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ANOTHER LOOK AT "ALMAH," Is. 7:14

I should like to draw attention in the first place to two verses in Genesis 24 which, when taken together, have an important bearing on the meaning of *almah* in Is. 7:14, which has stirred up so much controversy. In v. 16 of the chapter referred to it is said of Rebecca: "The maiden was fair to look upon, a virgin whom no man had known." The word used for virgin here is *bethulah,* a word about which there is no disagreement. Now, in v. 43 of the same chapter the virgin Rebecca is called an *almah,* the term used in the Isaiah passage. So *bethulah* and *almah* are synonymous — and convertible terms, as indeed the Septuagint, or Greek translation of the Old Testament, renders both words with *parthenos,* virgin, while the Vulgate uses *virgo* in both cases. The Revised Standard Version, however, translates the latter passage "young woman." If we keep verse 16 in mind, there can of course be no confusion or ambiguity. But where there is no such clear indication of the meaning, as is the case in Is. 7:14, the translation "young woman" at once becomes doubtful and ambiguous. To the writer "young woman" means primarily a young married woman, and only in a secondary sense, in more colloquial speech, is it applied to an unmarried girl or maiden. As a matter of fact, *almah* of our passage has been referred to the "youthful wife of the prophet," so Gesenius, Davidson, and others; or to the wife of Ahaz, or to "any young (married) woman," as my Hebrew professor told his class many years ago. For this reason I consider it very unfortunate that the translators saw fit to replace the word "virgin" with "young woman." It leads inevitably to doubt and confusion. On the other hand, if the marginal "or virgin" be meant as an alternative possible rendering of *almah,* which the reader may choose if he will, then why make the change in the first place?

Another important aspect of the translation under discussion lies in the fact that the revisers are by no means consistent in treating the word *almah.* It occurs eight times in the Old Testament, if we include Psalm 46:1, *al alamoth,* which is left untranslated by R. S. V. and some commentators. But it may very well mean "according to maidens," which would possibly refer to the high pitch of the voice (soprano). So Delitzsch, no mean authority, and Kautzsch, who has provided an excellent translation of the Old Testament in modern German. Here

are the other passages with the translation of the new version:
Ex. 2:8: ". . . so the *girl* (Moses' sister) went and called the child's
mother"; Ps. 68:26: ". . . singers in front, the minstrels last, between
them *maidens* playing timbrels"; Prov. 30:19 (three things are too
wonderful for me) : ". . . the way of a man with a *maiden*"; Song of
Songs 1:3: ". . . your name is oil poured out; therefore the *maidens*
love you"; Song of Songs 6:8: "There are sixty queens and eighty
concubines and *maidens* without number." Gen. 24:43 and Is. 7:14
are the only passages which have "young woman," and in view of v. 16
of Genesis 24 the dubious and equivocal "young woman" is quite
arbitrary and wholly uncalled for in v. 43. The net result is that the
new translation uses "maiden" no less than four times and "girl" once
in rendering the Hebrew *almah*. What has become of the "young
woman" in these five passages? Has the word undergone a change
in its connotation? For the sake of consistency why not use "maiden"
for *almah* in all the passages? In that case all the furor in connection
with Is. 7:14 would have been avoided. To the writer "maiden" and
"virgin" are identical in meaning, and he has the support of Webster's
authority. So once more, why "young woman" in Is. 7:14? I have
my own personal opinion on the matter. To express it might seem
invidious to some, but I cannot suppress the feeling that in this
important Messianic passage the revisers, consciously or unconsciously,
have abandoned their sound principle that a translator must in no wise
be influenced by dogmatic or any other prepossessions. There must be
a reason why in this single instance — I disallow Gen. 24:43, since
almah is equated with *bethulah,* cf. v. 16 — they chose "young woman,"
whereas in all the remaining passages we have either "maiden" or
"girl," as already pointed out. The reason, in my judgment, is to be
sought in the rather vague and indefinite "young woman" as compared
with the rigid and inflexible "virgin." Many an "advanced" critical
scholar may well subscribe to the former — because he can fill the
expression with the content he chooses — while he would positively
refuse to accept the prediction "A virgin shall conceive." I have no
hesitation in saying that there are scholars of just this type in the
translation committee. I myself was personally acquainted with one
years ago when I was a classmate of his at the university, and doubtless
there are others.

One member of the translation committee calls for a little more
extended notice because of his unique and radical method of dealing
with the *almah* passage. This is Orlinsky, the only Jewish member of
the committee. Starting out from the Septuagint, the Greek translation

of the Old Testament made several centuries before Christ, he makes
the astounding assertion that the word *parthenos,* virgin, by which
these Jewish translators rendered the Hebrew *almah* of our passage is,
in fact, a shameless forgery of the Christians and has no foundation
in the original Hebrew text. Speaking of Aquila, a Jewish proselyte,
i. e., a convert from heathenism to Judaism, who flourished in the first
half of the second century after Christ, Orlinsky says that he produced
an independent and unique translation of the Hebrew Bible, studiously
avoiding all Christological elements, which Orlinsky says had been
introduced into the Septuagint. Aquila translated the word *almah* with
neanis, "young woman" (also "girl," "maiden," according to Liddell
and Scott) instead of *parthenos,* "virgin," which the Christians had
substituted for it, according to Orlinsky.

This almost takes one's breath away. So the Christians are here
brazenly charged with willfully falsifying the Greek text in the interest
of their theology. They substituted *parthenos,* "virgin," for the alleged
original *neanis,* which Aquila restored.

We wonder whence Orlinsky derives this interesting information.
He offers no evidence, no proof, that *neanis* was ever a part of the
Septuagint text. Even if it had been, it is simply preposterous to think
that the Christians should have tampered with every single copy (and
of course they were very numerous) in order to expunge the word
neanis and substitute *parthenos* in its place. It is sheer folly to question
the originality of *parthenos* in our passage. At the same time we know
that the Septuagint translators had no particular axe to grind, while
Aquila did his work under a distinctly anti-Christian bias. To which
version, then, shall we accord the greater trust?

Nor can Matt. 1:23, which points back to our verse, be ignored and
lightly set aside. Matthew sets the seal of his approval on *parthenos,*
which to him is the Greek counterpart of *almah* as used in Is. 7:14.

To sum up, the writer has given this *almah* question much study
and thought, and that not only since the publication of the Revised
Standard Version, but decades before it appeared and the present
controversy arose. In his own mind he feels assured that *almah* is the
equivalent of *parthenos* not only in Is. 7:14, but in every passage where
it occurs. At any rate I have never read any convincing proof to
the contrary.

Milwaukee, Wis.   CARL GAENSSLE