



# **THE SPRINGFIELDER**

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# The Interpretation of Isaiah 7:14

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THE NEW ENGLISH BIBLE of 1970 has translated Isaiah 7:14 as follows: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; a young woman is with child, and will bear a son, and will call him Immanuel."<sup>1</sup> *The Revised Standard Version* of 1952 and 1959 rendered this passage similarly: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."<sup>2</sup> *The American Translation*, produced by the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, translated Is. 7:14: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign; behold! a young woman is with child, and is about to bear a son; and she will call him 'God with us.'"<sup>3</sup> The translation sponsored by The Jewish Publication Society of America has a similar rendering: "Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign: behold, the young woman shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."<sup>4</sup> The Moffatt translation interpreted the Hebrew as follows: "There is a young woman with child, who shall bear a son and call his name 'Immanuel' (God is with us)."<sup>5</sup>

Generally it may be stated that critical scholars, rejecting the idea of predictive prophecy, embracing a wrong concept of Messianic prophecy and refusing to accept the New Testament's interpretations of Old Testament prophecies, adopt the "young woman" interpretation for the Hebrew word *almah*.

## *Almah in the Ancient Version*

How did the ancient versions understand Isaiah 7:14? The Septuagint translated: "Dia touto dosei Kyrios autos humin semeion. Idou *he parthenos* (a virgin) en gastri lepsetai, kai textetai huion, kai kaleseis to onoma autou Emmanuel."<sup>6</sup> The Syriac Peshitta (according to the translation of George Lamsa) rendered Is. 7:14: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."<sup>7</sup> The Latin Vulgate translation of St. Jerome has: "Propter hoc dabit Dominus ipse vobis signum: ecce virgo concipiet, et pariet filium, et vocabitur nomen ejus Emmanuel."<sup>8</sup> The Latin *virgo* means "virgin." Throughout the Middle Ages and the time of the Reformation this was the meaning given to the Hebrew *almah*, namely, that the word meant "virgin," a member of the female sex of marriageable age who never had sexual intercourse with a man.

Martin Luther rendered Is. 7:14 as follows: "Darum so wird euch der Herr selbst ein Zeichen geben: Siehe, eine Jungfrau ist schwanger, und wird einen Sohn gebären, den wird sie heissen Immanuel."<sup>9</sup> In German the term "Jungfrau" is used of a woman who has remained unmarried. The King James Version was following the Septuagint understanding of *almah* when it rendered the latter as "virgin." The British Revised Version of 1885 has the same translation as the Authorized Version.<sup>10</sup> All Roman Catholic translations

have either rendered *almah* as "virgin" or "maiden." *The Oxford Historical Dictionary* gives the meaning of "maiden" as "virgin."<sup>11</sup> The Rheims-Douay translated Is. 7:14: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign, Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son: and his name shall be called Immanuel."<sup>12</sup> *The Jerusalem Bible* of 1966 has: "The Lord himself therefore, will give you a sign, it is this: the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel."<sup>13</sup> The Knox Version rendered: "Sign you ask none, but sign the Lord will give you. Maid shall be with child, and shall bear a son, that shall be called Immanuel."<sup>14</sup> The Confraternity Version of 1970 does likewise.<sup>15</sup>

The 1959 and 1969 versions of the Berkely Bible translated Is. 7:14 as follows: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and shall bear a son and shall call His name Immanuel."<sup>16</sup> Young in his *Commentary on Isaiah* translated the Hebrew: "Behold the Lord Himself will give you a sign: A virgin is with child and she will call his name Immanuel."<sup>17</sup> Dr. Leupold likewise in his recent commentary rendered *almah* as "virgin."<sup>18</sup>

Those translations in modern times that render *almah* as "young woman" are simply following the rendering of Aquila, Theodotion and Symmachus who substituted *neanis*, "young woman" for virgin in their new translations or revision of the Hebrew O.T. into Greek, designed to replace the traditional Septuagint translation, because first and second centuries Christians were using Old Testament Messianic prophecies according to the LXX and claiming that they (including Is. 7:14) were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.

### *The Historical Background for Almah Passage*

The name Immanuel appears for the first time in Isaiah Chapter 7:14-17. The allied armies of Israel and Syria held Jerusalem in the iron grip of a siege, which had brought the city to the verge of despair. Already the allies had decided upon a foreigner, who should be seated on the throne of David, when the city would fall, one called "the son of Tabeel," (Is. 7:6). King Ahaz and his staff had gathered, it seems, to consider some last expedient for deliverance, when the prophet Isaiah appeared among them. His message from the Lord was that Ahaz might dismiss his fears, for the two kings must soon abandon the siege, and that their own destruction was hurrying on. Seeing unbelief in the faces of his hearers, Isaiah offered a sign from the Lord, any sign that they might ask, from heaven above to hell below. Ahaz, who was hostile to Isaiah's religion and to his policy for (Judah), rejected the prophet's gracious offer with scorn. Isaiah knew that Ahaz, refusing to trust Jehovah, had put his faith in Assyria, and bought its intervention with a ruinous tribute. Possibly Ahaz had tidings, or at least some hope, that just then the Assyrian was invading the land of Syria. So in hypocrisy or scorn he answered the prophet: "I will not ask, neither will I tempt Jehovah." Then, the prophet, turning upon the apostate king, said: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign (whether you ask for it or not)."

This is the historical setting of the appearance in revelation for the first time of the Immanuel sign. The foremost element in the interpretation of Is. 7:14ff, must be that it is not a sign of blessing to Ahaz, the apostate, but of judgment or deprivation.<sup>19</sup> The emphasis of the sign is not upon the birth of Immanuel, but upon the time condition; before the child can come to years of moral discretion and accountability, — twelve years with the Jews — Israel and Syria will be conquered and in captivity. After that, instead of deliverance through Immanuel, Ahaz and wicked Judah will be judged and punished: "Jehovah will bring upon thee, and upon thy people" days darker than those through which they were then passing.

Ahaz had refused to ask for a miraculous sign. In announcing judgment on the immediate house of David, Jehovah at the same time proclaimed a miraculous happening, the birth of His Son by a virgin. The prophet sees in a vision *the* virgin pregnant and about to bear a son, whom she will call *Immanuel*.

Professor Gehman and those who follow his viewpoint claim that to take Is. 7:14 as a prediction would fail to do justice to the historical situation, that the prophet's words to Ahaz had to have relevance for the immediate situation in which they were uttered. Those who accept Matthew's statement that the conception of Christ by the Virgin Mary was in fulfillment of what Isaiah had predicted are accused by Gehman of being guilty of subjective exegesis.<sup>20</sup>

To find a prophecy of the Virgin Birth of Christ in Is. 7:14 is not fanciful exegesis. The salvation set forth by Christ and the Apostles was the theme of Old Testament prophecy. In writing to the congregations of Asia Minor, Peter said:

"This salvation was the theme which the prophets pondered and explored, those who prophesied about the grace of God awaiting you. They tried to find out what was the time, and what were the circumstances, to which the spirit of Christ in them pointed, foretelling the sufferings in store for Christ and the splendours to follow; and it was disclosed to them that the matter they treated of was not for their time but for yours. And now it has been openly announced to you through preachers who brought you the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. These are things that angels long to see" (I Peter 1:10-12, NEB).<sup>21</sup>

The same apostle, speaking before the Jewish council, claimed that the Old Testament prophets had foretold the suffering and glorification of the Messiah, identified with Christ by Peter. "And so said all the prophets, from Samuel onwards; with one voice they all predicted the present time."

Professor Gehman has stated in his article on "Immanuel" in the *New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* that "the prophet spoke in a historical situation, and that Isaiah would not have been understood by his contemporaries if in some mysterious manner he had referred to an event that was to take place 700 years in the future."<sup>22</sup> There are many more statements in the prophetic literature that contain asser-

tions about the future which were not always understood by those to whom they were addressed. That is no adequate criterion for rejecting the clear interpretation of Matthew that Isaiah had definitely foretold the unique manner of Christ's conception on the grounds that the immediate hearers needed to understand the words. Ahaz had been guilty of unbelief; his condition would make him obtuse to many statements the prophet might utter. Isaiah's prediction was understood no doubt by many future Israelites as a new prophecy.

Any correct interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 must take three points into consideration: (1) The birth must be a sign. (2) The mother of the child is one who is both unmarried and a good woman. (3) The very presence of the Child brings God to his people. "Immanuel" is a title which according to both Luther and Calvin can only be applied to one who is both God and man in one person. For these reasons the prophecy can only be found fulfilled in that Person who meets all the conditions set forth in Isaiah 7:14.

#### *Wrong Interpretation of Isaiah 7:14.*

The so-called "young woman" of Is. 7:14 is said to have been one of the women of Ahaz' harem or the mother of Hezekiah, but if we accept II Kings 16:2; 18:2 as historical statements, immediately a difficulty arises in making the year c. 734 the year of Hezekiah's birth, who by that time was a number of years old.

Another faulty interpretation is the identification of *Almah* with the wife of Isaiah, for she already was the mother of Shaer-Yashub, and in Is. 8:3 she is called a prophetess. This view according to Gehman must be rejected.<sup>23</sup>

Some scholars believe that Isaiah pointed to some pregnant woman, who stood nearby, but surely that would have been an indelicate act and rules out *almah* being a virgin.

Others claim that the young woman was some undefined person, and that her personality was unimportant. Immanuel, was simply the symbol of a new age that would dawn for Judah. However, in 8:18 Immanuel is addressed as a real person and in 8:10 there is a play on his name.

Still others have proposed the idea that *almah* represents the house of David, that the term is a personification of the descendants of David's line. In the prophetic literature Israel is sometimes represented as a virgin (*bethulah*) in Amos 5:2; Jer. 18:18; 31:4,21. This view it is felt by Gehman would at least connect the prophecy with a local and historical situation.

Some have also advanced the theory that Isaiah was simply announcing that within nine months a woman was going to have a child and that she would call her baby Immanuel as an act of faith that God would save his people from the Assyrians.

The exegetical interpretations just cited all reject Matthew's clear assertion that it had been Isaiah's intention to announce the Virgin Birth. There is an interpretation, accepted by a number of expositors, which endeavors to do justice to both the historical situa-

tion and the fulfillment as given in Matthew 1. These expositors believe that Isaiah announced the birth of a child by a young woman who would be a sign that within a very short time the threat of Israel and Syria would come to naught and that God would deliver His people from their enemies, and that this woman was a type of the Virgin Mary.

### *The Use of Almah in the Hebrew Old Testament*

The word *almah* occurs six times in the Old Testament. We pass by those references of the form in the plural *alamoth* as a part of certain psalm titles. Scholars do not know exactly what the meaning is of this title. In Gen. 24:43, in reference to Rebekkah, the word *almah* is used and it becomes clear in that chapter that it is synonymous with *bethulah*. The same is true of Ex. 2:8, in the case of Miriam, Moses' young sister, where Miriam is designated an *almah*. The same is true of Psalm 68:25, obviously a reference to women of honorable repute at the sanctuary. In the Song of Solomon, in 1:5 *almah* certainly does not imply a woman of questionable reputation, inasmuch as she is described as a woman to be desired. The same can also be said about the use of the term *almah* in 6:8, where the word is employed to such as stand over against both queens and concubines. Thus virginity is implied. Dr. Von Rohr Sauer in an article in the *Concordia Theological Monthly*, August, 1953, page 558 asserted the following about the use and meaning of *almah* in Isaiah 7:14:

- (1) *Almah* is never used of a girl before she attains to puberty, as the etymology of the word shows.
- (2) *Almah* is never used of a girl after she has become a married woman, as the usage in the Old Testament shows.
- (3) This means that a girl is called an *almah* only during a very restricted period of her life, namely, from the point of her becoming mature to the point of her becoming married.
- (4) It is proposed that this is precisely the period in which the Hebrew girl normally possessed the characteristics of maidenhood.
- (5) It is further proposed that the word "maid" or "maiden" is an accurate translation of the word *almah*, which implies virginity without stressing it, as *bethulah* does.
- (6) It is finally proposed that this translation is supported by the probability that the sign in Is. 7:14 is a miraculous sign.

### *A Ugaritic Text and Almah*

An interesting text has come from the Rash Shamra or Ugaritic literature, where the goddess Nikkal is described as "A virgin will give birth . . . a damsel will bear a son."<sup>1</sup> In this passage *bethulah* and *glmt* (= Hebrew *almah*) are used synonymously. These two designations are used of the goddess Nikkal before her marriage to a god took place. It is of little importance that the child is to be born after the marriage; what is significant is the fact that before her wedding Nikkal is characterized by two words *bilt* and *glmt*. These two Ugaritic words are practically synonymous. At least, there was no hesitation in applying this word *bilt*; in the Ugaritic texts it is the standing designation for the virgin Anat. *Glmt* is never used in Rash Shamra of a married woman, and hence it was well adopted to serve as a parallel expression to *bilt*. The new evidence from Rash Shamra in

no wise supports the contention that *almah* may be used of a married woman. It was the conclusion of the late Robert Dick Wison of Princeton Seminary that in extra-Biblical Semitic literature *almah* never meant a young married woman.<sup>25</sup>

### *Almah the Proper Noun for Designation of Virginity*

Dr. Edward Young claims that of all the Hebrew words that Isaiah could use to describe the virgin birth, *almah* was actually the only suitable word.<sup>26</sup> Thus there were available the following words: *yaldah*, *naharah*, *bethulah*, *ishshah*, *kalah* and *almah*. *Yaldah* was used of a young child and thus would not be appropriate to describe a woman that had the capability of bearing a child. In Joel 4:3 the word is employed of one who is a mere child.

The word *naharah* is the ordinary word for "girl." Its usage is broad and therefore would not have been suitable in this Immanuel prophecy. *Naharah* may refer to both married and unmarried women. It may be used of a concubine as well as of an evil woman. Thus it was unsuitable for predicting a virgin birth.

Then there is the word *bethulah* which those contend should have been employed if Isaiah wanted to announce a virgin birth. In the Rash Shamra texts as has been shown the word without exception refers to an unmarried woman. This however, is not the case in Biblical Hebrew. Dr. Young has examined the usage of the word in O.T. Hebrew and claims that:

A close examination of the Biblical data reveals the fact that in Old Testament times there were two classes of women who might bear the designation *bethulah*. One of these was the young girl who may have been of marriageable age, but who was technically a virgin in that she had not known a man. The other was the *bethulah meorasah* or betrothed virgin. This distinction is made clear in a passage such as Deuteronomy 22.<sup>27</sup>

A study of Deuteronomy 22 indicates that it is a chapter designed to preserve the sanctity of the married estate. The various laws set forth in chapter 22 leave the reader with the distinction of a *bethulah* not engaged to a man and a *bethulah meorasah*, "a betrothed virgin," who is also defined as the "wife" of the man to whom she is betrothed. In Hosea 4:13,14 the word *kalah*, "bride" refers to a woman already married. On the other hand, Isaiah 49:18 refers most likely to a woman who is a betrothed virgin before the actual ceremony has been performed. On the strength of such writers as Epstein, Neufeld and Mace who have written on ancient Hebrew marriage customs, Young claims that "it is difficult to discern precisely what constituted the change from the status of 'betrothed virgin' to that of a married wife."<sup>28</sup>

Joel 1:8 complicates the matter further, where we read: "Lament like a virgin, girded with sackcloth over the husband of her youth." On the basis of this passage it would be proper to speak of a *bethulah behulah*. Such an inference is warranted in view of the fact that the virgin in Deut. 22:24 is called a wife (*ishshah*). The

language employed in these two passages would seem to imply that whatever the difference was between the state of betrothal and the actual marriage state was merely of a formal nature. That there does not appear to have been a great difference between a "betrothed virgin" and a married woman is also shown by the severe penalty the law imposed upon unfaithfulness by a betrothed virgin. According to the Mosaic law she was not merely guilty of fornication but guilty of adultery.

When the Old Testament speaks of a true virgin, it adds the qualifying phrase "who had not known a man." In Judges 21:12 this phrase is used to indicate that the girls (*nahrah*) were truly virgins and not betrothed. Otherwise this language would be unnecessary if the word *bethulah* without exception meant "virgin." Rebekkah is described as a *bethulah*, as a woman whom no man had known. (Gen. 24:16). This qualifying phrase "neither had any man known her" would seem to indicate that Rebekkah was not a betrothed virgin. This phrase removes any doubt about her virginity which is not implied by the mere use of the word *bethulah*.

In view of the uncertainty connected with *bethulah* it becomes clear why Isaiah employs *almah*, which implies an unmarried woman of marriageable age, who has never had sexual relations. Probably the best translation for *almah* is the English "damsel" or "maiden." While Scott,<sup>29</sup> Leslie<sup>30</sup> and others claim that *almah* designates a married woman, one wishes that they would furnish philological evidence for this assertion. The O.T. philological evidence does not support this rendering.<sup>31</sup>

In discussing the meaning of Isaiah 7:14 it should also be remembered that the name *Immanuel* occurs three times in chapters 7-11, and for this reason this section of Isaiah has been called the "Immanuel book." The second Immanuel passage we have in chapter 9:1-9. In this passage the prophet announces that Immanuel's ministry will be in Galilee. Matthew states that this prophecy was fulfilled in the preaching in Galilee, during the first year of His public ministry.

Isaiah ascribes to Immanuel the following titles: Wonderful Counsellor, Might God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from henceforth even forever." The titles given here surely could not be assigned to any human king. Nor would the nature of Immanuel's reign be possible for any human Israelite king.

In this passage there are also the distinctive features of the Davidic covenant; he shall sit on David's throne, his kingdom is everlasting; and he is God's son, as Jehovah had promised.

In Isaiah 11:1-9, the third Immanuel passage, new features appear in Isaiah's picture of the Messiah. He is to be the house of Jesse; the Spirit is poured out upon him abundantly; righteousness and justice are the foundations and strength of his reign; and peace will fill the earth.



In chapters 7, 8, and 10 the prophet has predicted the desolation of Judah which the Assyrian will effect. Before the mighty Assyrian, the houses of Israel and Judah have fallen as trees of the forest before the axes of the woodmen. Only the bare stumps remain to accentuate the desolation. Then begins the message of hope in the eleventh chapter; one of these stumps has life in it, and will put forth again, for there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse.

This coming King "shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither decide after the hearing of his ears." Righteousness is declared to be the strength of his reign by the figure of girded loins or waist. Finally, his reign of righteousness will heal the wounds of the world and establish everlasting peace.

### FOOTNOTES

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17. Edward J. Young. *The Book of Isaiah.* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), I, p. 278.

18. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Isaiah*, Volume I, chapters 1-39 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), p. 153.
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20. Henry Snyder Gehman, *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), p. 419.
21. *The New English Bible. New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 396-397.
22. Snyder, *op. cit.*, p. 419.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 419.
24. Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature* (Roma: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1941), pp. 63-64.
25. Robert Dick Wilson, "The Meaning of Almah (A.V. "Virgin) in Isaiah VII. 14," *The Princeton Theological Review*, 24:308-316, April, 1926.
26. Edward J. Young, *Studies in Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), pp. 178-185.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 179-180.
29. R. B. Y. Scott, "The Book of Isaiah," *The Interpreter's Bible*. George Arthur Buttrick, editor (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), V, p. 219.
30. Elmer A. Leslie, *Isaiah. Chronologically Arranged, Translated and Interpreted* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1963), p. 49.
31. Modern Hebrew dictionaries simplify reflects what is considered the scholarly interpretation of *almah* in the standard commentaries. cf. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958), p. 709. Where *almah* is said to be a marriageable girl or young woman (until the birth of her first child). No passage cited demonstrates the latter part of the definition; William L. Holladay, editor, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), p. 274.