There are five fragments that are attributed by ancient writers to Ezekiel but which do not occur in the canonical book of Ezekiel. Since one of these fragments is explicitly said to derive from an apocryphon of Ezekiel (Epiphanius, Pan. 64.70.5), it is a plausible hypothesis that all five derive from this same work, especially since the Stichometry of Nicephorus also attests the existence of a pseudepigraphal work attributed to Ezekiel. In the interests of not multiplying hypothetical works unnecessarily, we should probably assume that all derive from the same lost apocryphon unless there is good reason to think otherwise. Whether this was also the second book of Ezekiel to which Josephus referred (Ant. 10.79) and whether it was the same work as the apocryphal Ezekiel of which fragments in Hebrew survive among the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QPseudo-Ezekiel) we need not discuss in the present context.

The fragment which is now generally known as Fragment 3 reads (in what is probably the most original version): “The heifer has given birth and has not given birth” (ἡ δάμαλις τέτοκεν καὶ οὐ τέτοκεν). It is quoted in five Christian works: Acts of Peter 24, Tertullian, De Carne Christi 23, Clement of Alexandria,
Strom. 7.16.94, Epiphanius, Pan. 30.30.3, and Pseudo-Gregory of Nyssa, Adv. Judaeos 3. Only Tertullian ascribes the Fragment to Ezekiel, whereas Pseudo-Gregory attributes it to Isaiah and the other sources attribute it merely to “scripture” or a “prophet.” In addition to these quotations, there are two allusions to the Fragment that have scarcely been noticed in studies of it: in Asc. Isa. 11.13–14 and Sib. Or. 1.323a–b, both of which will be discussed below. In all these Christian texts it is treated as a prophecy of the birth of Jesus, though, as we shall see, the more precise interpretation of it varies.

Modern scholars have given considerable attention to establishing the most original text of this fragment, but much less attention to its meaning. The fragment is so short and so puzzling that it has deterred serious investigation. In this essay I shall test the hypothesis that the fragment is of non-Christian Jewish origin by providing a plausible explanation of what it could have meant in such a setting. A detailed study of the reception of the fragment in the various Christian writings in which it appears will throw more light on the tradition history of the fragment, explaining the divergent forms in which it appears. But the place to start an adequate investigation of this text is with its literary form, something that previous studies have entirely neglected.

5 Mueller and Robinson, “Apocryphon of Ezekiel,” 490, comment that the “Ascension of Isaiah may also have known the apocryphon [of Ezekiel].” E. Norelli, “Avant le canonique et l’apocryphe: aux origines des récits de la naissance de Jésus,” RTP 126 (1994) 305–324 at 314–316, thinks the author of the Ascension of Isaiah knew the short form of the Fragment (without “the heifer”) as a testimonium, not in its context in the Apocryphon of Ezekiel. Denis, Introduction, 781, refers to Asc. Isa. 11.13–14 only in connexion with Pseudo-Gregory of Nyssa, Adv. Judaeos 3, which he thinks may be alluding to it.


8 See the history of research in Mueller, Five Fragments, 61–66.