Faculty Publications

2016

Sarah Our Mother

P. Richard Choi
Andrews University, choir@andrews.edu

Recommended Citation

11

Sarah Our Mother

P. Richard Choi

P aul's citation of Isa 54:1 in Gal 4:27 does not appear to have drawn much interest among scholars. De Witt Burton[1] considers Paul's citation of Isa 54:1 "appropriate,"[2] but he does not offer much explanation.[3] Hans Dieter Betz[4] tersely comments that the point of Gal 4:27 is that "Sarah=heavenly Jerusalem=Christianity,"[5] but again he does not explain whether or not Paul's use of the Isaiah passage is faithful to the original context. C. K. Barrett[6] does address the question of original intention but offers an ambiguous answer. He states that Paul is thematically faithful to the original context of Isa 54:1,[7] but notes that Paul's usage corresponds to rabbinic *gᵉzēra šāwā*,[8] an interpretive method that often disregards the

---

[1] Ernest de Witt Burton, "A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians," ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark LTD, 1980).

[2] Ibid., 264.

[3] Ibid., the reason he offers is that "[the language] involves the figure of Jerusalem as a mother."

[4] Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia,* Hermen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 251.

[5] Ibid., 249. Betz notes, "In [Paul's] view, the quotation refers to Sarah." He offers no further explanation.

[6] C. K. Barrett, "The Allegory of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in the Argument of Galatians," in *Essays on Paul* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982).

[7] Ibid., 167.

[8] Ibid., 164.

original context. J. Louis Martyn,[9] who accepts and builds upon Barrett's conclusions, does not address the question of the citation of Isa 54:1 in Gal 4:27. Nor does Troy Martin[10] address this question in his carefully argued article. Herman N. Ridderbos[11] asserts that Paul's reading of Isa 54:1 is "the true sense of the Scripture,"[12] without offering an explanation how this is so. Sigurd Grindheim[13] carefully compares the covenant theologies of Isa 54:1 and Gal 4:21–31, concluding that God's election results in a reversal between the visible and invisible.[14] However, like others before him, he offers no detailed analysis of Gal 4:27 or Isa 54:1. Mark D. Nanos, who often offers valuable Jewish perspectives on Paul, does not specifically discuss Gal 4:27.[15] Clearly, there is a noticeable lack of interest among Pauline scholars about whether Paul's citation of Isa 54:1 in Gal 4:27 is faithful to its original context. The intent of this paper is to argue that, as a whole, Paul's discussion of Sarah's barrenness in Gal 4:21–31 closely coincides with the original intent of Isa 54:1. The first section of the paper will argue that Isa 54:1–3 contains references to Sarah and Hagar, similar to the way we find them in Gal 4:24–27. The second section of the paper will argue that a close reading of Isa 54:1–3 reveals that both Paul and Isaiah base their concept of Sarah's barrenness on Gen 11:30 and 17:15–20. In the final section of the paper, I shall attempt to apply the significance of this study to modern medicine.

Galatians 4:24–27 and Isaiah 54:1–3

Galatians 4:24–27 is composed in a loose chiastic structure, which may be shown as follows:[16]

> A.   One woman, in fact, is **Hagar**, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for **slavery**.
>   Now **Hagar** is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present

---

[9] J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

[10] Troy Martin, "Apostasy to Paganism: The Rhetorical Stasis of the Galatian Controversy," *JBL* 114.3 (1995): 437–461.

[11] Ibid., 181–182.

[12] Ibid., 180.

[13] Sigurd Grindheim, *The Crux of Election,* WUNT 202 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 179–183.

[14] Ibid., 182.

[15] Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First Century Context* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2002), 115–119.

[16] All quotes are NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

Jerusalem, for she is in **slavery** with her children (vv. 24–25).

B.   But **the other woman** corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is **free**, and she is our mother (v. 26).

B'.   For it is written, "Rejoice, you **childless one**, you **who bear no children**, burst into song and shout, you **who endure no birth pangs**; for the children of the **desolate woman** are more numerous (v. 27a–b).

A'.   than the children of **the one who is married**. (v. 27c).[17]

In A, vv. 24–25 mention Hagar by name and identify her as a slave woman. In B, v. 26 introduces Sarah as "the other woman" (ἡ δὲ) and describes her as "free," causing A and B to form an antithetical parallel. Although Sarah is not directly identified by name in B, for those who know the Genesis story of Abraham, her identity should be sufficiently clear from the mention of Abraham in v. 22 and of her son Isaac in v. 28. In B₁, v. 27a–b introduce further descriptions of Sarah. She is called "barren one" (στεῖρα), "who bears no children" (ἡ οὐ τίκτουσα), "who endures no birth pang" (ἡ οὐκ ὠδίνουσα), and "desolate woman" (τῆς ἐρήμου). These are attributes of Sarah, who is described as a free woman (ἐλευθέρα) in line B. Then finally, Hagar is briefly reintroduced in A₁ with the description, "one who has the husband" (that is to say, Sarah's husband) and completes the chiasm that began in v. 25. The structure of Gal 4:24–27 may be simplified as follows:

A.   Hagar the slave woman (vv. 24–25)

    B.   Sarah the free woman (v. 26)

    B'.   Sarah the barren and desolate woman (v. 27a–b)

A'.   Hagar, the one who has the husband (v. 27c)

The net effect of this chiastic structure is that Sarah and Hagar described in Gal 4:24–26 closely align with the two women in Isa 54:1–the barren woman and the woman who has the husband. Many commentators of Isaiah, however, see a broader reference in Isa 54:1 than just Sarah because the passage does not identify her by name. As a result, Rebekah, Rachel,

---

[17] A   μία μὲν ἀπὸ ὄρους Σινᾶ εἰς δουλείαν γεννῶσα, ἥτις ἐστὶν Ἁγάρ (v. 24) τὸ δὲ Ἁγὰρ Σινᾶ ὄρος ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ | .... (v. 25)

    B   ἡ δὲ ἄνω Ἰερουσαλὴμ ἐλευθέρα ἐστίν, ἥτις ἐστὶν μήτηρ ἡμῶν (v. 26)

    B₁   γέγραπται γάρ·εὐφράνθητι, στεῖρα ἡ οὐ τίκτουσα, ῥῆξον καὶ βόησον, ἡ οὐκ ὠδίνουσα ὅτι πολλὰ τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἐρήμου (v. 27a–b)

  A₁   μᾶλλον ἢ τῆς ἐχούσης τὸν ἄνδρα **a** (v. 27c)Å

Manoah's wife, and Hannah, who are also called "barren" in the OT (Gen 25:21; 29:31; Jud. 13:2; 1 Sam 2:5), have been named as possible referents.[18]

Isaiah 54:1, however, contains numerous verbal echoes of Gen 11:30 and strongly suggests Sarah as the referent, regardless of whether one reads it in the MT or the LXX. The wording of MT Isa 54:1 is similar to Gen. 11:30.[19]

Isa 54:1: רָנִּי עֲקָרָה לֹא יָלָדָה (Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear)

Gen 11:30: וַתְּהִי שָׂרַי עֲקָרָה אֵין לָהּ וָלָד (Sarai was barren; she had no child)

Both passages have the word עקרה (barren). And both passages contain verbal derivatives of ילד (bear children). Thus Isa 54:1 has ילדה (has given birth), and Gen 11:30, ולד (child). Moreover, both verses have a similar word order. In Isa 54:1, עקרה is followed by the negative (not) and ילדה. And in Gen 11:30, עקרה is followed by אין (not) and לה ולד (she had a child).

Significantly, the LXX translation—the text that Paul cites in Gal 4:27–retains the same verbal characteristics that we see in the MT. Genesis 11:30 and Isa 54:1 read as follows in the LXX:

LXX[20] Gen 11:30: καὶ ἦν Σαρα στεῖρα καὶ οὐκ ἐτεκνοποίει

LXX Isa 54:1: εὐφράνθητι στεῖρα ἡ οὐ τίκτουσα

Both LXX passages translate עקרה (barren) with στεῖρα. And ἐτεκνοποίει (bear children) of Gen 11:30 and τίκτουσα (give birth) of Isa 54:1 have the same semantic range. Also, both passages rigidly follow the word order of the MT. In both passages, στεῖρα is followed by οὐ τίκτουσα and οὐκ ἐτεκνοποίει respectively.

A close verbal relationship exists between Isa 54:1 and Gen 11:30 in both the MT and the LXX. Indeed, this verbal relationship has not escaped the notice of modern exegetes. For example, W. A. M. Beuken writes: "The wording [of Isa 54:1] … recalls Gen xi 30."[21] Richard Longenecker states that

---

[18] E.g. Joseph Blenkisopp, *Isaiah 40–55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 19A (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 361.

[19] Translations from the RSV.

[20] Rahlfs edition.

[21] W. A. M. Beuken, "Isaiah LIV: The Multiple Identity of the Person Addressed," *OtSt* 19 (1974): 37; see Klaus Balzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, Hermen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 434, note 264 for others; see also Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15,* WBC 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 273.

Isa 54:1 is an allusion to Gen 11:30.[22] Mary Callaway simply assumes that Isa 54:1 is an allusion to Sarah's barrenness in Genesis.[23] And according to Karen Jobes, "Isa 54:1 echoes Gen 11:30." [24] This close verbal relationship between Isa 54:1 and Gen 11:30 surely would not have escaped Paul, an astute student of Scripture.

Furthermore, Isa 54:3 contains two key words that are found in Gen 17:16–19: "nations" and "seed." The two passages read as follows:

> **Isa 54:3**: Your seed (וְזַרְעֲךָ) will inherit (יִירָשׁ) the nations (גּוֹיִם) and they will inhabit (יוֹשִׁיבוּ) the desolate cities (my translation).

> **Gen 17:16b, 19**: I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations (לְגוֹיִם) … Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his [seed] (לְזַרְעוֹ) after him (RSV)

First, there is a verbal similarity between the two passages. Isaiah 54:3 uses זֶרַע (seed) and גּוֹיִם (nations) to describe the descendants and the inheritance of Zion, respectively. These same words are used in Gen 17:16–19 to describe Sarah's descendants: she will become the mother of *nations* and God will establish a covenant with her *descendants*. Second, the two passages share thematic similarities. The reason most translations miss this thematic echo is that they take the verb יִירָשׁ in Isa 54:3 in the sense of "dispossess" or "drive out." The direction taken by these translations is understandable since ירשׁ is often used in such violent sense in the Pentateuch.[25] Thus, for example, Blenkinsopp considers ירשׁ as deuteronomistic.[26] But introducing the meaning of "dispossess" to Isa 54:3 does not fit the context well and misses an important thematic echo being made to Sarah. As we have seen, Isa 54:3 contains verbal echoes of Gen 17:16–19, with reference to Sarah's זֶרַע and her role as the mother of גּוֹיִם. The promise in Isaiah 54:3 that her "seed will inherit the nations" closely echoes the language of promise found in Gen

---

[22] Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians,* WBC 41 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), 215.

[23] Mary Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 59–72.

[24] Karen H. Jobes, "Jerusalem, Our Mother: Metalepsis and Intertextuality in Gal 4:21–31," *WTJ* 55 (1993): 307; cf. F. S. Malan, "The Strategy of Two Opposing Covenants: Gal 4:21:5:1," *Neot* 26.2 (1992): 434.

[25] The overwhelming usage of this term denotes dispossessing through violence (Gen 24:60; Exod 34:24; Num 14:24; 21:24, 32, 35; 32:21, 39; 33:52, 53, 55; Deut 2:24,31; 4:38, 47; 7:1, 17; 9:1, 3–6; 10:11; 11:23; 12:29; 18:14; 19:1; 25:19; Josh 3:10; 8:7; 12:1; 13:6, 12; 13:13; 14:12; 15:14, 63; 16:10; 17:12–13, 18; 18:3; 19:47; 21:43; 23:5; 23:9, 13; 24:8).

[26] Blenkinsopp, 357, 362.

17:16, namely, that Sarah will become the mother of nations (גּוֹיִם). The notion of a violent military conquest does not fit the context of Isa 54:3. Rather, the picture is that the descendants of Zion will inherit the nations, and that they and the nations that have joined their ranks will live peacefully together in the cities of the land.

The structure of Isa 54:1–3 further corroborates my reading of v. 3. In v. 1, there is a call to Zion to rejoice, for she will have many children. In v. 2, she is told to enlarge her tent, with clear implications that her descendants will be extremely large in number. Then, in v. 3, she is told that she will be blessed, so that her seed will inherit the nations who will inhabit the desolate cities. According to this structure, v. 3 explains vv. 1–2. It reveals why Zion needs to rejoice, who her descendants are, and why she needs to enlarge her tent. In conclusion, then, Isa. 54:1–3 echoes the story of Sarah in Genesis.[27] Verse 1 contains allusions to Sarah's barrenness in Gen 11:30, and v. 3 contains allusions to the promise made to Sarah in Gen 17:16–19 that she will become the mother of nations.

Genesis 11:30 and 17:15–20

Genesis 11:30 stands out from its immediate surrounding context like a sore thumb. The genealogy of Gen 11:10–26 is very patterned and formulaic: "When A had lived X number of years, he became the father of B, and A lived after the birth of B, Y number of years, and he had other sons and daughters." Terah's genealogy in v. 27 deviates somewhat from this pattern, but it is still about his family history–who married whom, and who begat whom. However, Gen 11:30 sharply departs from this heavily patterned text when it announces: "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child" (RSV). According to Klaus Balzer, Gen 11:30 is "a very marked passage."[28] Gordon J. Wenham also notes the extreme importance of this "digression within [the] genealogy."[29] According to Tammi J. Schneider, the purpose of this digression in 11:30 is to introduce "a major problem"[30] for the plot of the Abraham story. Furthermore, Gen 11:30 occurs at a very strategic point in the Abraham narrative. It appears in a *toledoth* passage (11:27–31) that functions as a link between two major narrative complexes–the Abraham narrative, on the one hand, and the Tower of Babel narrative, on the other–throwing

---

[27] Cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Abraham as Paradigm in the Priestly History in Genesis," *JBL* 128 (2009): 231.

[28] Balzer, *Deutero-Isaiah,* 434.

[29] Wenham, *Genesis,* 273.

[30] Tammi J. Schneider, *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 17.

spotlight on the barrenness of Sarai as the key element in the plot. Klaus Balzer notes: "Sarah's barrenness [in 11:30] . . . plays a moving part."[31]

Genesis 17:15–16 forms an inclusio with 11:30.[32] First, Sarah's name is abruptly changed in 17:15. She is introduced as Sarai in 11:30. Thereafter, she is consistently referred to as Sarai until her name is changed to Sarah in 17:15. God tells Abraham: "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name." This abrupt change[33] of Sarah's name signals the end of the inclusio that began in 11:30. Second, 17:15 announces that Sarah will bear Abraham's offspring. This joyful announcement effects a sudden change in Sarah's status.[34] Sarah begins her career in 11:30 in her lowly and shameful status of barrenness. She remains in this state throughout the story (cf. 16:1), despised even by her own mistress Hagar who is pregnant with Abraham's offspring (16:4). The announcement in 17:15 removes her shame and elevates her status to a mother. Third, the promise of posterity appears multiple times before ch. 17 (cf. 12:2–3, 7; 13:14–17; 15:5–6. 13–16, 18), but Sarai is never mentioned in any of these promises. Genesis 17:15–16 is the first promise in the Abraham cycles that specifically mentions Sarah by name: "you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her." It is clear, then, that 17:15–16 presents the solution to the problem of Sarah's barrenness that was introduced in 11:30. These two passages complement each other. Furthermore, the appearance of גּוֹיִם (nations) in 17:16–a word that we already discussed in connection with Isa 54:3–reconnects Sarah to the genealogies in Gen 10–11. The term גּוֹיִם first occurs in the genealogies of Gen 10 (vv. 5, 20, 31, 32), and then it resurfaces only in 17:4 in connection with Abraham's fatherhood: "You shall be the father of a multitude of nations (גּוֹיִם)" [RSV]. גוים also appears in 22:18 in a similar sense in the context of the sacrifice of Isaac: "by your descendants shall all the nations (גּוֹיִם) of the earth bless themselves" (RSV). These occurrences of גוים refer back to chs. 10–11 which form the backdrop of Abraham's call.[35] Appropriately, the

---

[31] Balzer, *Deutero-Isaiah,* 434.

[32] The "small break" after 17:14 in the MT perhaps indicates a scribal recognition of this inclusio; see Schneider, *Sarah,* 57, who does not mention the inclusio.

[33] Cf. ibid.

[34] Cf. ibid., 61.

[35] Critical scholarship generally explains the close literary relations between Gen 10–11 and 17 on the grounds of P. See Blenkinsopp, "Abraham," 225–241, for the current debate on P's functions in the Genesis story of Abraham. The basic reasoning is that the covenant texts in Genesis 9:8–17 and 17:1–11, as well as the table of the nations in ch. 10 and the genealogy of ch. 11, belong to P. It is, however, methodologically unsound, indeed anachronistic, to try to explain Paul's reading of the Abraham story in Galatians on the basis of the documentary hypothesis of

phrase וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם (she will become nations)> in 17:16 is translated by the RSV, KJV, NKJV, and NASB with: "[Sarah] shall be a mother of nations" (RSV). This promise makes Sarah an equal recipient of the promise with Abraham.[36] It is significant in this context that the LXX translates the גוֹיִם in 17:4 and 17:16 with ἔθνη (Gentiles). For the LXX translator of Genesis, Abraham and Sarah are the father and mother of the Gentiles. The reference to Sarah's barrenness in 17:17 further strengthens the close literary relationship between 17:15–16 and 11:30. Abraham asks in 17:17: "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" This mention of Sarah's barrenness alongside the mention of her being the mother of the "nations" in v. 16 creates a thematic continuity between 17:15–17 and 11:30.

Gen 11:30 and 17:15–17 form an inclusio in the story of Abraham and plays a crucial interpretive role. First, it allows Sarah to emerge as an agent of the promise no less than Abraham. Genesis 11:30 signals to the reader that barren Sarah will become the mother of the promised seed one day, a knowledge that the characters in the story including Abraham apparently lack.[37] This tension causes the reader to wonder how barren Sarah will be able to fulfill the promise. For example, for the alert reader, suspense heightens when Sarai is endangered in Egypt in 12:10–20 or when Abraham marries Hagar in ch. 16. This heightened sense of suspense causes barren Sarai to stand out in the story as an agent of the promise. Second, the inclusio also underscores the importance of the announcement in 17:16 that Sarah will become the mother of nations. This announcement surprises Abraham. He falls on his face and laughs in disbelief[38] when he hears it (v. 17). The announcement also surprises the reader. The Abraham story promises blessing to the Gentiles in numerous places (12:3; 18:18; 22:18), but no passage directly mentions that Sarah is the mother of *nations*. This revelation

---

P, since the Pentateuch was a unified text by Paul's time. Blenkinsopp notes the universalistic tendency of P, allegedly composed over several generations by numerous temple scribes (230), but universalism is hardly limited to so-called P, since it is also found in 12:1–3, a passage generally attributed to J. See Thomas Christian Römer, "The Elusive Yahwist: A Short History of Research," in *A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman and Konrad Schmid (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2006), 24.

[36] Cf. Schneider, *Sarah,* 58.

[37] Cf. ibid., 48; Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis,* JSOTSup 96 (Worcester, England: Sheffield Academic, 1990), 61, rightly states that "to hear the promise as Abraham heard it, we [the reader] must bracket out any later developments we now know will take place" based on 11:30. The alert reader knows what the characters in the story do not know.

[38] Cf. Schneider, *Sarah*, 58–59; Turner, ibid., 78.

occurs only in 17:16. The point of this surprise is to underscore the importance of the concern that God has for the nations in the Abraham story. Finally, the inclusio excludes Hagar and Ishmael from the promise of posterity. Hagar and Ishmael are not part of the promise of posterity because the inclusio designates Sarah as the mother of Abraham's heir. In fact, Gen 17:18–21 explicitly denies that Ishmael is an agent of the promise. In v. 18, Abraham asks God to make Ishmael his heir. It is clear that Abraham had profound misconceptions about Ishmael's role in the promise. In v. 19, God corrects Abraham and clarifies that Ishmael has no role to play in the covenant: "No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him." In v. 20, God also promises a blessing for Ishmael, but in v. 21, God restricts his covenant blessings to Sarah and her offspring Isaac–"I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you" (RSV).

Conclusion

C. K. Barrett writes concerning Paul's use of the Abraham story in Gal 4:21–31: "Its plain, surface meaning supports not Paul but the Judaizers."[39] The detailed analysis of the Genesis account of Abraham, above, has shown that Barrett is wrong. It is Paul, rather than his opponents, who correctly reads the story. In Gal 4:21–31, Paul advocates three things about the Genesis story of Abraham. First, he writes in v. 28 that the Gentile Christians "are children of the promise, like Isaac" and identifies Sarah and Isaac as the agents of the Abrahamic promise. Second, Paul calls Sarah "our mother" in v. 26, making her the mother of the Gentiles. And third, in v. 30, Paul calls on his Gentile converts to "cast out the slave [Hagar] and her son" (RSV), denying Hagar any agency in the covenant. These three points in Gal 4:21–31 perfectly coincide with the intention of the story of Abraham in Genesis. Paul writes in Gal 4:21: "Tell me, you who desire to be under law, do you not hear the law?" (RSV), underscoring the need to read the story of Abraham more closely.

Yet, Paul is not original in this reading. He borrows understanding of Sarah's barrenness from Isa 54, which describes the fate of Jerusalem in

---

[39] Barrett, 164; Karen Jobes, "Jerusalem, Our Mother," who devotes nearly half of her article (306–320) to the allusions to Isaiah found in Galatians, concurs: "Paul's argument in Gal 4:21–31 resonates, not with the Genesis narrative, but with Isaiah's transformation of its themes of seed and inheritance" (312).

allegorical terms, as Sarah's experience. Isaiah 54 describes Jerusalem in exile under a curse (vv. 4–8) as Sarah humiliated in her barrenness. Conversely, it describes Jerusalem restored as Sarah who became a mother (v. 1). Like Sarah, Zion will be the mother of the nations (v. 3) and become the center of the universal people of God. It will be a heavenly city (vv. 11–12) vindicated by God, like barren Sarah. Moreover, Isa 54:1–3 employs the motives of Sarah's barrenness in Gen 11:30 and her vindication and healing in Gen 17:15 as an interpretive inclusio of the Abraham story that allows Sarah to emerge as the key agent of the promise (cf. Isa 54:10). It is clear, then, that Paul's allegory of Sarah and Hagar in Gal 4:21–31 is heavily dependent on Isaiah's breathtaking reading of the Genesis story of Abraham.[40] For Paul, however, the eschatological moment prophesied by Isaiah and Genesis has arrived through Christ the Seed of Abraham.[41] His Gentile converts represent the eschatological children of Sarah[42] who in turn represents the heavenly Jerusalem, their city.[43] To the casual reader, Paul's Gentile-centered reading of the Abraham story in Galatians may appear novel, or as Barrett notes, even contrary to the plain sense of the story. But to those very familiar with the text of the Genesis, like Paul and Isaiah, there is no other way to read the story.

Application

Paul's understanding of the story of Sarah is most apparent in the comparisons he makes between her and Hagar in Gal 4:21–28. Even a cursory reading of this passage reveals that the two women represent two sets of opposing qualities. In v. 22, Paul begins with their similarities: they both had sons. But that is where their similarities end, and the contrast begins. The son of Hagar is a slave, and the son of Sarah, a free man. In v. 23 Paul widens the contrast between them. The slave son is born "according to the flesh," but the son who is free is born according to a promise. Then vv. 24–25 apply these contrary predicates to the covenants of Israel. The Mosaic covenant of Sinai is Hagar, and the guardians of that covenant in Jerusalem are her children. Then in v. 26, Paul and his Gentile converts are described as the children of Sarah the free woman. They belong to the new covenant and serve the heavenly Jerusalem. Then Paul cites Isa 54:1: "Rejoice, you

---

[40] This is the way Paul would have viewed Isaiah 54, not as Deutero-Isaiah's reading of P.

[41] Gal 3:16.

[42] The descendents of Abraham in Gal 3:29.

[43] Gal 4:26.

childless one, you who bear no children, burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs; for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous than the children of the one who is married." Paul then announces in v. 28: "Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac." The rest of the verses of chapter 4 return to the contrast between Ishmael and Isaac in vv. 22–23 and reaffirm that Paul and his Gentile converts are the free children of Sarah and call for the expulsion of Hagar and her slave children from the household of Abraham.

It is obvious from this description that Abraham is not the focus of Paul's discussion Gal 4:21–31. Sarah is. When Paul declares in v. 22 that Abraham had two sons, it implies that it is not enough to be a child of Abraham. For Abraham had two wives, one a slave woman and the other a free woman. The point of this comparison is that it is insufficient to be offspring of Abraham. One must be a child of Sarah in order to be a free person, the promised offspring of Abraham. Another obvious point in the story is that Sarah is barren, and Hagar is not. And the true children of Abraham come from a barren woman. Thus the significance of Sarah's role in the story is not only that she is Abraham's original wife or that she is a free woman, but that, as Gen 11:30 makes plain, she is barren. This focus on barrenness is evident from the fact that Sarah is not mentioned by name in Gal 4:21–31. Like Isaiah, Paul wants to broaden the significance of her barrenness, so that it applies to all types of impossible and lingering human conditions. For Isaiah, the barrenness is Israel in exile, and for Paul it is the disobedience of the Gentiles and his own past. That Paul persecuted the church or that the Gentile believers were dead in sin (Eph 2:1–22)–these are all varying manifestations of Sarah's barrenness. Paul and his Gentile converts, like Israel in exile, were rescued from a barren condition by the power of God's promise and grace. Therefore the problem of the Jews in Jerusalem is not necessarily that they are Jews. Paul does not condemn Jews qua Jews. Otherwise he would himself be excluded from the promise. Rather, the problem is their unshakable notion of human possibility. The Mosaic covenant that they revere and trust is the symbol of human possibility for them, an institution that inspires them with a sense of control and hope that they can hasten the promised time of blessing by the exercise of their will. It is this overreliance on human works and processes that links Paul's Jewish opponents to Hagar and her slavery.

It is, then, obvious from this discussion that there are two ways of looking at Sarah's barrenness. One way is to view it as an obstacle that stands

in the way of Abraham's becoming the father of a great nation (Gen 12:2). Abraham's marriage to Hagar in Genesis 16 is an example of such a view. Another way is to see it as an agent of Abraham's transformation. In other words, her condition of lingering infertility is the reason why God unfolds his plan of redemption in Abraham's life the way he does. If Sarah had been fertile, there would have been no need for God's promise of a son in Gen 15:4: "no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." Furthermore, there would have been no need for Abraham to peer into the night sky and believe in God and be justified (v. 6). It is all because of Sarah's incurable infertility that Abraham experienced God's deliverance in the unique and marvelous manner in which he did. Seen this way, Sarah's infertility is not an obstacle standing in the way of Abraham's ability to become the father of many nations but the very agent or catalyst that enables and sustains the slow moving transformation process that makes him the father and shining example of faith for many nations down through the ages.

The significance of Sarah's barrenness may be further broadened and applied to modern illnesses, especially since infertility is a disease process by modern definitions. For many, an illness is an obstacle that stands in the way of their ability to enjoy a fulfilling life. But it is well known that in spite of great advances in medicine, most illnesses cannot be "removed" like an obstacle. In fact, many life-threatening illnesses are incurable, creating great inconveniences for the patients as well as their families. Notwithstanding, many longingly seek cures for their illnesses. And they are often discouraged when their disease processes continue without much progress. Paul would disagree with the modern tendency to view illnesses solely negatively, as an obstacle to overcome or some chronic inconvenience to manage and live with. For it is enslaving and not transformational to have such a fixation on physical healing and the treatment processes that facilitate it. The Jews of Paul's time tried to usher in a time of blessing by their meticulous works of the law. However, they failed to see that their overreliance on human effort was depriving them of their freedom, enslaving them under the burden of fear and unnecessary restrictions. I do not speak against modern medicine, just as I do not speak against the law, but I am concerned with the pervasive misguided notion that one can enjoy life fully only if one is healthy. Our illnesses and other debilitating human conditions do not necessarily have to hinder us from living a fulfilling life. They can be agents of positive change for those who walk with faith like Abraham who patiently waited for God. Like Sarah's barrenness, one's incurable illnesses and debilitating conditions

can become the reason that explains why God is involved one's life the way he is, and, why the unique stories of one's life have unfolded the way they did. Furthermore, rather than hindering us from becoming the people that God intends us to be, our impossible and incurable conditions become the hands that guide us to conform to the glorious image of the Son of God.

We may perhaps broaden the definition of barrenness a bit more. Just about everyone I know struggles with some insurmountable problem in their lives, and not all become a better person because of them. Yet for those who understand the positive significance of their barren conditions, it is evident that their obstacles and human conditions are agents that transform their lives, strengthening their faith and hope. These are the children of Sarah, for they find a new life in the crucible of human barrenness. They may join in Sarah's song of rejoicing because their lives have been made richer and fuller than those who are apparently without the same burdensome conditions. For these see that through it all–the unpredictable ups and downs of life–they have been with God.