Chapter 54 divides naturally into five parts, the first of which reads as follows:

> (1) Sing, O barren one, you who have borne no child; break forth into joyful shouting, and cry aloud, you who have not travailed; for the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous than the sons of the married woman, says the LORD. (2) Enlarge the place of your tent; stretch out the curtains of your dwellings; spare not, lengthen your cords, and strengthen your stakes. (3) For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left. Your descendants will possess nations, and they will people desolate cities.

These three verses are addressed to one who is described as "barren" and "desolate." She is said to have borne no child and never to have travailed. It is promised that her sons will be more numerous than "the sons of the married woman." Obviously the two individuals referred to in verse 1 are not literal women. Two suggestions have been made: (1) that the woman who has borne no children represents Israel in exile, while the married woman is Israel before the Exile; and (2) that the woman who has borne no children represents the Gentile nations, while the married woman represents Israel.

According to the first interpretation, the verse would mean that the progeny of Israel after the return from exile would be greater than the number of her children before the Exile. This interpretation mixes the figures rather badly. If Israel could be called the married woman before the Exile, the same term would certainly apply to her again when the Exile was over. The prediction that she would have more children than "the married woman" would be meaningless, since she would then be just as much a married woman as before the Exile.

An even stronger objection to this view is the fact that the woman is called "You who have borne no child." Obviously this phrase cannot be interpreted in a physical sense. No nation could be described as one who physically had borne no child, for such a nation would disappear after one generation. The reference to sons must point either to particular