

NORTHERN ARABIA AND ITS JEWRY IN EARLY RABBINIC SOURCES: MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

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Abstract: Northern Arabia and its Jewry in Early Rabbinic Sources: More than Meets the Eye

Early Rabbinic textual comments on the Jews of Arabia are widely considered terse and general, leading to the assumption that they have little information to offer and prompting scholars to seek knowledge in other sources. The article confronts this conventional wisdom by citing Mishnaic, Talmudic, and Midrashic references to Arabian geography and settlements that yield important if not conclusive findings on points that have been inadequately discussed thus far.

Keywords: Hījāz – Ḥegger – Teima – Jews

Resumen: El norte de Arabia y su comunidad judía en las fuentes rabínicas tempranas: más allá de lo que parece a simple vista

Los primeros comentarios rabínicos sobre los judíos en Arabia son ampliamente considerados como concisos y generales, llevando a la suposición de que tienen escasa información para ofrecer y motivando así a los investigadores a buscar información en otras fuentes. El presente artículo confronta esta opinión convencional, mediante la cita de referencias misnaicas, talmúdicas y midrásicas sobre la geografía de Arabia y sus asentamientos, las cuales dan lugar a hallazgos importantes, si no concluyentes, acerca de temas que han sido discutidos inadecuadamente hasta el momento.

Palabras clave: Hejaz – Ḥegger – Teima – Judíos

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INTRODUCTION

When the Jews of Arabia are discussed, the question of sources that one may use to study the subject arises. The material falls into two main types: textual and epigraphic. The former comprises, *inter alia*, post-Biblical Jewish sources such as the Mishna, the Talmuds, and the early Midrashim. Their references to the Jews of Arabia are few, terse, and mostly general—so it seems—leading to the assumption that they have little to offer by way of information. As Goitein puts it, “The Talmudic literature offers important testimony on the great Arabian migration of which the victory of Islam is merely the most salient eruption, but is poor in information about Arabian Jewry.”¹

What can we learn about Arabian Jewry from early Rabbinic literature such as the Mishna, the Talmuds, and the Midrashim? To pursue such a discussion, one must first consult the sources on the Jewish communities of Arabia and establish the boundaries of “Arabia” as precisely as possible. As I show below, this territory includes the Ḥijāz and the references to this area in these sources, although few in number, contain important information that research has not extracted thus far, mainly about the religious life of the Jews in this area. They also show that although there were many proselytes among these Jews, their culture—at least in al-Ḥijr (also known as Madāʿin Šāliḥ) and Taymāʿ—was quite high, and they had contact with Jewish communities outside Arabia.

ROMAN ARABIA: DOES IT INCLUDE THE ḤIJĀZ?

Before discussing the meaning of Arabia (עַרְבִיָּא) in Rabbinic sources, one must address oneself to Roman Arabia, since it is likely that the Jews under Roman rule in the Land of Israel in Talmudic times were familiar with that term and, more or less, with the borders of the area that it denoted. The term “Arabia” was originally used by Greek and Roman geographers; thus, it was probably borrowed by Jews, given that the Bible calls the land of the Arabs ʿArav (עֲרָב, *e.g.*, Is. 21:13; Jer. 25:23–24). The Biblical references to Arabia plainly refer to northern Arabia because they mention Dedan and Teima.

In the early twentieth century, after Jaussen and Savignac’s *Mission archéologique en Arabie*, scholars assumed that the Ḥijāz was not part of

¹ Goitein 1931: 411.

Roman Arabia. Three decades later, this premise was challenged by Seyrig on the basis of his discoveries of Roman outposts on the road to Medina.² Consequently, scholars almost completely abandoned Jaussen and Savignac's view³—with one exception⁴—and research after Seyrig reinforced his stance.⁵

In view of this broad consensus, it would not be unreasonable to claim that Arabia in Rabbinic sources refers, *inter alia*, to the Ḥijāz as well. The consensus regarding the territory of Roman Arabia is crucial to the discussion about the information on the Jews of northern Arabia, mainly regarding those in Ḥegger/Ḥagrā, that emerges several times from Rabbinic sources. Now that this matter has been clarified among scholars, the Rabbinic literature can teach us more about the Jews of northern Arabia than is known today.

ḤEGGER AND ḤAGRĀ

Early Rabbinic sources mention Ḥegger and Ḥagrā (in three variations) several times. Most opinions in academic literature refer to Ḥagrā but not to Ḥegger, although both names denote the same place.⁶ They bring to mind al-Ḥijr in northern Arabia. Indeed, the academic discussion of Ḥegger and Ḥagrā in its variations favors their identification as al-Ḥijr. Those who argue to the contrary do not explain the rationale behind their stance. Judging by the publication dates of their works, they apparently follow Jaussen and Savignac and predate Seyrig, whose opinion has become the common one among scholars.

Below I discuss four references to Ḥegger and Ḥagrā in Rabbinic sources. The discussion will be broader than the previous treatment of these sources; it will offer new insights, strengthen the identification with al-Ḥijr, and challenge those who deny the identification of these place names.

(A) Ha-Ḥegger (ההגר): Mishna, *Gittin* 1:1 reads: “He who brings a bill of divorce from abroad must say: In my presence it was written and in my presence it was signed. R. Gamaliel says: also he who brings one from ha-Reqem or from ha-Ḥegger [...].”⁷ Klein claims that Ḥegger (and Ḥagrā) is in the east-

² Seyrig 1941: 218–223.

³ E.g., Sartre 1981; Bowersock 1983: 95–97, 103, 157.

⁴ Graf 1988.

⁵ For a review of works that support Seyrig's findings, see Graf 1988: 172–173. See also, Bowersock 1983: 97.

⁶ Cf. Goodblatt 1995: 16, 18, 21, 24.

⁷ See also, J.T. *Gittin* 1:1 (1:1); BT, *Gittin* 2a.

ern part of Trachonitis.⁸ He misidentifies Ḥegger because he also misidentifies Reqem. While Josephus, a Jew who lived in the first century CE under Roman rule, explicitly claims that Reqem is Petra,⁹ Klein identifies it as al-Raqīm, drawing on the finding of the Muslim geographer al-Muqaddasī, who lived about a millennium later (*ca.* 946 CE–*ca.* 1000 CE), that there is a location of this name near Damascus.¹⁰ Klein even ignores a Jewish contemporary of Josephus in the Land of Israel, Onkelos, who renders Qadesh (in the Negev) as Reqem in his translations of Gen. 16:14 and Gen. 20:1. Since the two places are mentioned in proximity in the Mishna, Klein claims, they must be close. To identify Ḥegger, he also relies on Wetzstein, according to whom the ‘Anzī tribes call two tribes east of Damascus *Ahl al-Ḥujr*.¹¹ Ben Ze’ev criticizes Klein for his view because Mishna, *Gittin* 1:2 reads: “From Reqem eastward and Reqem as [part of] the east.” Thus, he argues, one should search for Ḥegger in the northern Ḥijāz; on this basis, he identifies Ḥagrā as al-Ḥijr.¹²

Mazar, basing himself on the definite article that precedes the word “Ḥegger” in the Mishna, argues that the term denotes not a settlement but the *limes Palaestinae*, a series of Roman fortifications along the southern border of the Land of Israel.¹³ The root *ḥ.g./j.r.* in Semitic languages, he adds, denotes a circumference, a wall, or a fence; thus, Ḥegger is a geographical region or a string of fortified localities. It may therefore be, according to Mazar, that Ḥagrā of Arabia is the fortified area of *Provincia Arabia*, *i.e.*, the *limes Palaestinae*. Interestingly, while Mazar suggests this, he opines that Ḥagrā in Nabataean inscriptions is al-Ḥijr.¹⁴ By implication, according to his view, Ḥagrā in Rabbinic sources is not the Nabataean Ḥagrā—an argument that has nothing on which to rely. Mazar’s opinion is accepted by Avi-Yonah.¹⁵ Similarly, Bar-Ilan claims that ha-Ḥegger denotes a desert area beyond the southern border of the Land of Israel, where there were stockade fortifica-

⁸ Klein 1928: 206–207. Cf. Klein 1939b 1: 43, 161.

⁹ Thackeray 1926: 553 (IV: vii. 1).

¹⁰ Klein 1929: 21–22.

¹¹ Klein 1928: 206; Klein 1929: 21–22.

¹² Ben Ze’ev 1931: 19, 25.

¹³ The first to suggest this idea, albeit very briefly, was Krauss (1899: 2: 253), whose view will be mentioned below in the discussion of Ḥagrā.

¹⁴ Mazar 1949: 317. Cf. Rappel 1984: 83.

¹⁵ Avi-Yonah 1974: 2:88 (map no. 135).

tions.¹⁶ Albeck notes, similarly but somewhat equivocally, that ha-Ḥegger is “apparently in the southern border of the Land of Israel.”¹⁷

Another scholar who follows Mazar is Davies: “It seems probable,” he says, that Ḥegger, as Mazar goes on to suggest, came also to have the collective sense of “a line of forts” and was applied to *limes Palaestinae*, which extended from Rafah on the Mediterranean coast to the Dead Sea. It is legitimate, Davies continues, to suppose that the Ḥagrā of the Targumim has no connection with Hegra in Arabia, but is instead a toponym that relates to the region south of the Land of Israel. Davies notes that while the inscriptions from al-Ḥijr clearly points to the presence of Jews, Mishna, *Giṭṭin* 1:1 probably relates to a region closer to the Land of Israel.¹⁸

Goodblatt criticizes Mazar and Bar-Ilan on several grounds: (1) Even if one accepts the meaning of Ḥegger as a fort, one cannot possibly know that ha-Ḥegger is a series of fortifications or a fortified border. After all, it was not unusual in the Mishnaic era to preface names of cities with the definite article. (2) According to the current broad scholarly consensus, the *limes Palaestinae* was built 200 years after R. Gamaliel’s lifetime (late first century CE–second century CE) and some say that there was never a system of fortifications along the southern border of the Land of Israel in the Roman period. Thus, ha-Ḥegger cannot be the *limes Palaestinae* and one should search a specific settlement that carries the name ha-Ḥegger. (3) Al-Ḥijr prospered under Nabataean rule, mainly in the first century CE, close to R. Gamaliel’s lifetime, and was more famous than any other Ḥegger. Thus, it is very likely that R. Gamaliel would mention famous places as al-Ḥijr.¹⁹ (4) Inscriptions from the first century CE show that Jews lived in al-Ḥijr at that time; there is also evidence that they continued to do so until the eve of Islam. Eventually, Goodblatt concludes that ha-Ḥegger is al-Ḥijr.²⁰

(B) Ḥagrā (הגרא): BT, *Yevamōt* 116a tells of a man named ‘Anan bar Ḥiyyā from Ḥagrā, who spent some time in Nehardea. The text does not specify what ‘Anan’s purpose in Nehardea was; it mentions him only in regard to the bill of divorce that he sent his wife. Krauss claims that the word Ḥagrā is actually a corruption of *Ḥagrā*, a fort.²¹ His opinion recurs in Mazar’s argument,

¹⁶ Bar-Ilan 1991: 107 n.28.

¹⁷ Albeck 1958: 273.

¹⁸ Davies 1972: 157–158, 159 n.1.

¹⁹ Cf. Hirschberg 2007: 2:294.

²⁰ Goodblatt 1995: 17–18, 20–21, 24.

²¹ Krauss 1899: 2:253.

which, as we have seen, is futile. Goodblatt, who identifies ha-Ḥegger as al-Ḥijr, states that the location of Ḥagrā in BT, *Yevamōt* 116a is not clear.²² Obermeyer suggests that Ḥagrā is actually an abbreviation of Hagrūnia (הגרוניא), a suburb of Nehardea²³ and Davies argues—on the basis of the context, which describes an incident in Babylonia—that Obermeyer’s proposal of Hagrūnia seems more likely than a reference to al-Ḥijr.²⁴ Oppenheimer notes that Obermeyer may be right.²⁵

The identification of Ḥagrā in BT, *Yevamōt* 116a as Hagrūnia, however, is groundless because the Talmud mentions this suburb specifically and by name in several places. It seems to have been the home of no few sages, such as R. El‘azar ben Hagrūnia (BT, *‘Eirūvīn* 63a; *Bavā Meṣī‘ā* 69a; *Ta‘anīt* 24b), Avīmī of Hagrūnia (BT, *Bavā Batrā* 174b; *Bavā Meṣī‘ā* 77b, 97a; *Ketūbōt* 109b; *Makkōt* 13b; *Yevamōt* 64b), Samuel bar Abbā (BT, *Bavā Qammā* 88a), R. Ḥilqiah (BT, *Hōrayōt* 8a; *Yevamōt* 9a), R. Yehuda (BT, *‘Avōda Zara* 39a); R. Ashī (BT, *Sōta* 46b) and R. Shīmī bar Ashī (BT, *Berakhōt* 31a).²⁶ In addition, Rabbah bar bar Ḥannā mentions the Tower of Hagrūnia as a metaphor for something huge (BT, *Bavā Batrā* 73b).²⁷

Goitein considers it unlikely that ‘Anan had come from al-Ḥijr, noting that several places bear the name Ḥagrā but offering no examples. Since Goitein states *ad loc.* that he consulted with Klein on a related issue,²⁸ it would be within the bounds of reason to argue that he followed his view regarding Ḥagrā. Hirschberg notes that although several places are called Ḥagrā, some references to them—he gives BT, *Yevamōt* 116a, as an example—undoubtedly refer to al-Ḥijr. He adds that al-Ḥijr was an important center in the first century BCE and therefore was known in the Land of Israel and Babylonia.²⁹

²² Goodblatt 1995: 20.

²³ Obermeyer 1929: 266.

²⁴ Davies 1972: 159 n.1.

²⁵ Oppenheimer 1983: 138.

²⁶ *Idem.*: 134–140.

²⁷ The name Hagrūnia may be a diminutive for Hegra, the Graeco-Roman version of al-Ḥijr, akin to “Little Ḥagrā,” possibly indicating that Jews originally from Ḥagrā lived there and plausibly explaining the purpose of ‘Anan bar Ḥiyyā’s stay in the vicinity of Nehardea. The presence of a man from Ḥagrā in Nehardea suggests that the Jews of these communities had some form of relationship, by kinship or other. If this is the case, the Jews of northern Arabia were not disconnected from Jewish communities outside Arabia. The person who reported the news of ‘Anan’s stay in Nehardea presumably knew to identify him as someone from Ḥagrā and thought it worth mentioning.

²⁸ Goitein 1931: 411 n.7.

²⁹ Hirschberg 2007: 2:294.

Most scholars who discuss the subject indeed appear to identify Ḥagrā as al-Ḥijr. Horovitz, for example, considers ‘Anan a “native” of al-Ḥijr.³⁰ A series of scholars in different disciplines also identify Ḥagrā as al-Ḥijr; examples are Abel, Ben Zvi, Naveh, Preis, and Friedheim.³¹

(C) Ḥagrā of Arabia (חגרא דערביא): On several occasions, some major sages insert into their exegetics non-Hebrew words that were used in Arabia. For example, Zeph. 1:17 reads: “And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord: and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their *leḥumam* (לְחָמָם) as the dung.”³² R. Isaac interprets the verse as speaking about the Israelites who were killed pursuant to the sin of the golden calf and notes that their flesh was “tossed aside like dung.” R. Levi supports this explanation by noting, “In Arabia they call meat *laḥmā*” (בערביא קורין לבשרא, לחמא).³³ Given that *lahm* in Arabic means meat, R. Levi’s recourse to the vernacular of Arabia for support seems precise and reliable. This example and several others led some scholars, such as Cohen, to assume that a Jewish colony had settled in northern Arabia in the Talmudic era.³⁴

One might get the impression that these sources refer to northern Arabia. Hoyland states: “Since these statements mostly originate with Palestinian authorities (*tannaim* and *amoraim*) of the first to fourth centuries CE, we might suppose that they chiefly intend to southern Palestine and the Transjordan, that is, the Nabataean heartlands and subsequently, after their annexation in 105/106 CE, the Roman province of Arabia.” Thus, he adds in regard to the presentation of such sources in support of the Talmudic references to Arabia, “One suspects that that part of Arabia just across the Jordan from Jerusalem is meant rather than faraway Hijaz [*sic*].” Still, Hoyland admits that in some Rabbinic references to Arabia, “It cannot be doubted that occasionally the southern-most reaches of Nabataea/Roman Arabia are intended.” As an example, he mentions the visit by R. Ḥiyyā, R. Shim‘ōn bar Ḥalaftā, R. Shim‘ōn, and Rabbah to “Ḥagrā of Arabia” to discover the meaning of several Aramaic words that they had forgotten (Genesis Rabbah

³⁰ Horovitz 1929: 170.

³¹ Abel 1938: 2:436; Ben Zvi 1960: 134; Naveh 1978: 181; Preis, 1977: 122; Friedheim 2000: 170 n.24.

³² Translation taken from *The King James Bible*.

³³ Exodus Rabbah, 42:4. See further, Cohen 1912; Krauss 1916.

³⁴ *Idem.*: 224.

79:7).³⁵ Oppenheimer also places Ḥagrā of Arabia in northern Arabia;³⁶ Davies admits to uncertainty but notes that Ḥagrā of Arabia may be al-Ḥijr.³⁷ While most scholars point in the direction of al-Ḥijr, Klein, based on his misidentification of Reqem, argues that this is not so.³⁸

R. Ḥiyyā, R. Shim‘ōn bar Ḥalaftā, R. Shim‘ōn, and Rabbah journey as far as Ḥagrā of Arabia to rediscover the meaning of words that “they had forgotten from the Targum.” The source of this information, however, does not specify which Targum it was. Although much of Genesis Rabbah is in Aramaic, they seem to have come to learn the meaning of words in Hebrew. The text reports that a resident of the place told his friend, “Hang these *yahavā* on me” (תלי הדין יהבא עלי) (תלי השלך על ה’ יהבך והוא יכלכלך”. Ps. 55:23), as a burden. The text then describes additional situations in which the sages learned the meanings of other words from listening to conversations there.

If so, these sages viewed the inhabitants of Ḥagrā of Arabia (some of whom were probably Jewish) as having preserved the authentic meaning of Biblical words, at a time when sages in the Land of Israel struggled to understand Biblical texts in their original language. Therefore, when a Jewish source states that “in Arabia they refer to such-and-such as so-and-so,” it is very likely that it does refer to the Ḥijāz, where, as stated, Jews cognizant of Hebrew dwelled.³⁹ This insight is of immense importance for our discussion; it shows that the references to northern Arabia in early Rabbinic sources are not as few as is widely assumed.

BT, *Ro’sh ha-Shana* 26b and BT, *Megilla* remark that the sages did not understand Ps. 55:23 because they found it difficult to explain the word *yahav*. Rabbah bar bar Ḥannā solved the problem with an anecdote: “One day I walked with one *Tayya’ā* while carrying a burden and he told me take *yahavkha* and throw it onto my camel” (יומא חד הוה אזלינא בהדי ההוא טייעא, (הוה דרינא טונא, ואמר לי שקול יהבך ושדי אגמלאי). The word *Tayya’ey* (sg. *Tayya’ā*) in the Talmud refers to Bedouin, especially those in the vicinity of Iraq, and is a generic term for Arabs in Syriac sources.⁴⁰ It is not clear, however, where

³⁵ Hoyland 2011: 92.

³⁶ Oppenheimer 1993: 21.

³⁷ Davies 1972: 158 n.3.

³⁸ Klein 1929: 23.

³⁹ A recent work suggests that the Jews of northern Arabia used Judaeo-Arabic as early as the fourth century CE and that the earliest examples of the Arabic language were written in the Hebrew alphabet by Arabian Jews. See Hopkins 2009.

⁴⁰ Shahīd 2000: 402.

Rabbah bar bar Ḥannā's epiphany had taken place.⁴¹ Still, the sages again used the Arabs' language (the identity of the language not being clear) to explain a Biblical word. This raises an important question: why would a major sage such as Rabbah bar bar Ḥannā need to learn the meaning of a word in Hebrew from a non-Jew? The question remains moot.

In Arabic sources, the *Ṭayya* 'ey are known as the Banū Ṭayyi', a large tribe originally from northern Arabia that was one of the first Arab tribes to reach the Land of Israel. Eventually, it split into several branches that still exist today. Interestingly, Islamic sources state that one of the Banū Ṭayyi' married a woman from the Banū al-Naḍīr, one of the Jewish tribes in Medina, and their son Ka'b b. al-Ashraf was one of the leaders of the tribe.⁴² It is very likely that his father converted to Judaism.⁴³ Was the *Ṭayya* 'ā from whom Rabbah bar bar Ḥannā learned the meaning of *yahav* a convert? There is no telling, but such a hypothesis would explain why he would trust the man's explanation. When one takes into account the large extent of conversion to Judaism among pre-Islamic Arab tribes, it seems quite likely.⁴⁴

(D) Hegra (הגרה): Ḥagrā is also mentioned in Num. Rabbah 13:2, this time in its Greek version, Hegra. The text reads:

An alternative [interpretation]: "Awaken O North" [Songs. 4:16] shows that the winds will be jealous of each other. The southerly wind says: I bring the exile from Yemen and the exile from Hegra and all of the south, and the northerly wind says: I bring the northern exile. The Omnipresent ordains peace between them and they enter through one entrance, to fulfill what is written: "I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far etc. [Is. 43:6]."

⁴¹ It seems that Rabbah bar bar Ḥannā had many encounters with *Ṭayya* 'ey in different situations. See further, Baer 2007; Kiperwasser 2008.

⁴² Ibn Hishām 1987: 3:12–17.

⁴³ On Arabs converting to Judaism due to their marriage with Jewish women, see Lecker 1987: 17–18; Mazuz 2014: 44–45.

⁴⁴ For a survey of primary sources from all Abrahamic faiths on the extent of proselytism in Arabia, as well as secondary sources on the subject, see Gil, 1984; 1997 1:3–19; 2004: 3–19. See further, Ben Ze'ev 1931: 29–31; Lecker 1995; Tobi 2012: 22, 26–27; Robin 2013.

The text offers several insights. First, Hegra is not within the borders of the Land of Israel; it is south of the country. Thus, any attempt to locate it at the north of the Land of Israel is futile. Secondly, the text is a Midrash on Is. 43:6 and Songs. 4:16 that speaks of the end of the exile and the ingathering of Israel from the Diaspora. It describes Yemen as the southernmost point of the exile and then refers to Hegra and then all of the south, meaning that Hegra cannot be anywhere close to the border of the Land of Israel. Accordingly, it must be located between Yemen and the territories to the south of the Land of Israel, more or less corresponding to al-Ḥijr. Therefore, it is to this place that the text refers. Thirdly, it suggests that in the eyes of the Midrash there was a Jewish settlement in Hegra.⁴⁵

Apart from the confusion regarding Ḥagrā and the mistakes in making deductions about it, some scholars have overlooked several points of relevance to the discussion: (1) The academic literature has not pinpointed the location of Ḥagrā in Rabbinic sources thus far; even Klein's suggestion is vague. (2) Ha-Ḥegger is actually the Hebrew rendering of al-Ḥijr. (3) The definite article preceding the word Ḥegger in the Mishna suggests that this is a generic name for several settled localities. Al-Ḥijr is also known as Madā' in Ṣālīḥ, *i.e.*, the cities of Ṣālīḥ, a Qur'ānic figure, meaning that it was not only one settlement but many. (4) The Arabic root *h.j.r.* indeed denotes prevention/obstruction, but walls and fortifications were not unusual in Arabia. Islamic sources describe forts such as al-Ablaq of the Jewish king of Taymā' al-Samaw' al b. 'Ādiyā and of the Jews of Medina and Khaybar.⁴⁶ (5) Reqem has been identified as Petra, the famous "twin" of al-Ḥijr among the Nabataean settlements. Thus, when Ḥegger is mentioned in proximity to Reqem, it is very likely that it is indeed al-Ḥijr.

TEIMA

Hoyland argues: "The only contender for a rabbi from the north Arabian Peninsula (as opposed to the Roman province of Arabia and Iranian province

⁴⁵ This argument is supported by epigraphic evidence from al-Ḥijr, such as Jewish inscriptions dating back to the first century CE. See *CIS III/1*: 257 (no. 219); Jaussen and Savignac 1909: 148–149 (Nab. no. 4), 242 (Nab. no. 172 *bis*); Horovitz 1929: 170–171; *CII* 2:344 (no. 1422); Altheim and Stiehl 1968: 305–310, 500–501; Stiehl 1970; Hirschberg 1975: 144–147; Noja 1979: 289–293; Healey 1989; Graf 2001: 268; Hoyland 2011: 93–97, 99; Robin 2014: 58. These findings, although few, argue in support of a strong Jewish presence there. (One should not expect to find many written findings, since oral transmission was the norm at that time and in that culture. See Macdonald 2010).

⁴⁶ See Hirschberg 1946: 184–186; Tobi 2012: 35–37.

of Beth Arabaye) is a certain Simeon the Temanite/Taymanite (championed by Torrey, *Jewish Foundation*, “lecture 2”), though even this is unsure inasmuch as the adjective could refer to the Edomite city (or district) of Teman (Petra area).⁴⁷ Klein traces Shim‘ōn’s provenance to Timnah.⁴⁸ Shim‘ōn ha-Teimanī/Taymanī/Tīmnī (שמעון התימני) is a Tanna who lived between the first and second centuries CE. His name suggests that he is from Yemen (תימן), Teima (תימא), Timnah (תמנה) in the Judean foothills, or Timna‘ (תמנע) in the southern ‘Arabah. Horovitz claims that he was “probably a native of Teima.”⁴⁹ Three Nabataean inscriptions may support this view, since they use a term that resembles Teimanī/Taymanī/Tīmnī to denote people from Teima—Teimaniyā/Taymaniyā/Tīmniyā (תימניא) in reference to a man from this location and Teimanītā/Taymanitā/Tīmnītā (תימניתא) in regard to a woman from there.⁵⁰

While it is possible to debate Shim‘ōn ha-Teimanī/Taymanī/Tīmnī’s origin, there are two Tannaim who definitely come from the Ḥijāz: The first is Yehuda ben Teima,⁵¹ “son of Teima,” a place that had a strong Jewish presence in the Talmudic period.⁵² The second is Yehuda ben Ḥagrā,⁵³ “son of Ḥagrā,” which, as we have seen, is al-Ḥijr. Teima and Ḥagrā are proximate settlements in northern Arabia. This may suggest that a number of Jewish sages was present in that area. Support for this comes from an inscription from al-‘Ulā that states: “Blessing to ‘Aṭūr son of Menahem and Rabbi Yirmiah” (ברכה לעטור בר מנחם ורב ירמיה).⁵⁴ Given that four major sages such as R. Ḥiyyā, R. Shim‘ōn bar Ḥalaftā, R. Shim‘ōn, and Rabbah took the trouble of traveling to that vicinity to learn the meaning of Biblical words from the locals, it definitely seems possible.

⁴⁷ Hoyland 2011: 111 n.48.

⁴⁸ Klein 1939b 1:157.

⁴⁹ Horovitz 1929: 172.

⁵⁰ Doughty 1884: 47 (no. 13); Euting 1885: 33 (no. 4), 40 (no. 8), 63–64 (no. 22); *CIS II/I*: 227–228 (no. 199), 235–236 (no. 205); Jaussen and Savignac 1909: 141 (Nab. no. 1), 162–163 (Nab. no. 12).

⁵¹ E.g., Mishna, *Avōt* 5:18; JT, *‘Eirūvīn* 13a (1:10); JT, *Mō‘ed Qatan* 18a (3:7).

⁵² See Hirschberg 1946: 134–135; Altheim and Stiehl 1968: 305–310, 500–501; Stiehl 1970; Hirschberg 1975: 146–147; Noja 1979: 291–293; Chiesa 1994a: 167–168, 193–194; 1994b: 167–168, 195; Al-Najem and Macdonald 2009; Tobi 2012: 35; Robin 2014: 58.

⁵³ JT, *Pe‘ah* 24a (4:7); JT, *Ketūbōt* 4b (1:3).

⁵⁴ Winnett and Reed 1970: 163 (by J.T. Milik). In an inscription from Teima published by Altheim and Stiehl (1968: 310), the word *hb/r’*, appears. Both scholars assume that the term

The Hebrew word *ben* (and its Aramaic cognate, *bar*) denotes not only the son of a father but also the son of a birthplace. The Mishna (*ʿEduyyōt* 7:8–9), for example, mentions Mehaḥem ben Sagnā, Sagnā being a city in the Galilee;⁵⁵ Yōḥanan ben Gudgoda hailed from an eponymous location mentioned in Deut. 10:6–7, near Yotvata. The aforementioned R. Elʿazar ben Hagrūnia (BT, *ʿEiruvīn* 63a; *Bavā Meṣīʿā* 69a; *Taʿanūt* 24b) is another case in point. An inscription from al-ʿUlā, apparently from the fourth century CE, mentions ʿAbday bar Teima (עבדי בר תימא), *i.e.*, ʿAbday of Teima.⁵⁶ A related locution is *ben ha-maqōm*, a son of the place, *i.e.*, a local person. This use also occurs in the plural, as in *bnei Yerushalaim*, sons of Jerusalem.

ARAB PROSELYTES

Yehuda ben Ḥagrā is mentioned only twice in the Talmud. One reference appears in a discussion about whether a proselyte must observe the commandment of *leqet*,⁵⁷ in which the poor are allowed to glean grain that drops in the course of a harvest. Many references to Yehuda ben Teima occur in the context of laws pertaining to divorce outside the Land of Israel.⁵⁸ Such information suggests that these sages had to solve situations related to these subjects, *i.e.*, that Yehuda ben Ḥagrā had converts in his milieu and that Yehuda ben Teima was asked about divorce laws outside the Land of Israel, probably by Jews from the Diaspora, perhaps from Teima, or by Jews from the Land of Israel who married them.

Interestingly, two reports about the Banū Balī from Islamic sources support the hypothesis that Yehuda ben Ḥagrā had converts in his milieu. According to the Muslim geographer Yāqūt (1179–1229 CE), one branch of the Balī lived in al-Ḥijr.⁵⁹ This information is important because the members of this branch may have been proselytes. This possibility is based on the writings of another Muslim geographer, al-Bakrī (d. 1094 CE), according to

denotes a *haver*, a Jewish term that denotes a Pharisee, a believer in the oral tradition and a Jewish sage. Noja (1979: 296) disagrees. On the term *ḥabr*, see further, Nehmé 2005–2006: 197–198; Mazuz 2014: 21–23.

⁵⁵ See further, Klein 1939a: 231–232.

⁵⁶ Euting 1885: 71 (no. 30); *CIS III/I*: 298 (no. 333); Huber 1891: 395 (no. 5).

⁵⁷ JT, *Peʿah* 24a (4:7).

⁵⁸ Tōseftā, *Giṭṭīn* 5:13; JT, *Nazīr* 7a (2:4); BT, *Bavā Meṣīʿā* 94a; BT, *Giṭṭīn* 84a.

⁵⁹ Yāqūt 1990: 4:81.

which many of the Balī converted to Judaism when they reached Taymā' because the Jews there had made this a condition for their settlement there.⁶⁰ The Jewish presence in Taymā' was so dominant that Islamic sources called it “Taymā' of the Jew” (تيماء اليهودي).⁶¹ Given the proximity of these settlements, those of the Balī who settled in al-Ḥijr, another locality with a strong Jewish presence, may have converted too.

Let us return to Mishna *Giṭṭin* 1:1, which treats a person who delivers a bill of divorce from ha-Reqem and ha-Ḥegger as one who has delivered it from overseas; *i.e.*, he must declare that it had been written and signed before him. This wording demonstrates that Jewish settlement existed at that time at least as far as ha-Ḥegger, *i.e.*, al-Ḥijr. Theoretically, it is also possible that some Jews from the Land of Israel were married to inhabitants of ha-Reqem and ha-Ḥegger; this might explain why a bill of divorce would be sent from there. But why must a courier who delivers such a document from ha-Reqem and ha-Ḥegger declare that it had been written and signed before him? The apparent answer is that some people in Reqem (and therefore, most likely, also in Ḥegger) were proselytes and thus were not well versed in the laws. The Mishna (*Nidda* 7:3) implies as much: “All stains from Reqem are pure and R. Yehuda pronounces them impure because they are proselytes and mistaken.”

Jews in the Land of Israel and those in Ḥegger/Ḥagrā appear to have maintained a bilateral relationship: the former learned the meaning of Biblical words from the latter; the latter consulted them on bills of divorce and, perhaps, menstrual laws, two highly sensitive areas of *Halakha*. Such relations may support the view that the Jews of northern Arabia absorbed teachings from the Land of Israel and were Talmudic.⁶² These findings challenge arguments about shallow Jewish culture due to the absence of contact with Jewish communities outside Arabia and proselyte background, although proselytes were common in northern Arabia.

CONCLUSION

The concept of Arabia in Rabbinic sources includes the Ḥijāz. This alone allows us to broaden the use of Jewish sources to gain insights into north Arabian Jewry. The discussion focused on references to al-Ḥijr and Taymā' in

⁶⁰ al-Bakrī 1876–1877: 1:21. See further, Hirschberg 1946: 116–117.

⁶¹ *E.g.*, Yāqūt 1990: 2:78.

⁶² See Kister and Kister 1980; Mazuz 2014.

the Mishna, the Talmuds, and the Midrashim. The investigation of this material showed that it accommodates more than was known so far about the north Arabian Jews' religious life and their relations with religious authorities in the Land of Israel, irrespective of the extent of proselytism among them.

This discussion addressed only several references to north Arabian Jews in Rabbinic sources. The potential of the material there and the insights that may be produced from them are far from being exploited. Scholars should accept the challenge and develop a new and extensive discussion on the Rabbinic material and even offer new methodologies for analyzing it.⁶³ By investigating all the information that appears in the Rabbinic literature and reading the sources closely, one may draw far-reaching conclusions about north Arabian Jewry. Costa's recent article attempts to head in this direction, sending an excellent message and promoting research.⁶⁴ This subject is highly important for several disciplines other than Jewish studies, such as Late Antiquity and Early Islam. Interdisciplinary collaboration would surely yield abundant fruit.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CII 2 = Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum: Recueil des inscriptions juives qui vont du IIIe siècle avant Jésus-Christ au VIIe siècle de notre ère, vol. 2: Asie – Afrique. 1952. Edited by J.B. FREY, Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana.

CIS II/I = Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum II/I: Inscriptions Aramaicas Continens. 1889. Paris: n.p.

The King James Bible = The King James Version of the English Bible: An Account of the Development and Sources of the English Bible of 1611 with Special References to Hebrew Tradition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1941.

⁶³ An example is my recent work on the religious and spiritual life of the Jews of Medina, in which I identify Talmudic elements in the Islamic descriptions of these Jews. See Mazuz 2014.

⁶⁴ See Costa 2015.

Yāqūt = AL-ḤAMAWĪ AL-RŪMĪ AL-BAGHDĀDĪ, Y. 1990. *Muʿjam al-Buldān*. 7 Vols. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya.

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