together all those who questioned Rabbinic Judaism. It made no difference to the rabbis whether their opponents were Gentile Christians, Jewish Christians, Gnostics of any variety, pagans, or dissident Jews; all of them, to the exasperation of later scholars, were called *minim*.” See also Stuart Miller, “The Minim of Sepphoris Reconsidered,” *HTR* 86, no. 4 (1993): 377–402.

2 Following MS Oxford Opp. Add. fol. 23. Manuscript variants will be noted in footnotes. Some are discussed more fully below.

3 The printed editions read צדוקי.

4 MS Oxford has R. Abbahu conversing with the *min* instead of Beruria. However, since the next story in this talmudic section involves a conversation between R. Abbahu and a *min*, it is likely a mistake caused by proximity.

5 MS Paris 671 has here: משום דעקרה רני. MS Munich 95 has רני [ולא ילדה]. משום דעקרה ולא ילדה are added in a different hand on top of the line. See below (§ 3) for the possible significance of this variation.

רני? אמרה ליה: שוטה שפיל לסופיה דקרא "כי רבים בני שוממה מבני בעולה".  
אלא<sup>6</sup> רני כנסת ישראל שדומה לאשה עקרה שלא ילדה בנים<sup>7</sup> לגיהנם.<sup>8</sup>

A certain *min* said to [Beruria]: It is written: "Rejoice, O barren one who bore no child." Because she did not bear is she to rejoice?! She replied to him: You fool! Look<sup>9</sup> at the end of the verse, [where it is written], "For the children of the desolate shall be more than the children of the espoused." But rejoice, O community of Israel, who resembles a barren woman, for not having born children for Gehenna.

At the center of this dialogue stands a discussion concerning the interpretation of Isaiah 54:1:

רני עקרה לא ילדה פצחי רנה וצהלי לא חלה כי רבים בני שוממה מבני בעולה אמר יהוה

Rejoice, O barren one who bore no child; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labor. For the children of the desolate are more than the children of the espoused [the one who has had intercourse],<sup>10</sup> says the Lord.

A *min* is portrayed as posing a question to Beruria concerning the meaning of the Isaiah verse.<sup>11</sup> Prima facie, the *min*'s purpose in posing his question is to ridicule the biblical verse by pointing to its absurd content: why would a childless woman rejoice? Yet, while the *min* belittles the biblical wording, he does not attempt to use it as a source to support an alternative reading. Beruria's answer seems to consist of two parts. The first is a simple reading of the rest of the verse in which the

6 MS Paris has *אלא מאי עקרה לא ילדה* and the first printed edition has *אלא אמאי רני עקרה*.

7 The Genizah fragment (T-S NS 329.258) has here: *בן לנהנם כותיכו* "a child for Gehenna like you." Also, in MS Munich 95 the word *בנים* "children" appears in shorthand *בני* and closely linked to the next word. There are also signs that these last two letters are a correction written over an erased single long letter. We suspect that this is another attestation of the *בן* version.

8 All other manuscripts (the Genizah fragment and MSS Paris, Munich, Florence II-I-7, and also the printed editions) read *לגיהנם כותיכו* "for Gehenna like you." In the Genizah fragment (Bologna – Archivio di Stato Fr. ebr. 595) the word *כותיכו* is an addition.

9 Lit. "look down."

10 The word in Hebrew is *בעולה*, which carries both meanings indicated in the translation in different stages. The Septuagint translation reflects the former. We will return to this point below, but due to this double meaning we sometimes prefer to use the untranslated Hebrew term.

11 The Beruria stories have been discussed extensively in the literature. Just to name a few studies: David Goodblatt, "The Beruryah Traditions," in *Persons and Institutions in Early Rabbinic Judaism*, ed. William Green (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), 207–29; Daniel Boyarin, "Reading Androcentrism Against the Grain: Women, Sex, and Torah-Study," *Poetics Today* 12, no. 1 (1991): 29–53; Tal Ilan, "The Quest for the Historical Beruria, Rachel, and Imma Shalom," *AJS Review* 22, no. 1 (1997): 1–17; Shana Strauch Schick, "A Re-examination of the Bavli's Beruriah Narratives in Light of Middle Persian Literature," *Zion* 79, no. 3 (2014): 409–24. For the later development of the Beruria narrative see for example, Itamar Drori, "The Bruria Incident" (in Hebrew), in *Sipur 'oqeb sipur*, vol. 3 of *'Ensiqlopyah šel hasipur hayehudi*, ed. Yoav Elstein, Avidov Lipsker, and Rella Kushelevsky (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2004), 115–54.

joy is explained by the fact that the barren woman, who in the parallel sentence is described as the desolate woman, has multiple children. It is not explicit whether the barren woman somehow has children in the present or whether it is a prophecy about her future. The second part is a direct attack on the *min*. Unlike the first part of the answer, it accepts the methodological premise of the *min*'s question, according to which the first part of the verse is read as a self-contained statement: the childless woman indeed rejoices in the lack of children. But, explains Beruria, the joy is due to the presumed nature of the children, i. e., the children who were not born are likened to the *min* himself, and since they are destined to hell, the mother is happier for her lack of children.

This passage is one of several in rabbinic literature in which *minim* engage in dialogue with rabbinic figures such as Rabbi and R. Abbahu, mostly concerning the interpretation of biblical passages.<sup>12</sup> The fact that in this case the dialogue portrays the *min* as posing a question to which the answer is rather obvious (as Beruria's answer makes clear) raises the following question: what is the purpose of such a story to begin with? Is it simply to mock a *min* by showing he cannot read a verse in its entirety, or is the intention to model a reading of the verse in its larger context? And if so, why was this specific verse chosen?

In addition, the conversation between Beruria and the *min* is presented in a rather harsh tone. Beruria calls the *min* "a fool,"<sup>13</sup> and in her second response, according to most manuscripts, she says that Israel is happy in her barrenness because she does not have sons "like you [plural]" who will end up in hell. The harsh response suggests that this apparently innocent conversation about the correct biblical interpretation is in fact a tense dialogue.

12 For a list of these stories see Daniel Sperber, "Min," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 14, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan, 2007), 263–64 and also Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven* (Leiden: Brill, 1977). Literature on the *minim* stories is extensive; here are a few of the more recent studies: Christine Hayes, "Displaced Self-Perceptions: The Deployment of *Minim* and Romans in Bavli Sanhedrin 90b–91a," in *Religious and Ethnic Communities in Later Roman Palestine*, ed. Hayim Lapin (Potomac, MD: University Press of Maryland, 1998), 249–89; *ibid.*, "Legal Realism and Sectarian Self-Fashioning in Jewish Antiquity," in *Sects and Sectarianism in Jewish History*, ed. Sacha Stern (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 119–48; and Jenny Labendz, *Socratic Torah: Non-Jews in Rabbinic Intellectual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

13 "Fool" in rabbinic literature can appear either as a legal category, often with the hearing impaired and a minor, or, as is in this case, as a derogatory term, meant to demonstrate a critical or disrespectful attitude. The latter is not very common, and appears in relation to specific groups such as the Galileans ('Erub. 53b) and Sadducees (B. Bat. 115b, quoting the Scholion to Megilat Ta'anit). Jesus is also called a fool (Šabb. 104b), and several people are criticized for foolish behavior ('Abod. Zar. 51a) or foolish sayings (Ḥul. 85b; Nid. 52b). In "Matthew 5:22: The Insult 'Fool' and the Interpretation of the Law in Christian and Rabbinic Sources," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 234:1, pp. 5–23 (2017) Michal Bar-Asher Siegal attempts to show a semantic field in late antique literature in which the word "fool" is used to convey polemic scriptural disagreements, including in Matt 5:22.

This paper proposes a new reading of this talmudic passage, against the background of Jewish-Christian polemic. This reading is based on a relevant New Testament passage that uses the same Isaiah verse, as well as a careful philological analysis of the talmudic source and other parallel sources. We will argue that the *min* in this story should be viewed as a Christian, and that his short comment may be understood as referring to a Christian tradition of interpretation of this verse. We argue that a familiarity with the broader hermeneutical history of this verse in antiquity, and especially the Christian interpretive tradition, illuminates the charged nature of the Beruria-*min* dialogue.

The structure of the paper is as follows: section 2 surveys the history of the interpretation of Isaiah 54:1. We focus on ancient interpretations of the verse, identifying the main hermeneutical dilemmas that each interpretation deals with, and how those dilemmas shaped each interpretation. Section 3 reads the talmudic passage as a reaction to an interpretive tradition similar to that of Paul. We conclude with a short discussion of the possible ramifications of the current study.

## 2. A Survey of Ancient Interpretation of Isaiah 54:1

The goal of the following short survey is to introduce, on the one hand, the major interpretive challenges evoked by the original verse and, on the other hand, to portray several hermeneutical strategies used by readers prior to and contemporaneous with the rabbis. Since the history of the interpretation of this verse has been discussed in previous biblical scholarship,<sup>14</sup> our discussion will focus on what we consider useful for understanding the dialogue in the Babylonian story. As will become clear from our survey, each interpretation must deal with the following three methodological considerations:

1) The Isaiah verse employs three Hebrew attributions: עקרה “barren,” שוממה “desolate,” and בעולה, which can be translated as “being owned” (especially in light of the parallel contrast in Isaiah 62:4), but in the history of Hebrew could be translated also either as “married” or as “one who has had intercourse” (a difference that will prove relevant for our discussion);<sup>15</sup> as well as two negated verbs: לא ילדה and

14 See especially Mary Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), and more recently Michael Wolter, “Die unfruchtbare Frau und ihre Kinder. Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte von Jes 54,1,” in *Paulus – Werk und Wirkung: Festschrift für Andreas Lindemann zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Paul-Gerhard Klumbies and David S. du Toit (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 103–27.

15 The form בעולה, the feminine passive singular form of the root בעל, appears three more times in the Bible, twice in the expression בעלה בעל “a married woman.” The root בעל in Biblical Hebrew refers either to “ownership” or to the act of forming a marital relationship. Thus, בעולה means a woman “owned” by a husband. However, in later Hebrew, in the rabbinic corpora, the root בעל refers to the act of intercourse (e.g. this is how Isa 62:5 is understood), and



לֹא חָלָה, both translated as “did not give birth.” Interpretations of this verse must define these terms and determine the semantic relationships among them in the context of the verse. Two of the attributes are positioned in opposition in the verse: “desolate” and “married/nonvirgin”—*בְּעוּלָה מְבִנִי שׁוֹמְמָה*—“For the children of the desolate woman are/will be more than the children of the married/nonvirgin”—and the attribute *עִקְרָה* “barren” seems to be in parallel with *שׁוֹמְמָה* “desolate.” As we shall see, each of the interpretations chooses one of the attributes as the point of reference for interpreting the verse: i. e., as the entity that the Isaiah verse is discussing. The identification of the other attributes follows from this choice. The difference between the various interpretations, accordingly, is to a large extent the result of the attribute that is assumed to provide the key for the rest of the interpretation. Furthermore, as noted, there seems to be a parallelism suggested by the structure of the verse between *עִקְרָה* “barren” and *שׁוֹמְמָה* “desolate.” However, neither *עִקְרָה* nor *שׁוֹמְמָה* is a strict antonym of *בְּעוּלָה*, and at the same time, the two terms, *עִקְרָה* and *שׁוֹמְמָה*, are not from the same semantic field. Therefore, there is a tendency to select *one of the three* attributes as the main focus of the sentence and to construe the others as perfect antonyms or synonyms of that term, as the case may be.

2) Why should the barren woman rejoice? Is there something about her current situation that calls for joy despite her barrenness, or is her happiness related to a future development involving children? Will the children of the desolate woman be born in the future or do they already exist at the time of the call to rejoice? And if the latter, how can a “barren woman” have children?

3) Is the verse meant to describe an experience relating to one entity, or is it meant to compare the situation of two separate entities, one of which is currently *שׁוֹמְמָה* /*עִקְרָה* and the other of which is currently *בְּעוּלָה*? If it is one entity, it is likely that the verse compares a historical development (either from the past to the present or from the present to the future); but if the comparison is between two entities, it is more likely that it is meant to compare the synchronic situation of two separate entities. However, as we shall see, this is not necessarily the case, since the comparison might be of two entities in different time periods.

## 2.1 Biblical Targums

The Septuagint and the Peshitta offer a close translation of the Masoretic Text, and translate the word *בְּעוּלָה* as “one who has a man” or in other words: “married” (τῆς

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*בְּעוּלָה* stands often in contrast to *בְּתוּלָה* “a virgin.” Since the focus of our discussion is how this verb was read in the history of interpretation, it is sufficient for us that the form *בְּעוּלָה* could be read by speakers of Late Hebrew as a woman who has had intercourse. We will elaborate further on this issue in a forthcoming article “The Hebrew-based traditions in Paul’s use of *kata pneuma* in Galatians 4:21–31.”

ἐχούσης τὸν ἄνδρα in Greek; *b'iltā* in Syriac). In the Targum Jonathan we encounter the following translation:

שבחי ירושלם דהות כאתא עקרא דלא ילדת, בועי תשבחא ודוצי כאיתא דלא  
עדיאת, ארי סגיאין יהון בני ירושלם צדיתא מבני רומי יתיבתא אמר יהוה

Sing O Jerusalem who was like a barren woman that beareth not, rejoice with praise and be glad who was like a woman that conceiveth not: for more shall be the children of Jerusalem that was laid desolate than the sons of the inhabitants of Rome saith the Lord.<sup>16</sup>

The key to this interpretation of the Targum lies in the adjective שוממה “desolate,” which denotes Jerusalem. According to this interpretation, the verse refers to two historical entities: Jerusalem and Rome. Consequently the attribute in the verse that describes Rome (בעולה, *be'ulah*) is understood to stand in opposition to the attribute that describes Jerusalem (שוממה, *šomemah*, which is translated as צדיתא, i. e., “desolate, ruined, depopulated”) and is thus translated as יתיבתא, “inhabited.” In light of this interpretation the call for joy stems from the prophecy for a future change, as indicated by the tense of the copula יהון, in which the offspring of the currently desolate city (Jerusalem) will outnumber those of the inhabited city (Rome).

## 2.2 Philo of Alexandria

Philo of Alexandria (*On Rewards and Punishments* 153–61) offers two interpretations of this verse. The first is a description of the land’s state at the Sabbatical Year, after years of mistreatment and neglect of Sabbatical laws:

The cities being thus destroyed as if by fire, and the country being rendered desolate, the land will at last begin to obtain a respite, and, as one may say, to recover breath, and to look up again, after having been much exercised and harassed by the intolerable violence of its inhabitants, who drive away all the virgin periods of seven years out of the country, and discarded them from their minds.... For all which conduct, these men shall incur the penalties and curses mentioned above: and the country being thoroughly exhausted, and having been forced to submit to innumerable afflictions, shall at last be relieved by being delivered from the burden of its impious inhabitants, and when looking around it, shall see no one left of those who destroyed its grandeur and beauty, but shall behold the market-places all free from their tumults, and wars, and acts of iniquity, and full of tranquillity, and peace, and justice; then it shall recover its youth and former vigour, and shall enjoy tranquillity, and shall have rest at the festive

<sup>16</sup> Translation according to *The Chaldee paraphrase on the prophet Isaiah [by Jonathan b. Uzziel]*, trans. Christian William H. Pauli (Oxford: London’s Society House, 1871), 185 and n. 1 there.

seasons recurring at the sacred numbers of seven, recovering its strength again like an athlete who has been fatigued by his exertions. Then, like an affectionate mother, it shall pity the sons and the daughters whom it has lost, who now that they are dead are, and still more were, when alive, a grief and sorrow to their parents; and becoming young a second time, it will again be fertile as before, and will produce an irreproachable offspring, an improvement on its former progeny; **for she that was desolate, as the prophet says, is now become happy in her children and the mother of a large family.**<sup>17</sup>

The land, free of its usual agricultural burdens, of war and wrongdoings, will rejoice in their absence and recuperate, and will bear a new generation without faults. Thus, this first interpretation speaks of a process that occurs to a single entity. Philo's second interpretation is an allegorical one: the soul exhausted from its bad qualities is able to rid itself of them and develop new and good ones, and can rejoice even in its barrenness in anticipation of better future qualities:

For when the family is very large, and the soul is full, all kinds of passions and vices, surrounding it like so many children, such for instance as pleasures, appetites, folly, intemperance, injustice, it is sad and diseased; and being exceedingly prostrate through illness, it is near to death, but when it is barren and has no such offspring, or when it has lost them, then it becomes changed in all its parts and becomes a pure virgin, and having received the divine seed, it fashions and brings to life a new family, very admirable in their nature, and of great beauty and perfection, such as prudence, courage, temperance, justice, holiness, piety, and all other virtues and good dispositions, of which not only is their birth a blessing accompanied by happiness in its children, but the mere expectation of such a birth is a blessing, since it cheers its weakness by the anticipations of hope; and hope is joy before joy, even though it may be somewhat defective in comparison with perfect joy. But still, it is in both these respects better than that which comes after; first, because it relaxes and softens the dry rigidity of care; and secondly, because by its anticipations it gives a forewarning of the impending perfect good.

In both interpretations Philo reads the verse in Isaiah as describing a process for a single entity. In the first interpretation, which identifies the woman in the verse as the land, the key adjective for the interpretation is the word שוממה “desolate”; in the second allegorical interpretation, which puts the soul as the referent of the verse, the attributive עקרה “barren” is seen as the heart of the verse. What both interpretations have in common is the understanding that already at the stage of barrenness there must be joy, in anticipation of the healing process itself. Philo discusses this point specifically at the end of his second interpretation, suggesting that “the mere expectation of such a birth is a blessing.” He goes on to explain exactly why joy is present even at the stage of desolation, and how this joy surpasses the actual joy of the future birth.

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<sup>17</sup> *The Works of Philo Judæus, the Contemporary of Josephus*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London, G. Bell, 1855–94), 491.

In both interpretations, interestingly, Philo seems to bring a fourth attribute into play: “virgin” (τὰς παρθένους): the land, which missed the periods of Sab-  
batical cycles that are described as “the virgin periods of seven years” later gets  
them back. In this second stage, the land becomes “young again” and fertile. Sim-  
ilarly, about the soul Philo says: “but when it is barren and has no such offspring,  
or when it has lost them, then it becomes changed in all its parts and becomes  
a pure virgin.” Here Philo equates the barren soul to a virgin and consequently  
describes the process of healing as “receiving the divine seed.”<sup>18</sup>

Both applications of the notion of virginity compare a barren woman to a vir-  
gin, and are likely to stem from the second part of the verse, which says **בִּי רְבִים**  
**בַּעוּלָה** **בְּנִי שׁוֹמְמָה** **מִבְּנֵי בַעוּלָה**. If one understands **בַּעוּלָה** as “a woman who has had inter-  
course” or “nonvirgin,” the appearance of the word “virgin” in Philo’s interpreta-  
tion may be explained in this way: since **שׁוֹמְמָה** and **בַּעוּלָה** are opposed, then **שׁוֹמְמָה**  
can be interpreted as non-**בַּעוּלָה**, “a woman who has not had intercourse,” or in  
other words: a virgin. And since **שׁוֹמְמָה** parallels **עִקְרָה** both terms are interpreted  
as “virgin.” “Virgin” here is a stage-level predicate (a description that is true of a  
temporal stage of its subject), and not an individual-level predicate (a description  
that is true throughout the existence of an individual), since the land can “become  
virgin again”—virginity can be regained.

The following scheme exhibits the data from the verse and its “logical” con-  
clusion:

It is given that:

1. **בַּתוּלָה** is the antonym of **בַּעוּלָה** (in Late Hebrew)
2. **שׁוֹמְמָה** is equivalent to **עִקְרָה** (parallel in the verse)
3. **בַּעוּלָה** is the antonym of **שׁוֹמְמָה** (contrast in the verse)

Conclusions:

**בַּעוּלָה** is an antonym to **עִקְרָה**; hence

**עִקְרָה** means **בַּתוּלָה** (virgin)

It must be noted that this reading of Philo’s interpretation assumes that he under-  
stood the word **בַּעוּלָה** in the Isaiah verse as “a woman who has had intercourse,”

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18 Philo’s interpretation here is linked to his allegorical interpretation of the Genesis story  
of the barren woman Sarah giving birth to Isaac. In both he presents a model of “fruitful virgin-  
ity”: “[w]hether literally in a woman or allegorically in a soul, barrenness functions as a passive  
and receptive object for divine initiative and grace.” Callaway, *O Barren*, 154. Callaway ignores  
Philo’s first interpretation of the Sabbatical Year and the land, and focuses on the soul (as does  
Matthew S. Harmon, *She Must and Shall Go Free: Paul’s Isaianic Gospel in Galatians* [Berlin: De  
Gruyter, 2010], 179, n. 175).

which differs from the way בעולה was translated in the Septuagint (τῆς ἐχούσης τὸν ἄνδρα = the one who has a man). Though this point is tangential to the current paper, it might be of significance to the ongoing scholarly debate concerning Philo's knowledge of Hebrew and his direct or indirect access to the biblical verses, or at least his awareness of other traditions of interpretation of the Bible different from those of the Septuagint.<sup>19</sup>

### 2.3 Galatians 4:21–31

In one of his early letters in the New Testament, Paul addresses gentiles in Galatia in Asia Minor.<sup>20</sup> This letter is considered “quintessential Paulism” in its theology, and is often viewed as representing “the living heart of Paul’s gospel.”<sup>21</sup> In chapter 4:21–31, Paul argues against opponents who claim that gentile Christians need the works of the law and refers to the verses in Genesis 21 that deal with Isaac and Ishmael. He interprets the chapter allegorically, as speaking about two different covenants: a covenant of slavery given to Israel, parallel to “the present city of Jerusalem,” and a covenant of freedom, parallel to “the Jerusalem that is above”:

Tell me, you who want to be under the law (ὕπὸ νόμου),<sup>22</sup> are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman.<sup>23</sup> His son by the slave woman was born according to/by<sup>24</sup> the flesh (κατὰ σάρκα); but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a prom-

19 See Suzanne Daniel, “La Halacha de Philon selon le premier livre des ‘Lois Spéciales,’” in *Philon d’Alexandrie Lyon, 11–15 septembre 1966* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique [CNRS], 1967), 221–41, and recently Tessa Rajak, “Philo’s Knowledge of Hebrew: The Meaning of the Etymologies,” in *The Jewish-Greek Tradition in Antiquity and the Byzantine Empire* (The Nicholas de Lange Festschrift), ed. James K. Aitken and James Carleton Paget (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 173–87.

20 James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–17.

21 Dunn, *Theology of Paul’s Letter*, 2.

22 νόμος in this passage can be read as both Jewish law and Scripture itself according to Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49)*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 241.

23 On slavery and freedom under the law in Galatians see 2:4; 3:26–28; 4:31; 5:1; 5:13. Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 242.

24 In the Greek of the New Testament the function of the preposition κατὰ followed by a noun in the accusative, can be both “according to” or “by means of” (see James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament* [New York: Abingdon Press, 1980], § 2595). J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 435, offered the translation “as a result of the power of” since “both the flesh and the promise/Spirit are powers able to produce children.” See below for discussion of this term.

ise (δι' ἐπαγγελίας). These things may be taken figuratively (ἀλληγορούμενα), for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia<sup>25</sup> and corresponds (συστοιχεῖ) to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free,<sup>26</sup> and she is our mother. For it is written: **“Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman (τῆς ἐρήμου) than of her who has a man (τῆς ἐχοῦσης τὸν ἄνδρα)”** (Isa 54:1). Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise (ἐπαγγελίας τέκνα ἐστέ). At that time the son born according to/by the flesh (κατὰ σάρκα) persecuted the son born according to/by the Spirit (κατὰ Πνεῦμα). It is the same now. But what does the Scripture say? **“Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son”** (Gen 21:10).<sup>27</sup> Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

In this (difficult)<sup>28</sup> passage, Paul uses the verse in Isaiah to support his allegorical interpretation of the Genesis verses.<sup>29</sup> The frequent use of Isaiah quotations in Paul’s writings has been noted in general, and scholars consider it an indication

25 This verse stands at the heart of Paul’s allegory here, and probably suggests that the word “Hagar” was used as a name for Mount Sinai. For its various textual problems see Franz Mussner, “Hagar, Sinai, Jerusalem,” *TQ* 135 (1955): 56–60, and see also M. G. Steinhauser, “Gal 4,25a: Evidence of Targumic Tradition in Gal 4,21–31?,” *Biblica* 70 (1989): 234–40; and Peder Borgen, “Some Hebrew and Pagan Features in Philo’s and Paul’s Interpretation of Hagar and Ishmael,” in *The New Testament and Hellenistic Judaism*, ed. Peder Borgen and Søren Giverson (Aarhus: Aarhus University, 1995), 151–64; On the location of Mount Sinai see G. I. Davies, “Hagar, El-Heḡra and the Location of Mount Sinai, with an Additional Note on Reqem,” *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972): 152–63; Martin Hengel, “Paul in Arabia,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12 (2002): 47–66. We thank Josh Burns for these two references.

26 ἐλευθέρας can be translated both as “free” and, due to the Greek morphology, more specifically as “freewoman.”

27 On the differences here in version from the Genesis verse see Christopher D. Stanley, *Paul and the Language of Scripture: Citation Technique in the Pauline Epistles and Contemporary Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 248–51.

28 Harmon, *She Must and Shall Go Free*, 173: “On any list of difficult NT passages, Gal 4:21–5:1 would certainly rank near the top.” See note 156 for some of the many bibliographical references on this passage. For one of the more interesting contributions on this topic see Steven Di Mattei, “Paul’s Allegory of the Two Covenants (Gal 4.21–31) in Light of First Century Hellenistic Rhetoric and Jewish Hermeneutics,” *NTS* 52 (2006): 102–22.

29 On Paul’s use of Isaiah in Galatians see recently Harmon, *She Must*. The heavy use of Abraham traditions in chapters 3 and 4 of Galatians suggests that Paul’s opponents might have been using these verses as well in some way (see Harmon, *She Must*, 124 and references in n. 3). Especially interesting is the observation that the Isaiah verse is actually found in the Palestinian triennial haftarah cycle of these very Genesis verses, making Paul’s allegory a Torah/haftarah midrash of sorts. If so, this passage supplies additional proof that the liturgical Torah/haftarah reading practice was already in place in the first century CE (Callaway, *O Barren One*, 173–74; Di Mattei, *Paul’s Allegory*, 114, and n. 44).

of the formative place Isaiah held in the apostle's theological framework.<sup>30</sup> In this case, Paul wishes to draw the analogy between the two covenants on the one hand (one that is, in his eyes, free, and the other that is slavery) and the two biblical characters on the other (Isaac, the son of the free woman, Sarah, and Ishmael, the son of the slave woman, Hagar).<sup>31</sup> By doing so, he aims to explain the contemporary political situation of the community to which he speaks, and denies the need to observe the laws in the era following the coming of Christ.<sup>32</sup>

Paul not only compares the status of Isaac and Ishmael but adds an additional difference between them: the former was born according to/by<sup>33</sup> the Spirit/promise (κατὰ Πνεῦμα/ἐπαγγελίας) and the latter according to/by the flesh (κατὰ σάρκα).

Paul establishes the following oppositions:<sup>34</sup>

Slaves: those who are under the law	The free people
Present city of Jerusalem	The Jerusalem that is above
The son of the slave woman, Hagar, who was born according to/by the flesh (κατὰ σάρκα)	son of the free woman, Sarah (“the barren woman”), who was born as the result of a promise (δὲ ἐπαγγελίας) / born according to/by the Spirit (κατὰ Πνεῦμα)

According to the biblical story, Isaac was conceived by a barren Sarah only after a heavenly promise to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18). His use of the verse from Isaiah is meant to support his reading that Sarah conceived Isaac according to the Spirit in opposition to Ishmael's birth by flesh.

Scholars have pointed out that in Paul's allegory, Hagar is identified as the one who has a husband as opposed to Sarah, while in the biblical story Sarah is Abraham's wife and Hagar her servant.<sup>35</sup> However, we would like to argue that Paul's interpretation assumes a reading of the verse in Isaiah similar to Philo's reading, where the word עקרה (*aqarah*, barren woman) stands in opposition to the word

30 Harmon, *She Must*, 11.

31 The traditional identification of the non-Sinaitic covenant with that of Christ has been challenged, and the Abrahamic covenant or Abrahamic covenant understood christologically has been proposed instead. See Harmon, *She Must*, 174, n. 159.

32 As opposed to interpreters seeking to read here a difference between Jews and gentiles, recent scholarship agrees that Paul is talking about the historical circumstances of his Galatians audience. See below.

33 In the Greek of the New Testament the function of the preposition κατὰ followed by a noun in the accusative can be both “according to” or “by means of” (see James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1980], § 2595).

34 For a more complete table see Harmon, *She Must*, 176.

35 See Harmon, *She Must*, 177, and n. 168 there for further bibliographical references. Harmon himself notes the sexual meaning in the Greek wording, but goes on to interpret Paul's words as referring to the “married” meaning of בעולה.

בעולה (*be'ulah*).<sup>36</sup> If בעולה is understood not as a married woman but as a woman who has had intercourse (as Hagar has) then the עקרה is simply a woman who has not had intercourse, i. e., a virgin, and the problem no longer exists.<sup>37</sup> Paul is calling Hagar “the one who has had intercourse” (rather than a married woman) and Sarah, in contrast, is “the one who has not had intercourse.” From here it is an easy step to call Isaac’s conception according to the Spirit, κατὰ Πνεῦμα. In other words, Paul relies on the fact that Sarah is described as barren in Genesis 11:30, and consequently understands her to be the barren woman in Isaiah, who is also a non-בעולה, a woman who has not had intercourse.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Paul reads the verse in Isaiah not as a description of two stages experienced by one individual, but as a synchronic description of the two entities (Sarah and Hagar), one of which is a barren woman who has multiple descendants, while still remaining non-בעולה. This can happen only if she is barren in the sense that she is a “non-בעולה” according to the flesh but blessed with children by the Spirit.

#### 2.4 2 Clement 2:1–3

2 Clement, the second-century epistle,<sup>39</sup> interprets the verse in Isaiah as referring to the Christians:

“Rejoice, you barren one who bears no children; break forth and cry out, you who endure no labour pains; for the woman who is deserted has more children than the one who has a husband.” When it said, “Rejoice, you barren one who bears no chil-

36 As in the case of Philo, this observation touches on the question of Paul’s knowledge of Hebrew, or at least his access to Hebrew-based scriptural traditions. On this topic see for example David Lincicum, *Paul and the Early Jewish Encounter with Deuteronomy* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 53: “There is no compelling evidence to doubt Paul’s knowledge of Hebrew and/or Aramaic.” Nevertheless, he suggests that his “almost exclusive proximity to the Septuagint,” alongside examples in which he is closer to the Hebrew version, can stem from “a Greek text that has undergone a hebraizing revision.” And see also Timothy H. Lim, *Holy Scripture in the Qumran Commentaries and Pauline Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 163–64. On Philo and Paul as near contemporaries, see the survey of the literature in David T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey* (Assen: Van Gorcum; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 66–74.

37 This argument is developed and explained at length in our forthcoming article “The Hebrew-based traditions in Paul’s use of *kata pneuma* in Galatians 4:21–31.”

38 Scholars have suggested that the connection between Sarah and the Isaiah verses was made earlier, maybe even going back to the Hannah narrative in 1 Samuel 1. See the second chapter in Callaway, *0 Barren One*, and di Mattei, *Paul’s Allegory*, 116, n. 48. Callaway brings into the interpretive history the traditions in Baruch and 4 Ezra in which Jerusalem is called “the mother of us all.”

39 Christopher M. Tuckett, *2 Clement: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 62–64. On page 64 he carefully supports an early-middle second-century date.



dren,” it meant us, for our church was barren before children were given to it. When it said, “cry out, you who endure no labour pains,” it means this, that we should offer up our prayers to God sincerely, and not grow weary as women in labour. And when it said, “for the woman who is deserted has more children than the one who has a husband,” it meant that our people seemed to have been deserted by God, but now, we who have believed are more in number than those who seem to have God.<sup>40</sup>

Like the Targum Jonathan, this interpretation views the verse as referring to two different entities compared in their historical circumstance. The barren woman is the church in its beginning, but now she rejoices since she is more numerous than the other woman. However, we know the identity of only one group, “our church,” and not that of the other group. The author of this text does not seem to have been familiar with the writings of Paul,<sup>41</sup> but some scholars have identified the other group here, like in Galatians, as Jews.<sup>42</sup>

### 2.5 Pesiqta de Rab Kahana 20:5

The fifth-century midrash *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana* (PDK)<sup>43</sup> quotes two rabbinic views on the Isaiah verse:

א'ר לוי. ב!כניינה העמידה לי רשעי'. כגון אחז מנשה אמן. בחורבנה העמידה לי צדיקים.  
כגון דניאל וחבורתו. מרדכי וחבורתו. עזרא וחבורתו. ר' אחא בשם ר' יוחנן.  
הרבה צדיקים העמידה לי בחורבנה יותר מצדיקים שהעמידה בביניינה.

R. Levi said, [God said:] when the Temple was standing, it brought to the fore wicked men, such as Ahaz, Manasseh, and Amon. But when the Temple was in ruins, it brought to the fore righteous men, such as Daniel and his company, Mordecai and his company, Ezra and his company. R. Aha, citing R. Johanan, declared: [God said:]

<sup>40</sup> Text according to Tuckett's edition, 87.

<sup>41</sup> See Wolter, “Die unfruchtbare Frau und ihre Kinder,” 117–18. Two other early Christian interpretations that did not rely on Paul's epistle are Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 53:5 and *Epistula apostolorum* 33; see Wolter, “Die unfruchtbare Frau und ihre Kinder,” 120–21. Justin Martyr uses the Isaiah verse to talk about two groups as well, but he uses it to show the “numerical superiority of Gentile Christians over against Jewish Christians” (see Tuckett, *2 Clement*, 141).

<sup>42</sup> Joseph B. Lightfoot, Karl P. Donfried, and Klaus Wengst among others. See references in Tuckett, *2 Clement*, 143, n. 22. Tuckett himself disagrees with this identification and determines that “[c]ertainly any polemic against non-Christian Jews seems remote from the author's viewpoint here” (141). He refuses to identify the other group: “A search for a real group (of those who ‘seem to have God’) in the author's own context may therefore be unnecessary and inappropriate” (144).

<sup>43</sup> On this midrash see Hermann Leberecht Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 291–96.

when the Temple was desolate, it brought to the fore for Me more righteous men than it did when it was intact.<sup>44</sup>

This midrash reads the verse in Isaiah as praising the benefits of the destruction of the temple. The barren woman (i. e., the temple) rejoices because now that she is in ruins she produces righteous, rather than evil, sons (according to the opinion of R. Levi), or more righteous sons than at the time she (the temple) stood (according to R. Aḥa). The key for this interpretation seems to be the word שוממה “desolate,” and it understands the entire verse as describing one entity in a two-stage process, the time of the temple and the current time of its destruction, without considering any future development.

It is possible that in this interpretation the word עקרה is analogous to the word שוממה, with the additional assumption of the midrashic move mentioned a few lines earlier in the Pesiqta 20:2:

א' ר מאיר. "עקרה". עקורה. אומה שעקרוה אומות העולם.

R. Meir, [reads the word] ‘*akarah* [=barren], as [though spelled] ‘*akurah* [=uprooted], a nation, whom the nations of the earth uprooted.<sup>45</sup>

R. Aḥa reads the verse’s promise of more children to the desolate woman בני רבים שוממה, as the production of more righteous children after the destruction than were produced at the time when the temple was intact (בחורבנה לי בעמדה העמידה). The word בעולה here is not interpreted in its own right, but rather as the opposite of שוממה. R. Levi’s opinion, however, is harder to relate to the phrasing of the second half of the verse, since it appears to deal not with the quantity of the children but rather with their quality.

We propose that R. Levi’s reading is based on a rabbinic midrashic move, known from other rabbinic interpretations as well, that understands the word רבים not in the (more common) sense of “many” but rather in the (less frequent) sense of “great.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, R. Levi reads the verse as follows: the one who is in ruins should rejoice, since the sons of the desolate are better, greater (רבים), than the

44 Hebrew according to MS Oxford 151; modified translation based on *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana. English*, trans. William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 447.

45 Braude translation, 445.

46 A meaning that can be identified already in the Bible itself (for example in Num 22:15; Deut 33:7; Isa 19:20). See Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* (New York: Yoselof, 1960), 13:6343, s.v. רב, and Menachem Kahana, “The Biblical Version in Codex Vatican 32 of the Sifre on Numbers and Deuteronomy” (in Hebrew), in *Mehqarei Talmud*, vol. 1, ed. Yaakov Sussman and David Rosenthal (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 5–7 and especially n. 20 there.

sons of the nondesolate—she bears children who are more righteous than those produced before the destruction.

### 3. Back to the Talmudic Dialogue

We can now return to the talmudic passage in tractate Berakhot that stands at the heart of our discussion, armed with the insights into the methodological and hermeneutical considerations involved in interpreting Isaiah 54:1. Specifically, we suggest that the *min*'s words in the passage, and Beruria's response, are better understood in light of these earlier interpretations, especially Paul's epistle.

As mentioned earlier, at first glance the passage seems to ridicule the *min*'s question. It appears easily refutable and it is not clear what stands behind its phrasing. Our reading of this passage treats the *min*'s words not as a simple debate over the interpretation of this verse. The *min* does not intend to introduce a pseudoparadox in the biblical wording but rather to assert a polemical theological claim based on Isaiah's language. This reading relies on a textual variation of the talmudic passage as found in MSS Paris and Munich, and is informed by the interpretations of the verse by Philo, Paul, and the PDK. Here is the text according to MS Paris (as well as MS Munich 95 body of the text):

א"ל ההוא מינא לברוריייה: 'כתי' - "רני עקרה לא ילדה," משום דעקרה רני, אמרה ליה: 'שטייא שפיל לסופיה דקרא—"כי רבים בני שוממה מבני בעולה"; אלא אמאי "רני עקרה," רני כנסת ישראל שהיא כאשה עקרה שלא ילדה בנים לגיהנם כוותיבין'

A certain *min* said to Beruria: It is written: "Shout/Rejoice, O barren one who bore no child." Because she is barren she is to rejoice. She replied to him: You fool! Look at the end of the verse, where it is written, "For the children of the desolate are more than the children of the espoused." But what then is the meaning of "Rejoice O barren one"? Rejoice, O congregation of Israel, who resembles a barren woman, for not having born children like you for Gehenna.

In this text, the *min* does not ask "משום דלא ילדה רני" "Because she did not bear is she to rejoice[?!]" as in the other MSS, but rather affirms "משום דעקרה רני" "Because she is barren she is to rejoice." The *min*'s words should be read not as a rhetorical question but rather as a declarative statement, and this statement provokes Beruria's harsh response. This response can be understood if the *min*'s words echo a Christian tradition that uses this verse in a context of Jewish-Christian polemics.

The *min*'s words do not spell out the full Christian argument. This kind of abbreviation occurs elsewhere in rabbinic literature, when short and sometimes vague references to Christian traditions assume that the contemporary audience has wider knowledge than is actually presented in the rabbinic source itself. One needs to be familiar with nonrabbinic traditions in order to understand the concise

rabbinic reference.<sup>47</sup> A modern-day reader of these texts can sometimes supplement the rabbinic texts by referencing exterior sources. In this case, Paul's epistle provides important assistance. In this attempt to reconstruct the background to the *min*'s words, we must remember that Paul's message in Galatians had a great impact on early Christian interpretations of Isaiah 54:1. It had such an impact, that almost all future interpretations of this verse relied on Paul's reading.<sup>48</sup> Scholars now mostly agree that Paul was not talking about Jews and gentiles, but rather about groups arguing about law observance among his local audience in Galatia.<sup>49</sup> However, later readers of Paul, starting with Tertullian,<sup>50</sup> already understood him to reference Jews and Christians.

In light of Paul's allegorical tradition, the *min*'s statement can be read as a summary of the view according to which there is a call for being joyful for being barren. As we saw in Philo's reading, and also in Paul's, the barren one is understood as a non-*בעולה*, i. e., one who has not had intercourse. The *min* reads the verse as affirming the superiority of the non-*בעולה*'s state. The virgin in the *min*'s reading can refer to the entire Christian community, as Paul's Letter to the Galatians was understood. It can even refer to the virgin birth of Jesus himself, since early writers, intent on seeing Sarah as prefiguring Mary, and Isaac as a type of Christ, read Paul's words "by the Spirit" as pointing to such conception.<sup>51</sup> But in any case, the *min*'s statement affirms the use of Isaiah to express its validity and superiority. If we assume that the *min* has in mind an argument similar to Paul's, then his interpretation has two com-

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47 For one such example see Moshe Halbertal and Shlomo Naeh, "Springs of Salvation: Interpretive Satire and the Refutation of Heretics," in *Higayon L'Yona: New Aspects in the Study of Midrash, Aggadah and Piyyut in Honor of Yonah Fraenkel*, ed. Joshua Levinson (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2006), 179–98.

48 According to Wolter, "Die unfruchtbare Frau und ihre Kinder," 120–21, the only three early Christian interpretations that did not rely on Paul's epistle are 2 Clement 2:1–3, Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 53:5, and *Epistula apostolorum* 33.

49 Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation: Galatians*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 332. Di Mattei (120–21), for example, emphasizes that Paul is *not* claiming that the Jews are now the sons of Hagar and the gentiles the true sons of Sarah, but rather talks about the two *covenants* and asks his audience to choose the free one. This reading, while dealing with the anti-Jewish sentiment, poses a problem with Paul's description of a persecution of one group by the other, see Martyn, *Galatians*, 445. For bibliographical references concerning the entity to whom Paul is referring, whether it is Judaism that requires Torah-observance, or the Jerusalem church that asks Christian gentiles to become law-observant, see Harmon, *She Must*, 175, n. 161.

50 *Adversus Marcionem* 5.4.8. See Irene Pabst, "The Interpretation of the Sarah-Hagar-Stories in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature," *Lectio Difficilior: European Electronic Journal for Feminist Exegesis* (January 2003). [http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/03\\_1/pabst.htm](http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/03_1/pabst.htm).

51 For example, the fourth-century Latin writer Marius Victorinus wrote (as cited by Stephen Andrew Cooper, *Marius Victorinus' Commentary on Galatians*, Oxford Early Christian Studies [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 324):

ponents: (1) the joy is about the present situation and (2) the barren one should be understood as a non-בעולה, who nonetheless has many children. This interpretation relies on the fact that the barren woman is understood as the opposite of the בעולה “the one who has had intercourse.”

The *min*'s few words make it clear that the crux of the argument is the reason for the joy. Why should one rejoice? The *min*'s answer: because she is a non-בעולה (according to MSS Paris and Munich). Paul's tradition helps us understand the reason for the non-בעולה's joy: the verse in its entirety refers to a non-בעולה, and yet she has multiple children and thus reason to rejoice. The Bavli's *min* is therefore posing this challenge to Beruria: the verse proves the joy of the non-בעולה, i. e., the current Christians who are children of the covenant according to the Spirit and not the flesh, i. e., Sarah who conceived Isaac without intercourse and not Hagar the wife who has had intercourse.

In such a context Beruria's response is appropriately harsh. She begins by challenging the *min*'s equation of the barren one and the non-בעולה. This equation relies on the fact that in the verse עקרה parallels שוממה, and שוממה stands in opposition to בעולה. The meaning of שוממה “desolate” is ignored in this equation. Beruria, accordingly, calls attention to the end of the verse, to the opposition between שוממה and בעולה. This opposition, and the equation of שוממה and עקרה, entails that עקרה must mean “having no children” rather than “not having had intercourse.”

Beruria continues her explanation by paraphrasing Isaiah 54:1. We submit that Beruria's words, like R. Levi's statement in PDK, should be understood as interpreting the word רבים as an attribute describing the superior quality of one group of sons over the other. But unlike the PDK, which reads the verse as speaking of a single entity before and after the destruction of the temple, Beruria reads the verse as comparing the two communities of Jews and Christians, as do later interpretations of Paul's Epistle to the Galatians.

Thus, Beruria answers the *min* as follows: שטייא שפיל לסופיה דקרא "כי רבים בני שוממה מבני בעולה"—you fool, read to the end of the verse and see that it does not deal with the nonsexuality of the woman. But rather, the focus is on the outcome: the quality of the sons, בני שוממה מבני בעולה, כי רבים בני שוממה (who is also the עקרה) are superior to those of the בעולה.

She then clarifies the meaning of the word עקרה by paraphrasing the verse itself: [Rejoice, [O community of Israel, who resembles a] barren woman, for not having born [children

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From this one can understand that Abraham had a son, not from their taking up bodily activity (*non ex adsumptione inter se corporum*), but based on the promise of God—if indeed the son of the free woman was born of a barren woman and conceived by a certain spirit, rather than by copulation.

See Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and John Reumann, eds., *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 45–49.

for Gehenna].” The עקרה in the verse is the one who לא ילדה “did not bear children,” but it does not mean the lack of *all* children but rather the lack of specific children—evil ones: “not bearing children” should be read as “not having born [children for Gehenna].” The עקרה with no evil children should rejoice since she ends up having superior children.

Notice that Beruria uses the term כנסת ישראל “congregation of Israel,” in her reply to the *min*. It has been suggested that this term was coined as a reaction to the Pauline *ecclesia*, to refer to the whole of the community as a theological entity.<sup>52</sup> In addition, it is notable that this term often appears in passages that are assumed to have Jewish-Christian tensions in their background.<sup>53</sup> To encounter this term in a heated conversation with a *min*, such as Beruria’s dialogue with the *min*, is not surprising.

Additionally, according to most textual witnesses, Beruria notes that the fate of the *min*, like that of the evil children, is Gehenna. Interestingly, one Genizah fragment (T-S NS 329.258), and possibly MS Munich,<sup>54</sup> reads here, בן לגהנם כותיכו, “a son for Gehenna like you” instead of בנים לגהנם “children for Gehenna.” This version might echo talmudic traditions about Jesus’s eternal punishment in hell, in boiling excrement (Giṭ. 56b–57a).<sup>55</sup>

It should be emphasized that we are not claiming a direct contact between Paul’s tradition and the talmudic one. Rather we see Paul’s words in the Epistle to the Galatians, and its interpretation in later writers, as an example of an allegorical reading of Isaiah 54:1 in late antique Jewish-Christian polemics. One does not need to imagine a joint “*havruta* session” in which the rabbis learned Paul’s epistle and then formulated a polemical response to it. Such a scenario assumes firsthand knowledge of the actual epistle and its reading in late antiquity, and other historical assumptions that we need not, and cannot, make. Rather, we suggest knowledge

52 Samuel Krauss, *Synagogale Altertümer* (Berlin: B. Harz, 1922), 13–14 (cf. J. F. Baer, “The Origins of the Organisation of the Jewish Community of the Middle Ages,” *Zion* 15 [1950]: 1–41, esp. n. 30).

53 For example, Ephraim E. Urbach, “Rabbinic Exegesis and Origenes’ Commentaries on the Song of Songs and Jewish-Christian Polemics” (in Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 30 (1960): 148–70, claims that the rabbinic exegesis of the Song of Songs reflects Jewish-Christian polemics. More specifically, it reflects a debate with the arguments raised in Origen’s commentaries on this biblical book. In the rabbinic corpus the term כנסת ישראל appears very often. Recently Shaye J. D. Cohen (“Antipodal Texts: B. Eruvin 21b–22a and Mark 7:1–23 on the Tradition of the Elders and the Commandment of God,” in *Envisioning Judaism, Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, vol 2, ed. Ra’anana S. Boustani et al. [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013], 965–83) argued that the text in Bavli ‘Eruv. 21b–22a reflects a specific Jewish-Christian debate, and once again the term כנסת ישראל appears in this context (and see there n. 83). We wish to thank Moshe Idel for discussing this point with us.

54 See comments on the textual variants above.

55 On this story see Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 82–94. On the parallel to this tradition in b. ‘Eruv. 21b see Cohen, “Antipodal Texts.”

of a tradition similar to the one that appears in Paul's epistle, and understood as referring to Jews and Christians. This interpretive tradition might have reached the composer of the talmudic tradition in oral form or in a paraphrase that did not necessarily derive directly from Paul's formulation. What we do suggest is that the content of a Christian interpretation of Isaiah 54:1 was familiar to the composer of this talmudic passage. This assertion is strengthened by the fact that Paul's reading of Isaiah 54:1 was so widely known, that from the second century on it became the prevailing tradition for other Christian readers of this verse.<sup>56</sup> This reading was so well known to the extent that it is reasonable to assume some kind of familiarity with its circulation (as referring to Jews and Christians) in the talmudic author's circle.

If we are right in proposing a Christian backdrop for this talmudic Beruria-*min* dialogue, then we can identify the *min* in the story as a Christian. This identification is noteworthy in light of the general academic consensus regarding the difficulty of identifying *minim* in the Talmud. Certainly, if one collects all *minim* sources in the Talmud, identification of the *minim* will be rather vague and will reflect different nonrabbinic groups. However, in this particular case, the Christian backdrop illuminates the talmudic polemics nicely, and points to the theological identity attributed to this specific *min* in b. Berakhot 10a.

### Concluding Remarks

A summary of the various interpretations of Isaiah 54:1 discussed in this paper, and their responses to the three questions articulated above, is contained in the following table:

	One or two entities?	Happiness about the current situation or about the future (process)?	What is the biblical attribute that provides the key for the interpretation?
Targum	2: Jerusalem and Rome	Happiness about the future	שוממה "desolate"
Philo 1	1: The land	Happiness already in the present due to future prospects	שוממה "desolate" and בעולה "nonvirgin"

<sup>56</sup> As mentioned above (in the footnote on the Clement source), Justin Martyr offers the last non-Pauline reading of this verse. See Wolter, "Die unfruchtbare Frau und ihre Kinder," 120–21.

	One or two entities?	Happiness about the current situation or about the future (process)?	What is the biblical attribute that provides the key for the interpretation?
Philo 2	2: The soul	Happiness already in the present due to future prospects	בעולה “nonvirgin”
Paul	2: The free and the enslaved children	Happiness about the current situation	בעולה “nonvirgin”
2 Clement	2: The church and another community not explicitly identified	From the perspective of the time of the prophecy: happiness due to future prospects (the prophecy has already been fulfilled)	עקרה “barren”—who has no children
PDK	1: Israel	Happiness about the current situation	שוממה “desolate”
Beruria in the Babylonian Talmud	2: The congregation of Israel and the Christians	Happiness about the current situation	לא ילדה “did not give birth”

The table provides a fascinating example of an interpretive matrix. Various factors involved in understanding the biblical verses are differently combined and used in each text. Regardless of their authors’ theological agendas, all of these sources deal with similar interpretative and hermeneutical dilemmas, but each source has its own unique way of establishing its interpretive agenda.

It is likely that some of these interpretations are based on an awareness of the others, and even responded one to another. Familiarity with this history of interpretation has the potential to shed light on the context and content of any given interpretation. In this paper we have focused on the biblical interpretation of Isaiah 54:1 that stands at the heart of a polemical debate between a rabbinic figure, Beruria, and a *min*. Knowing the nonrabbinic material, especially as Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians was read, illuminates the nature of this polemic and explains its content.

In the final analysis, both Beruria and the *min* use the Isaiah verse to argue for the superiority of their religious group. In reading “For the children of the desolate shall be more/better than the children of the espoused” the *min* is saying: we are better because we are the sons of the Spirit and are not bound by the commandments. Beruria responds: we are better exactly because we *do* keep the commandments and do not end up in Gehenna. The *min* says: the woman’s desolation is her virginity, which refers to having children of the Spirit, while Beruria says: no, the



woman's desolation is her childlessness, which consists of being bereft of children like you. In both readings the desolation is a cause for joy.

This example, part of a group of stories involving the *minim* in the Babylonian Talmud, adds to our ability to better understand this literary genre and might in turn enable a better understanding of the historical circumstances that brought it about. The nature of Jewish-Christian interactions in the Persian Empire at the time of the composition of these literary traditions, the rabbis' acquaintance with Christian interpretive traditions, and their objectives in creating and preserving these traditions in the Talmud, are some of the more fascinating questions still waiting to be explored.