

NOTES AND READINGS

The Call of Abraham: A Midrash Revisited

R. Hanan bar Rabba said in the name of Rav:

On the day when Abraham our father departed from the world, all the great ones of the nations of the world came and stood in a row (in mourning), and said: "Woe to the world whose leader has perished; woe to the ship whose pilot has perished!"

Babylonian Talmud, Baba Bathra 91a

1

Maimonides, in the first chapter of the Laws of Idolatry in his *Mishneh Torah*, describes in detail the demise and revival of monotheism in the world from the time of creation. In his view, idolatry grew gradually, starting from a relatively innocent mistake on the part of Enosh and his generation, who supposed that God wished for man to honor the heavenly bodies and to worship them. Subsequently, as false prophets and others took advantage of the situation, it was taught that the celestial bodies themselves desired such worship, and icons were made as objects of worship. Ultimately, the worship of icons and heavenly beings led to the almost complete absence of the knowledge of God among men.

Such was the situation at the time of Abraham, who was himself an idol worshiper. Maimonides then describes Abraham's rediscovery of monotheism:

When this "great one" (i.e., Abraham) was weaned, he began to think—being still a small child—and to muse night and day, wondering: How is it possible that the [celestial] sphere should be continuously in motion without one to guide it? Who then causes it to revolve—for it certainly cannot cause itself to revolve? . . . And such were his ponderings, until he attained the way of truth and perceived the straight path from his own correct understanding, and

knew that there was one God, and that He is the one to guide the [celestial] sphere, He created all, and there exists no other god besides Him.¹

Abraham, after attempting to dispute the current idolatrous views of the Chaldeans, was expelled from Ur Casdim. He continued to teach the truth of monotheism to all, imparting this knowledge especially to his children, until, ultimately, "there came into the world a people knowing God." During their stay in Egypt, however, this knowledge was almost lost, and the people resumed idolatrous practices. But God, "in keeping with His oath to Abraham," instated Moses as prophet and chose the Jews as his people, giving them the commandments and instructing them in His worship.

I have quoted Maimonides here as a prime example—and one of the most lucid—of an ancient and prevalent view of Abraham's "calling" and his role as progenitor of the Jewish people: Abraham, living among idolators, was one of the very few to discover the one God, and was central in the propagation of monotheism and the refutation of idolatry. This singular fact provides an (historical) explanation for Maimonides and others for the subsequent choice by God of the Jews, realized through His revelation to them at Sinai.²

Of course, none of this is mentioned in the Bible's account of Abraham's call. God's revelation to him through his command to leave Ur (Gen. 12:1–3) is presented without any previous actions or beliefs on the part of Abraham. Not even is Abraham described here as being particularly righteous, as is the case with Noah (Gen. 6:8–9; 7:1), although we receive such descriptions—both explicit and implicit—in subsequent chapters. Indeed, it is just this silence of the Bible at this all-important juncture in the life of the Jewish people that has prompted readers of all generations to attempt to explain the reason for God's call to Abraham. Maimonides' presentation of the (re)discovery of monotheism by Abraham as such a reason, while particularly suited to Maimonidean thinking, has ancient roots. I wish to trace those roots here briefly, from postbiblical literature through rabbinic midrash, with particular emphasis on one midrash, which undoubtedly underlies Maimonides' discussion cited above, and which has been viewed by many as the rabbinic description *par excellence* of Abraham's recognition of monotheism. An analysis of this midrash against the background of earlier, parallel passages, will provide, I propose, some surprising results.

2

If the Bible is mute about Abraham's life and views prior to God's revelation to him in Genesis 12, we do nevertheless find reference to idol worshiping among his ancestors in the well-known passage from Joshua 24 (vv. 2–4): "Thus says the Lord God of Israel: Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the river in old time—Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor—and they served other gods. And I took your father Abraham from the other side of the river, and led him through the whole land of Canaan, and multiplied his seed." Thus, the view of Abraham's ancestors as an idolatrous people is well rooted in biblical tradition. It is not surprising, then, that we find this view in apocryphal literature: In

Achior's description of the Jews to Holofernis in Jth. 5:6–8, the Jews' monotheism, in opposition to their idolatrous roots, is their salient feature. So, too, the Book of Jubilees presents an early version of the idolatrous practices in the time of Terah (although Terah himself is portrayed as realizing the error of these ways). It is here that we find one of the earliest mentions of Abraham as the discoverer of the one God, at a precocious age.³ Later, when Abraham is already seventy-five years old, the story is told of his contemplation of the stars (in order to forecast the rainfall of the coming year), at which time he comes to the conclusion that, since all the celestial bodies are in the hands of God, there is no need to forecast the future: "If He wishes it, He causes it to rain, morning and evening; and if He wishes it, He withholds [the rain]—all things are in His hands." That very night Abraham prays to God to save him from the errors of idolatry, and to direct him accordingly: "Shall I return to Ur Casdim . . . or shall I remain here [in Haran]?" In response, God's word is revealed to Abraham in a paraphrase of Gen. 12:1–3.⁴

We note two points here: (1) Abraham's realization of the existence of God as Creator is autodidactic, and occurs at an early age; and (2) the (first) revelation by God to Abraham, in which he is commanded to leave Haran, is described as a response to Abraham's supplications, these supplications being a direct consequence of Abraham's contemplation of nature. His contemplation, however, led Abraham *away* from nature: He concludes that nature (i.e., the observance of the courses of the celestial bodies) does not hold the key to knowledge of the future, even with regard to natural phenomena themselves (rainfall). "All are in the hands of God, and why should I search?"⁵

The idea that Abraham was well versed in astrological and astronomical matters was, in fact, the general view in Jewish Hellenistic circles of this period. This conformed to the general scientific trend of the Hellenistic age: "[I]t is a commonplace of first-century [B.C.E.] literature to suppose that the first races of mankind worshiped the heavenly bodies, i.e., that solar and astral cults were the 'natural' religion of mankind, and therefore true."⁶ Thus, we find already in early citations of Hellenistic Jewish authors that Abraham had discovered astrology and astronomy, and came to the recognition of God through, or at least in conjunction with, his knowledge of the stars.⁷

This idea became a central point in the characterization of Abraham by the two great Jewish Hellenistic authors of the first century C.E., Philo and Josephus.⁸ Both these authors were acquainted with Greek philosophy, and specifically allude to the so-called teleological "argument from design" for the existence of God, which deduces from the orderly state of the universe evidence for the existence of a power directing and commanding the universe.⁹ Particularly telling is Philo's rendition of this argument, when he exemplifies its message through the simile of a carefully constructed house: He who views such a house will surely conclude that only the assumption of the existence of a master craftsman can explain its state of completeness.¹⁰ This simile is an ancient one, and it is worth quoting one of its early versions, presented in the name of Cleanthes, the Stoic philosopher:

When someone enters a house, a gymnasium, or a forum, and sees the controlled methodical pattern of all that goes on, he cannot think that these

things happen without cause, but understands that there is someone who presides and who is obeyed. So much more must he, in the case of these great motions and phases of the heavenly bodies . . . conclude that it is by some mind that these great motions of nature are guided.¹¹

This ancient Greek view, however, undergoes a transformation in both Josephus and Philo, as we shall presently see.

Philo describes the natural astronomical philosophy of the Chaldeans, who, "in their exploration of numerical order as applied to the course of the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars, and the change of seasons, . . . concluded that the world itself was god." Abraham was "raised in this philosophy and practiced it for a long time." But then, "he began to perceive what he had not seen before: a charioteer and pilot, presiding over the world and directing in safety his own creation."¹² The divine word, exemplified by Gen. 12:1-3, is then revealed to Abraham, telling him to abandon his preoccupation with the material universe and turn instead to the study of man. Abraham concludes from the existence of the invisible mind in man, which rules and directs his activities, that the world must similarly be ruled by an invisible power; it cannot be self-governing. God's revelation to Abraham is a direct result of this perception.¹³

Josephus also describes Abraham against the background of his Chaldaean environment. Abraham is the first to demonstrate that there is one God who created all things and commands them, and who alone is responsible for their well-being. Here, too, Abraham's argument results from the observation of the celestial motions; interestingly, though, he concludes the existence of God not from the rhythmic order of the universe but rather from the many *irregularities* in the heavenly courses, which prove that they must be subject to a higher command. In the course of Abraham's persuasions, he finds it necessary to leave his homeland and, directed by divine providence, settles in the land of Israel.¹⁴

Thus, while both Philo and Josephus connect Abraham's migration to the land of Israel with his contemplation of nature, their accounts portray Abraham as going beyond the teleological argument for the existence of God. Josephus's account can be seen as a polemic against this argument from within: By emphasizing the irregularities of the cosmos rather than its order, he similarly emphasizes the distance of God from His creation and His complete free will.¹⁵ For Philo, on the other hand, Abraham is seen to abandon the astronomical research altogether, rising beyond the material world to infer God from a study of the nonmaterial, intellectual realm of the mind of man.¹⁶

From approximately the time of Josephus, we have another work written on Abraham, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. This book, deriving originally from a Jewish (apparently Hebrew) text, but now extant only in a Slavonic translation, includes parallels to midrashim appearing in Genesis Rabbah and other rabbinic sources.¹⁷ In particular, the well-known legend of Terah and his idols appears here with many similarities to the story as told in Genesis Rabbah.¹⁸ Here Abraham disputes with his father concerning the power of idols, rejecting the divinity of the various physical entities (fire, water, earth, sun, clouds, and so on) by marking the subservience of one by the other.¹⁹ In conclusion, Abraham states:

But hear this, Terah my father; for I will make known to you the God who created all things. For who is it, or which one is it who made the heavens

crimson, the sun golden, who has given light to the moon, and with it the stars, who has dried the earth in the midst of the many waters. . . . Yet may God reveal Himself to us through Himself!

In direct response to this, the voice of God is heard crying out to Abraham from heaven:

Abraham! . . . You are seeking in the understanding of your heart the God of gods, the Creator; I am He. Go out from Terah your father, and go out of the house.²⁰

Despite the diversity among these accounts, we note that they contain common motifs concerning the call of Abraham, which we may assume were current in the late Second Temple period among Jewish (Hellenistic) circles. We may summarize these motifs as follows:

(1) Abraham searches and discovers the one God, the Creator, through his own intellectual contemplation.

(2) God's command to Abraham to leave his homeland is seen as a response to an initiative on the part of Abraham.

(3) This initiative is related to Abraham's contemplation of the physical universe, the conduct of which—whether orderly or disorderly—cannot explain its own existence. Abraham is thus led to recognize the significance of the transcendent God, who is not only Creator of the world, but also its governor and commander.

3

We now consider a midrashic passage from a third-century C.E. rabbi, which seems, at first glance, to include the very same motifs that we have found current in Jewish literary and philosophical circles from the Second Temple period. It is imbedded in a *petihta* (proem),²¹ being the first midrashic comment on Gen. 12:1 recorded in the early amoraic midrash, *Genesis Rabbah*. I quote the entire *petihta*, according to the text of the authoritative Vatican 30 manuscript:²²

The Lord said to Abram: Go forth from your country. . . . (Gen. 12:1)

R. Isaac opened:

"Hearken, O daughter, and consider, incline your ear; forget your people and your father's house." (Ps. 45:11)

R. Isaac said:

This may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place, when he saw a *birah* burning. He said, "Might you say that the *birah* is without a leader?" The owner of the *birah* looked out at him and said, "I am the owner of the *birah*."

Similarly, because our father Abraham had said, "Might you say that the world is without a leader?" the Holy One, blessed be He, looked out at him and said, "I am the owner of the world."

"So shall the king desire your beauty" (ibid.)—to improve you in the world.

"For He is your Lord, bow to Him." (ibid.)

The Lord said to Abram: Go forth from your country. . . .

One is very tempted to interpret R. Isaac's parable in the light of the parallels quoted above: The *birah*²³ no doubt signifies the world, and Abraham's contemplation of it leads to his rhetorical question, which presupposes the existence of a governor, or owner, of the world.²⁴ A direct connection is then posited between Abraham's philosophical initiative and God's response, which confirms Abraham's initial supposition. The entire parable is placed in the context of God's first revelation to Abraham in Genesis 12; this revelation is thus regarded by the midrashist as God's response to Abraham's recognition of His existence. Indeed, R. Isaac's parable has been cited as evidence of the teleological argument proper in rabbinic thinking.²⁵ It is evident that Maimonides drew on this parable in writing the section cited at the beginning of this paper, which exhibits linguistic and thematic similarities with the midrash.²⁶

However, a closer analysis of the parable reveals several problems of interpretation that demand resolution. It will be noted that the parable includes an element that does not easily fit the interpretation given above: The conflagration in the *birah* would seem to indicate that there is indeed no one minding the *birah*. If so, the question of the passerby (and of Abraham), "Shall you say that the *birah* is without a leader?" is not a rhetorical one, expecting the negative answer "No! There surely exists a leader of the *birah*!" but quite the opposite: All things indicate that this *birah* is without a leader! This reading is the better one philologically, since, in all similar occurrences of the term *תאמר* at the beginning of a clause, the clause is always taken as a serious possibility by the speaker, and is the cause for fear or consternation on his part.²⁷ The parable would thus imply that Abraham considered the absence of God as a distinct possibility! Indeed, this problem was clearly understood by the traditional commentators. Yaakov Moshe Hellin (*Yedei Moshe*) comments:

It seems to me that the intent is (as follows): Just as this one, who sees a *birah* burning, thinks, "Since no one is putting out the fire, certainly the *birah* is without a governor," and the owner of the *birah* looks out at him and says, "I am the owner of the *birah*, and it is my intention that it burn"—so, when Abraham our father saw the world go to desolation in the generation of Enosh, the flood and the dispersion (in the generation of the tower of Babel), he said, "Mercy; forbid! Perhaps the world is without a governor!" The Lord then looked out at him and said, "I am the owner of the world, and it is my intention to destroy the wicked. You—get out from your land, from these wicked people."²⁸

The burning *birah*, far from signifying a created world and a creator, actually suggests the opposite. And it is this suggestion of atheism that Abraham posits, and that God's revelation to him comes to refute. The parable, then, is an attempt to solve a theological problem—that of the possibility of the existence of God in

the face of destruction and decadence. This problem bothered Abraham; and God's response is none other than an affirmation of His existence.

The audacity of such an approach—that Abraham could consider atheism a possibility—was obviously not entirely acceptable to all. Therefore, we find that the early commentary of pseudo-Rashi evades the problem entirely by interpreting the verb *וילקח* as "lit up" and not "burning": The illuminated *birah* then signifies the celestial host of lights, and Abraham is understood as asking rhetorically, "Is it possible that such a great thing as this be without a governor?" This is a valiant attempt at "saving" the parable, but at the expense of philological preciseness: Nowhere in rabbinic literature does the verb *וילק* indicate anything except a fire; the term for illumination would have been derived from the root *אור*.²⁹

R. Zeev Wolf Einhorn ("Maharzu") combines both of these views. His interpretation is based on an understanding of the *birah* as "a beautiful and orderly building":³⁰ A passerby who views such a building must admit that there exists a lord and owner "and a wise craftsman built it." Upon seeing it burning, however, he will conclude that the owner has abandoned it. The destruction and decadence of the previous generations led Abraham to similar conclusions:

and from this Abraham was confused, [thinking] that the lord of the world had left it, and—forbid!—does not desire that one worship him, until God revealed Himself to him and said, "I am the owner of the world and its lord, and all this destruction and punishment is intentional." . . . but actually [He] wishes that one worship Him.³¹

None of these interpretations is entirely convincing, and each has its problems. The interpretation of Hellin, while providing a fitting and philologically correct explanation for the comment of the passerby/Abraham, raises several questions that do not receive adequate answers: Why does the parable speak of one who is going from place to place? If the intention is to allude to Abraham's sojourns, from which he deduced the wickedness and destruction in the world, then the parallel is highly inconsistent: The conclusion of the passerby is deduced from the conflagration, not from anything he has seen along the way.³² Moreover, one would assume that this passerby will be continuing along his way; how, then, does the command of God to Abraham to emigrate receive any importance? Again, there is hardly any hint in the parable that God is content with the destruction in the world. Shall we truly believe that the owner of the *birah* desires his *birah* to burn? Would we not regard such an owner as slightly deranged, or even evil? It is difficult to conclude from this parable that the destruction in the world is somehow purposeful and desired by God.

On the other hand, the alternate interpretation—that Abraham does recognize God's existence—while conforming comfortably to what we might expect from a parable like this as a comment to Genesis 12, is equally problematical. Besides presenting a difficult reading of the comment of the passerby, as mentioned above, this interpretation simply ignores, or must somehow force into context, the fact of the conflagration. If Abraham recognizes God's existence despite the fire, why must he receive confirmation from the "owner of the *birah*"?

What does such a revelation achieve? If the owner is present, then, as above, the question of the purpose of the fire remains unanswered in the parable.

For both interpretations, there arise a series of questions concerning the use of language in this parable:

— The passerby/Abraham is looking for a *מנוח*, but the response comes from the *בעל הבירה*—so-called by the midrashic narrator as well as by himself. What is the significance of such a change of name?

— The owner/God is peculiarly said to “look down”³³ at the passerby/Abraham; while such usage would perhaps fit God’s position in the *nimshal*, how are we to understand the parable itself: Where is this owner?

— Finally, what exactly is a *birah*, and why does the midrashist use such a term? Especially if such a building is assumed to be some kind of palatial residence, why doesn’t the midrashist use the more regular term in such parables, viz., *palatin* (or *paltorin*)?³⁴

4

The key to the proper understanding of the parable will be found in the correct definition of the word *birah*. This word, which has a long and complicated history,³⁵ appears in rabbinic sources in three different usages: as part of certain place names, as the name of a part of the Temple Mount, and as a residential building.³⁶ Although it is often translated as “castle,” “citadel,” “palace,” or “tower,” nowhere in the rabbinic literature can it be understood to refer to anything other than a normal (but large) residential building.³⁷ As I have shown elsewhere, the definition underlying all the usages of this term in Hebrew and Aramaic is “enclosure”; and at different periods and in different cultures various types of edifices were coined as such.³⁸ From a review of the rabbinic statements in which *birah* is mentioned, it will be seen that such a structure was a common one in the mishnaic and talmudic periods, found undoubtedly in large urban centers in the land of Israel. We quote here three passages, from which we may deduce its major characteristics:³⁹

The Sages agree with R. Judah⁴⁰ that if one set fire to a *birah*, he must make restitution for all that was therein, for it is customary for people to place [their belongings] in the apartments.

... If a camel laden with flax passed along in the public domain, and its [load of] flax intruded into a shop and caught fire from the shopkeeper’s lamp, thus setting fire to the *birah*, the owner of the camel is liable. (Mishnah Baba Kamma 6:5–6)

MISHNAH: If one has eaten and forgotten to say grace—

Bet Shammai says: He must return to the place where he ate.

Bet Hillel says: He should say it in the place where he remembered.

GEMARA: ... It has been taught:

Bet Hillel said to Bet Shammai: According to you, one who ate at the top of a *birah*, and forgot and descended without having said grace—he should return to the top of the *birah* and say grace!

Bet Shammai replied to Bet Hillel: According to you, one who forgot a purse at the top of a *birah*—would he not go up and get it? If he will ascend for his own sake, all the more so should he do it for the sake of Heaven! (TB Berakhot 53b)

(Simeon the Temani claims that, in a case of murder, the alleged implement of murder should be available to the court for examination, in order to discern if it is possible to murder with such an implement; such discretion should not be left to the witnesses.)

R. Akiba said to him: Suppose that one pushed another off the top of a *birah* so that he dies—do we say, "Let the *birah* come to the court"? And if you say, "Let the court then come and see the *birah*": [If the *birah*] collapsed—do we say "Let the owner come and rebuild it"? Rather . . . even in capital cases—all is dependent on the witness's [testimony]. (Tosefta Sanhedrin 12:3)

From these and other passages, it may be deduced that a *birah* was generally a large building in which people lived in private apartments.⁴¹ It often surrounded an inner courtyard, was adjacent to a main thoroughfare, and had shops along its ground floor.⁴² The most conspicuous characteristic of the structure was its height,⁴³ and from our sources we can determine that the common dangers of such structures were indeed those connected with tall buildings: falling from its upper stories, collapse of the entire structure, and fire.⁴⁴ Nowhere is a *birah* described as particularly grand or beautiful, and nowhere is it implied that such a building served royalty or the rich exclusively. From the casual use of *birah* as part of a typical case in talmudic halakhic literature, it may be concluded that it was a particularly common type of edifice.

This description fits exactly what is known in Roman architecture as an *insula*—a large tenement house, containing a number of distinct and separate dwellings. These buildings were legion in the major cities of the Roman empire, housing the majority of the urban population. Historians of the Roman period have emphasized the particular dangers of such buildings, which attained heights of up to five stories, and were particularly prone to collapse and fire.⁴⁵ We also learn that, while such buildings were generally owned by one individual, the landlords were often not directly concerned in the management of their property:

Almost everywhere throughout the Urbs (of Rome) the *insulae* were the property of owners who . . . leased out the upper stories to a promoter for five-year terms. . . . This principal tenant who set himself to exploit the subletting of the *cenacula* (the separate dwellings on each floor) had no bed of roses. He had to keep the place in repair, obtain tenants, keep the peace between them, and collect his quarterly payments on the year's rent.⁴⁶

. . . and—we may add—organize the tenants in case of the outbreak of fire, which occurred with alarming frequency.⁴⁷

The rabbinic *birah* is thus a translation of the Latin *insula*⁴⁸—an application of an ancient Hebrew / Aramaic architectural term to denote the relatively new urban reality.⁴⁹ From the above passages, we may deduce that the term as well as the

reality was well known to R. Isaac's contemporaries. We can now properly understand his parable, and answer the questions of interpretation raised above. The parable tells the story of a man traveling from one place to another, passing through a city on his way. He sees one of the (many) tenement houses going up in flames, and wonders: No doubt there is no *manager* (מנהיג)⁵⁰ in this house—otherwise he surely would have organized the tenants to help put out the flames. At that moment, *from on high*, a man peers down at this bystander who has stopped to look, and cries out: "I am the owner!" In the present literary and linguistic context,⁵¹ the only place that the owner can possibly be is somewhere in the upper stories of his *birah*, or perhaps on the roof—not a very safe place if the building is going up in flames!⁵² His cry to the bystander must therefore be understood as a cry for help; it is an elliptic remark, implying the following: "You, who have stopped to look for a manager—there is none! . . . Be you the manager, and save me and my building!" The bystander, who is still in the middle of his journey, can now continue on his way—or he can stop and help organize the tenants in extinguishing the fire.

Such is the situation of Abraham at this crucial stage in the history of the world. Abraham, upon seeing, throughout his journey, the discord and conflagration among the "tenants" of the world, correctly deduces that the world is lacking a manager, a leader to guide the various peoples to mutual peace. At just that time, God, the "owner" of the world, looks down and cries out—a cry that is more a cry for help than a revelation. God's call to Abraham (and, through the open-ended character of the parable itself, to the reader!), is a call for action: Abraham may heed God's call, stop in his tracks, and take on the task of leader; or he may continue along his way.

Additional proof of the cogency of this interpretation, and an indication of the sophistication of R. Isaac's parable, may be found, again, in Latin sources. As evidenced in the Roman law code concerning the rental of individual apartments in an *insula*, the "principal tenant" mentioned above—whom we today would call a contractor—is properly named a "conductor," as opposed to the owner of the *insula* (*dominus insula* = בעל הבירה).⁵³ Now, the principal meaning of the Latin verb *conduco* is "to lead together, to collect," whether of persons or of things. As a commercial term, however, it attains the meaning of "hire," or, as in our case, "to contract."⁵⁴ R. Isaac has thus offered us a pun, translating the Latin technical term according to its literal root, which, however, is exactly the sense that he desires: The passerby searches for the "conductor" = manager/contractor (*conduco* 2), who, in this context, must be a leader (*conduco* 1 = מנהיג) of men.

But what are we to make of the obvious parallels to the earlier passages seen above, where Abraham is said to have realized the existence of a "governor" or "guide" to the world—an idea at least hinted at by the term מנהיג?⁵⁵ Indeed, this "guide," necessarily equivalent to the owner/Creator, is precisely the term found in the similes used to exemplify the teleological "argument from design" for the existence of God in the early Hellenistic traditions, as quoted above.⁵⁶ We may assume that the traditions linking Abraham with this philosophical argument were not unknown to R. Isaac and his third-century audience. It may be posited, therefore, that R. Isaac has made conscious use of the old tradition—perhaps even of a known midrash on Gen. 12:1–3—but has turned the entire argument on its head:

Whereas the old tradition tells of Abraham's search of the heavens and of natural phenomena and his subsequent inference concerning the existence of God, R. Isaac's Abraham is interested in the world of man, not in the world of nature.⁵⁷ By the brilliant use of an item of common realia and its technical terminology,⁵⁸ R. Isaac transforms the ancient philosophical-theological theme into one concerning ethics and the government of men. His parable goes much further than Josephus and Philo in refuting the significance of the teleological argument; through the addition of the motif of the destructive fire, emphasis is placed on the disorderly human world and its consequences.⁵⁹ So too, God's revelation to Abraham, viewed by previous centuries of Jewish literature and thought as the result of and response to the latter's self-discovery of God, now becomes almost a parody of revelation: God's call is the cry of a God who is Himself in danger; and rather than being an answer to Abraham's theological discovery, is itself a call to Abraham, the passerby who has stopped to look at man's situation and to ponder. The quest and discovery by man for the transcendental God has been transformed into the quest and discovery by God for the caring and ethically involved Man.⁶⁰

5

It remains to be shown how R. Isaac's parable works in the context of the *petiḥta* in which it is imbedded. This *petiḥta* connects the verse in Ps. 45:11–12 with God's call to Abraham in Gen. 12:1–3. While other verses of this psalm are interpreted in reference to Abraham in the midrashic literature,⁶¹ the midrash linking this verse to Abraham is found only here and in the parallel in *Tanḥuma Lekh Lekha*. It may be assumed that the original midrash on the verse "solved" (*patar*) the verse, that is, applied it to Abraham, much the way that the *Tanḥuma* parallel does:

"Hearken O daughter, and consider"—this is Abraham.

"Forget your people and your father's house"—this is idolatry . . .

"and the king will desire your beauty"—the king of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, desires to improve you in the world.⁶²

The beginning of the verse is seen by the midrashist as a transparent allusion to God's command to Abraham in Genesis 12 to leave his homeland, making reference to Abraham's idolatrous past. The main point of the midrash, however, is its interpretation of the second part of the verse: The king's desire for "your beauty," when translated into mishnaic Hebrew,⁶³ becomes a promise to "improve/benefit you in the world" (reading the noun + genitive suffix [יפך] as a verb + accusative suffix [ליפוך]); the midrash thus reads the final section of God's promise in Gen. 12:2–3 (ונברכו בך כל משפחות האדמה) as the ultimate goal and purpose of His command. Viewing promise as imperative, this becomes precisely the message of our parable, which R. Isaac, however, has left open in his elliptic ending. By slicing the parable into the midrash on the verse from Psalms at just this point—before the gloss on the second part of the verse—the redactor⁶⁴ makes the final part of the midrash a comment on the parable itself and its conclusion:

God's revelatory call to Abraham is, in essence, His wish to groom him for the task of multinational leadership.

We have seen how R. Isaac's revision of the ancient themes of theology and exegesis concerning Abraham's beginning becomes, in his skilled hands, a message of ethical direction: The call of Abraham becomes a call to Abraham. It may be, as Martin Buber and other commentators would have it, that this is the underlying meaning of Scripture here: If Noah is the one man who saved the physical universe from extinction, then Abraham's mission, after the creation of a multitude of nations at Babel, is to become the one through which these nations will be blessed and led toward a greater unity.⁶⁵ Abraham is portrayed as one who cares about the world of nations around him and takes action when necessary. Our midrash would seem then to be closer to the original intent of Scripture here than the theologically oriented explanations of the Second Temple period. In any case, it clearly reflects the talmudic rabbis' view of the beginning of the Jewish people and their mission, and their all-consuming interest in the ethical sphere of man. Later generations, however, who were more interested (here) in the theological questions, would misread his parable, and revise his revision in the light of their own philosophical agendas. The ancient midrash revisited becomes itself revised.

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NOTES

1. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry, 1:3. For similar language concerning the celestial sphere, cf. *ibid.*, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah (*Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah*), 1:5. See also *idem*, *Guide of the Perplexed*, III, 29, for a parallel discussion on Abraham's role in discovering monotheism; and cf. *ibid.*, I, 63; II, 13; II, 39.

2. Note, however, that Maimonides places God's choice of the Jews as His people only at the time of Moses, refraining from any mention of revelation to Abraham. This is in keeping with Maimonides' view of the centrality and singularity of the one-time revelation of the Torah at Sinai. See L. Kaplan, "Maimonides on the Singularity of the Jewish People," *Daat* 15 (1985): V-XXVII, and especially pp. Xff. (I am indebted to Professor Bezalel Mannekin for this reference.) As is well known, Yehuda Halevi, in his *Kuzari*, presents a very different view concerning Abraham's call, placing emphasis on the congenital, special character of Abraham and his line, Abraham being especially suited by nature to accept the divine favor. As opposed to Maimonides' emphasis on Abraham's intellectual and philosophical considerations as the basis of his connection with the divine, Yehuda Halevi emphasizes that Abraham knew God by intuition, and not by philosophical reasoning. See *Kuzari*, I, 95 and IV, 17; and cf. IV, 27. See also David Hartman, "Philosophy and Halakhah As Alternative Challengers to Idolatry in Maimonides" [Hebrew], *Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume, Part 1, Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 7 (1988): 319-33.

3. *Jubilees* 11:15ff.; and cf. 12:1ff. How Abraham reached this view, however, is not mentioned: "The child (i.e., Abraham) began to understand the errors of the land, that

everyone went astray after idols and impurity . . . and he began to pray to the Creator of all to save him from the errors of mankind." Abraham is here no older than fourteen years.

4. *Jubilees* 12:16ff.

5. *Ibid.*, 12:17.

6. W. L. Knox, "Abraham and the Quest for God," *Harvard Theological Review* 28 (1935): 57.

7. Cf. the "long" version of the Jewish-Orphic fragmentary verses (second century B.C.E.; cited in the name of Aristobulus, apud Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, XIII, 12; see J. H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 [New York, 1985], pp. 795ff.), where mention is made of Abraham's recognition of God as master of the universe in conjunction with his expert knowledge in astronomical matters; and Pseudo-Eupolemus (apparently a Samaritan from the second century B.C.E., who was well versed in Jewish biblical legend and lore; cited by Alexander Polyhistor, apud Eusebius, op. cit., IX, 17-18; cf. Charlesworth, op. cit., pp. 873ff.), who similarly characterizes Abraham as one "who surpassed all men in nobility and wisdom, who also discovered astrology and Chaldean [sciences?], and who on account of his piety was well pleasing to God." Cf. Knox, *ibid.*, p. 56, for a summary discussion; on the Orphic verses, see Y. Gutman, *The Beginnings of Jewish-Hellenistic Literature* [Hebrew], vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1958), pp. 155-66 (and especially pp. 164-66); on Pseudo-Eupolemus, see Gutman, op. cit., vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1963), pp. 101-5; B. Z. Wacholder, "Pseudo-Eupolemus' Two Greek Fragments on the Life of Abraham," *HUCA* 34 (1963): 101-3; and cf. C. R. Holladay, *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors*, vol. I: *Historians* (Chico, Calif., 1983), pp. 157-87, and p. 180, n. 12. Whatever the exact origin of these passages may be (cf. Gutman, *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 168f. and pp. 285f., on the versions of the Orphic verses; on Pseudo-Eupolemus, see Gutman, *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 108; Wacholder, *ibid.*, pp. 85-87; and cf. Knox, loc. cit.), they clearly point to motifs current in Jewish Hellenistic circles during the last centuries before the common era. Cf. also Artapanus, who relates that Abraham taught astrology to Pharaoh (apud Eusebius, op. cit., IX, 18; cf. Charlesworth, *ibid.*, p. 897; and see Josephus, *Antiquities* I, 168); and Josephus's citation of Berossus, the Babylonian non-Jewish historian of the third century B.C.E., who mentions a "great and righteous man" among the Chaldeans who lived ten generations after the Flood, and who was "versed in celestial matters" (*Antiquities* I, 158): While it may be doubtful that Berossus had Abraham in mind, this identification was accepted by Josephus (and apparently Pseudo-Eupolemus). From these passages and others (see Gutman, *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 223-34 [in English: "Philo the Epic Poet," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 1 (Jerusalem, 1954), pp. 38-51], on the mention of Abraham in the verses from Philo the Epic Poet; and *ibid.*, pp. 134-36, on the importance attached by the Jewish-Hellenistic historian Demetrius to the event of God's revelation to Abraham at Haran as the beginning of an epoch), it is clear that Abraham's expertise in celestial affairs and his recognition of God were connected in the minds of the early Jewish Hellenistic thinkers and writers, and both were seen as central to his standing as the discoverer and disseminator of the monotheistic faith. In the context of the present paper, it should be noted that Abraham's status as an astrologer was recognized throughout this period up until talmudic times, as is evident by its mention in rabbinic sources (see *Genesis Rabbah* 44:10,12; *TB Shabbat* 156a-b; and cf. *Sefer Yetsira* 6:7), as well as in non-Jewish sources of the second and fourth centuries C.E. (cf. M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 2 [Jerusalem, 1980], pp. 173ff. [and the references cited there], and pp. 492ff.—my thanks to Professor Isaiah Gafni for bringing these last references to my attention).

8. On Josephus, see L. H. Feldman, "Abraham the Greek Philosopher in Josephus," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 99 (1968): 143-56 (especially pp. 146-50); idem, "Hellenizations in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*: The Portrait of Abraham," in *Josephus, Judaism and Christianity*, eds. L. H. Feldman and G. Hata (Detroit, 1987), pp. 133-53

(especially pp. 145–46). On Philo, see S. Sandmel, *Philo's Place in Judaism: A Study of Conceptions of Abraham in Jewish Literature*, 2d ed. (New York, 1971), pp. 104–5, 114–15, 200, and cf. p. 60, n. 228. See also Knox, loc. cit., and Gutman, *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 233–34.

9. Already voiced by Plato, *Laws*, chap. 10, 886A, 898Cff.; chap. 12, 966E ff.; and Aristotle, Fragment “On Philosophy” (ed. V. Rose, fr. 10; see D. Ross, *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 12: Selected Fragments [Oxford, 1952], fragment 12, pp. 84–85). Cf. the discussion of Y. Gutman, *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 162 ff..

10. Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus*, I, 6 (33–35); *Legum Allegoriae*, III, 32 (98–99); *De Praemiis et Poenis* 34, 37–38, 41–42; *Questiones et Solutiones in Genesim et Exodum*, II, 34 (to Gen. 8:6).

11. Cited by Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II, 14–15; see A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 323–24. See also Cleanthes’ “Hymn to Zeus,” *ibid.*, p. 326–27: “All this cosmos, as it spins around the earth, obeys you, whichever way you lead, and willingly submits to your sway”; and see below, in our discussion of the midrash.

12. Philo, *De Abrahamo*, 68–88, and especially 69–70, 84. Special note should be given to the terms used by Philo to describe God’s status as “guide” (*heniōxos* = one who holds the reins, charioteer) and “pilot” (*kubernetes* < *gubernator* [Latin] = helmsman) of the world: Both terms are used frequently in a wider sense of “guide, governor, director” (cf. H. G. Liddel, R. Scott, and H. St. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* [Oxford, 1940(9)], s.v.); similar images are found in the ancient Greek similes quoted above.

13. Philo, *ibid.*, 71, 77.

14. *Antiquities* I, 154–57. Here, too, the term applied to God’s direction of the cosmos (*keleuontos* = commander) is significant; similar terms are applied in the early Hellenistic philosophic literature (see Aristotle and Cleanthes, quoted above, n. 9 and n. 11; and cf. Feldman, “Abraham the Greek Philosopher” [above, n. 8], p. 147). Josephus understandably plays down the centrality and significance of God’s revelation in Abraham’s migration, in keeping with his tendency to limit such divine interventions; see Feldman, “Hellenizations” (above, n. 8), pp. 137f., 145; and *idem*, “Josephus’ Portrait of Moses,” *JQR* 83 (1993): 302, n. 161.

15. See Feldman, “Abraham the Greek Philosopher,” pp. 146–49.

16. See Knox, *ibid.*, p. 59; S. Sandmel, “Abraham’s Knowledge of the Existence of God,” *Harvard Theological Review* 44 (1951): 137–39; *idem*, *Philo's Place in Judaism*, pp. 104–5, 114–15; L. H. Feldman, *ibid.*, p. 150. For another comparative study of these texts, see G. Vermes, “The Life of Abraham (I),” in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies*, London, 1961, pp. 76–85.

17. See Charlesworth, *ibid.*, vol. 1 (New York, 1983), pp. 681 ff.

18. See Genesis Rabbah 38:13, edition of J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, pp. 361 ff.

19. *Apocalypse of Abraham*, chaps. 6 and 7. On the significance of this passage here, and a list of its many parallels, see L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1953), vol. V, p. 210, n. 16; and see Theodor-Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*, loc. cit., in the notes.

20. *Apocalypse of Abraham*, chaps. 7 and 8; cf. Charlesworth, *ibid.*, pp. 692–93. See also Ginzberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 217–18, n. 49.

21. For our purposes here, it should be noted that the *petihta* is a midrashic form, found in amoraic midrashic compilations at the beginning of a pericope (*parasha*), consisting of a midrashic comment, or series of comments, leading from a verse unrelated to the *parasha* and concluding (usually) with the first verse of the *parasha*. Most *petihtot* in Genesis Rabbah are relatively short, often providing a direct and immediate connection between the two verses.

22. Genesis Rabbah 39:1, edition of Theodor-Albeck, p. 365; note the variants listed there. In the following translation, I have retained the Hebrew term *birah*, the exact meaning of which will be central to our ensuing discussion. Other terms (הַרְצִיץ עַל, תְּאֵמַר, דּוֹלֵקֵת)

(לִימוֹךְ) have been translated here according to what I believe are their correct idiomatic counterparts; see the discussion below.

23. Usually translated "palace" or "castle"; but see below.

24. Notice the use of the term מוֹדֵיג, which is usually understood as "leader," "governor," and which bears a very strong resemblance to the terms used above by the Hellenistic authors. But see below, n. 50.

25. See especially H. A. Wolfson, *Philo* (Cambridge, 1947), vol. 2, p. 77, n. 22; Sandmel, "Abraham's Knowledge of the Existence of God," p. 137; idem, *Philo's Place in Judaism*, p. 77, and p. 114, n. 48. Cf. E. E. Urbach, *The Sages—Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem, 1975), p. 319; E. E. Halevy, *Sha'arei ha'aggadah* (Tel Aviv, 1982), p. 72, n. 4. See below, n. 27 and n. 29.

26. Another midrashic parallel alluded to by Maimonides here is the oft-quoted midrash on Gen. 26:5, which deduces that Abraham knew God at the age of three, or, some say, at forty-eight; see *Genesis Rabbah* 30:8 (Theodor-Albeck edition, p. 274), 64:4 (ibid., p. 703), 95:3 (ibid., p. 1190), and the parallels cited there.

27. See Ch. Albeck, *Introduction to Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1965[2]), p. 22, for a list of these occurrences in *Genesis Rabbah*; see especially Rabban Gamaliel's question in the story in *Jerusalem Talmud*, *Avoda Zara* 1:9 (40a). This philologic fact has been overlooked by all who quote our midrash as a rabbinic example of the teleological-cosmological argument for the existence of God (see above, n. 25), all of whom assume Abraham's question is a rhetorical one, to be answered in the negative.

28. The commentary is printed on the page of the Vilna edition of *Midrash Rabbah* (Vilna, 1878, 1887), ad loc. Cf. *Lekah tov*, ad loc.

29. See E. Ben-Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew*, s.v. דִּלֵּק, אָרַר. Nonetheless, this is exactly how the parable has been taken by modern scholars; see Wolfson and Sandmel, above, n. 25. In this context, a similar and interesting interpretation of our parable can be found already in a late midrash of the type שְׁנֵי שְׂמֹנֶמְרֵי בִרְחַק הָקֵדַשׁ וְזוּי, J. Mann, *The Bible As Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*, vol. I (New York, 1971), Hebrew section, pp. 59–61 (cited also in *Midrash Haggadol*, ad loc.). In this passage, the *birah* is not burning, but rather the passerby, who at first did not find any response when searching for the tenants, sees red woolen garments on the roof, which are replaced afterward by white linen garments. From these changes he deduces that there is an owner of the *birah*. So, too, Abraham deduces the existence of God from the changes in the celestial cycle. In this retelling of the parable, the "fire" has been transformed into the alternation of red and white garments!

30. See also M. A. Mirkin's commentary, *Midrash Rabbah* (Tel Aviv, 1971), vol. 2, p. 91.

31. Commentary of the Maharzu, printed on the page of the Vilna edition of *Midrash Rabbah*, ad loc.

32. Mirkin's attempt (cf. above, n. 30) at harmonizing the *mashal* and the *nimshal* at this point is absurd: the passerby sees *everywhere* a burning *birah*!

33. The term *על דרך* as used in rabbinic literature always seems to indicate that the viewer is peering down from above: Cf. *Tosefta Hagiga* 2:5 (Lieberman edition, p. 381); *Avot deRabbi Natan*, Version B, chapter 33 (Schechter edition, p. 72); *Genesis Rabbah* 44:4 (Theodor-Albeck edition, p. 427), 65:10 (ibid., p. 720); 85:3 (ibid., p. 1035).

34. See S. Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwoerter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum*, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1899), pp. 455–57; and cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 1:1 (Theodor-Albeck edition, p. 2), 1:3 (ibid., p. 3), 3:1 (ibid., p. 18), 12:1 (ibid., p. 98), *Avot deRabbi Natan*, Version A, chap. 19 (Schechter edition, p. 70), and frequently.

35. See P. Mandel, "'Birah' As an Architectural Term in Rabbinic Literature" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 61 (1992): 195–217; and cf. A. Lemaire and H. Lozachmeur, "*Bīrah* / *Birtā* en araméen," *Syria* 64 (1987): 261–66.

36. See Mandel, *ibid.*, pp. 195–98 (and n. 1), pp. 209–10 and nn. 74–75.

37. See Mandel, *loc. cit.*, and cf. M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, etc.* (New York, 1950), s.v. בירה, p. 165, def. 2.

38. Thus, an Accadian fort, a Persian acropolis, a Hellenistic manor house, a Nabatean Temple enclosure, a Syrian royal court—all these edifices were self-enclosed structures, often surrounded by an outside wall; this formal characteristic is what caused them all to be referred to by the term *birah*. See Mandel, *ibid.*, pp. 203ff., p. 210, n. 76.

39. See also Tosefta Baba Kamma 10:5 and parallels, Tosefta Shabbat 12:4 and parallels, TB Shabbat 102b, Kiddushin 39b, Makkot 5a, Baba Bathra 6b and 61b, and Pesikta deRav Kahana, Piska Shime'u, Mandelbaum edition, p. 242. See especially Rashi on Baba Bathra, *ibid.*, lemma בבירה גדולה, and the commentary of the Ra'abad on Baba Bathra 6b (apud *Shita Mequbetset*, ad loc.).

40. In the beginning of the Mishnah, R. Judah disagrees with the majority opinion concerning the liability of one who starts a fire: R. Judah includes liability for all items consumed in the fire, even if such items were not visible, or were such that one could not have supposed them to be in the burning item; while the majority opinion ("the Sages") limits liability only to the item itself that had been kindled. In the case of one who set fire to a *birah*, however, the Sages agree with R. Judah's more stringent opinion.

41. See TB Baba Bathra 6b and 61b. The term בתים there and in Mishnah Baba Kamma 6:5 refers in this case to single apartments; cf. S. Krauss, *Qadmoniyot Hatalmud* [Hebrew], vol. 1, section 2 (Berlin-Wien, 1924), pp. 246–49, 386 (= idem, *Talmudische Archaeologie*, vol. 1 [Leipzig 1910], p. 43).

42. So Mishnah Baba Kamma quoted above; cf. TB Baba Bathra, *ibid.*; Makkot, *ibid.*

43. So TB Berakhot and Tosefta Sanhedrin quoted above; cf. TB Kiddushin, *ibid.*; Tosefta Shabbat, *ibid.*

44. Cf. also the passage in Pesikta deRav Kahana, *ibid.*

45. See J. Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, trans. E. O. Lorimer (London, 1956), pp. 29, 33–42; R. E. M. Wheeler, *Roman Art and Architecture* (New York, 1964), pp. 124ff. See especially Carcopino, *ibid.*, p. 33: "Height was its dominant characteristic"; Wheeler, *ibid.*, p. 128: "In the great cities . . . buildings tended to grow vertically rather than laterally"; and *ibid.*, p. 131: "No doubt tall tenements were not uncommon in the more crowded cities round the Mediterranean." Most enlightening is Juvenal's third satire, lines 190–211, where he bemoans the fate of an apartment dweller in Rome, whose house may collapse at any moment, or it may go up in flames. Almost every characteristic found in the rabbinic corpus concerning a *birah* is found in those lines!

46. Carcopino, *ibid.*, p. 52.

47. See Carcopino, *ibid.*, pp. 41f.

48. The Roman *insula* = island was so-called because it was originally bounded and isolated on all sides by public ways; see Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll, *Pauly's Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, 1/18 (Stuttgart, 1916), s.v. *insula*, cols. 1593–94.

49. It may be assumed that when such structures began to appear in cities in Eretz Israel during the Roman period, they were accompanied by their Latin name. The Hebrew and Aramaic speakers of the local population naturally chose *birah* = enclosed structure, already in use to denote specific large residential buildings, to translate the Latin *insula* = island; cf. Mandel, *ibid.*, p. 214, n. 91.

50. It should be noted that the word מנהיג, which of course derives from the verb נהג = to lead, to conduct, is used in rabbinic literature of the tannaim and amora'im primarily in terms of physical guidance, as in the leading of animals (cf. Mishnah Baba Mezi'ah 1:2) or individuals (cf. Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 1:7, folio 61a). Similarly, objects used to guide ships are termed מנהיגים (Mishnah Baba Bathra 5:1, Genesis Rabbah 12:12). Even in its metaphorical use, as applied to individuals guiding entire groups of people, i.e., leaders of

men (cf. Genesis Rabbah 24:2; TB Sanhedrin 92a; and see the epigraph to this article), the term never loses its basic sense of "physically conducting human beings from one place to another." The term is never applied elsewhere, as far as I can ascertain, to God's leadership; nor is it applied, even metaphorically, to the governorship of a nontransportable entity (i.e., one that cannot be physically led from one place to another). Thus, the present context of God's governorship of a building is virtually a philologic impossibility.

51. See above, n. 33, concerning the meaning of the phrase *הורץ על*.

52. Cf. Juvenal, *ibid.*, where "the last to burn" is the one living on the top floor of an *insula*, who is at first oblivious to the alarm. It is for this reason that one must rule out the assumption of the commentators Hellin and Einhorn, that it is the owner's intent that the *birah* burn. Indeed, the owner himself is in danger.

53. Cf. *Digesta* XIX, 2, 30 (cited by Carcopino, *ibid.*, pp. 40–41).

54. Cf. Latin dictionaries, s.v.

55. *מנדיג* in the sense of one who guides something from one place to another—precisely the task of a *gubernator/henioxos* (Philo, *De Abrahamo*, 70). See next note.

56. See nn. 9–12 above: The image of a conductor/pilot, one who actually leads and conducts something, appears again and again in the teleological arguments of the Hellenistic authors. See especially Philo's use of *despozo* and *kubernatos* (*De Abrahamo*, 84) in reference to God—almost exactly identical to the two terms *בעל* and *מנדיג* in our parable!

57. This anthropocentric view of religion is typical of rabbinic thought; see E. E. Urbach, *The Sages* (above, n. 25), chap. 10.

58. It may be safely assumed that the Mishnah in Baba Kamma chap. 6 quoted above, concerning a burning *birah* and the responsibilities thereof, was known to at least the more learned in R. Isaac's audience, and served as a valuable intertext for his parable. It is also possible that R. Isaac's use of the term *birah* is meant to contrast the two reigning uses of the term in his day: Using the double meaning ironically, he jolts his audience, who may be thinking at first of the ancient *birah* = the Temple Mount (see Mandel, *ibid.*, pp. 209–10) and its "owner," into realizing that he is talking of the common *birah*—the tenement house teeming with the common people. See next note.

59. It may also be that, by using the term *מנדיג* and a term for a large building, R. Isaac is consciously parodying the old teleological arguments for the existence of God—and therefore we witness the strange coincidence of terms noted above.

60. The parable thus interpreted does not relate to the problem of the autonomous recognition of God by man, and obviates the discussion of the parable in this context; cf. Urbach, *ibid.*, p. 319.

61. See in particular v. 8 of the psalm, used in Genesis Rabbah 39:6 (Theodor-Albeck edition, p. 368) and parallels; and cf. Mann, loc. cit. (above, n. 29).

62. Tanhuma Buber, *Lekh lekha*, p. 59.

63. The term *יפה* in rabbinic Hebrew is almost exclusively used in contradistinction to *רע*, together denoting the pair "good, beneficial, worthy" / "bad, detrimental, unworthy" (while beauty is denoted by the word *טאה*); see Ben-Yehuda, *Dictionary*, s.v. *יפה*, p. 2093, def. b. The *pi'el* form should thus be translated "to improve" or "to benefit."

64. This redactor is probably not R. Isaac himself, despite the attribution of the *petihta* to him: As Ch. Albeck has pointed out (*Introduction to Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*, p. 17), the designation of a sage as the author of a *petihta* in Genesis Rabbah is not to be understood necessarily as ascribing the entire *petihta* to that sage; it is common to begin *petihtot* in the name of a sage ("R. X patah") whose comment is quoted therein. It seems likely that R. Isaac's parable was not originally connected to the exegesis of the verse from Psalms; perhaps it originated as direct exegesis of Gen. 12:1ff. The origin of rabbinic parables and their function in various midrashic contexts, and in particular within a *petihta*, is still being

discussed and debated in scholarly circles; cf. D. Stern, *Parables in Midrash* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 159–61, and J. Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha'aggadah vehamidrash* (Givatayim, 1991), pp. 338–47.

65. See M. Buber, "Abraham the Seer," in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies by Martin Buber*, ed. N. N. Glatzer (New York, 1968), pp. 22–43, and especially pp. 28–29 (= "Shelihuto shel Avraham," in M. Buber, *Darko shel mikra* [Jerusalem, 1964], pp. 65–81).