The Gospel Unashamed

Translation of Isaiah 7:14

""Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, **the virgin shall conceive** and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel." **Isaiah 7:14 (NKJV)**

Some claim that this verse should be translated "…the young maid shall conceive…" while others maintain that it should read "…the virgin shall conceive…". The Hebrew word in question is '*almah'*.

This has been a controversy from very early on in the history of the Church. Both Justin Martyr and Irenaeus defended the translation of "virgin" in the second century A.D. (See Justin Martyr's "*Dialogue with Trypho*" chapters 43, 46, 77, and Irenaeus' "*Against Heresies*" chapter 21.) In more recent times, the debate has been fueled, in part, by some translations opting for "young maid" rather than "virgin".

For anyone who believes that Matthew was an inspired man, the question can be dealt with rather quickly and easily.

The Greek word that Matthew uses in quoting this passage from Isaiah, in **Matthew 1:23**, is '*parthenos'* which certainly means "virgin" (as indicated by Thayer's Greek Lexicon and other language experts). For me, that settles the issue. The Divine inspired commentary on **Isaiah 7:14** indicates that the Hebrew word '*almah'*, when translated into Greek, should be '*parthenos'* which means "virgin".

However, it should be pointed out here that it was not Matthew who translated from the Hebrew to the Greek. He was simply quoting the passage from the Septuagint.

The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew by Jews in Alexandria in the third century B.C. In the first century A.D., it was very commonly used and accepted by both the Jews, (as can be seen in its use by Philo and Josephus), and Christians alike. Still, the fact that the inspired writer Matthew saw fit to use the Septuagint when quoting this verse gives Divine approval of its translation of this verse.

The Septuagint translation of this verse is also significant since the Jewish scholars who produced it were not trying to defend the virgin birth of Jesus. That was still more than two centuries in the future when they did their work.

Furthermore, the Jews at that time did not view **Isaiah 7:14** as a prophecy about Messiah. This means that the translators of the Septuagint were not trying to artificially build up a Messianic prophecy with their translation. In fact, translating this as "virgin" likely created a difficulty in their minds. Nevertheless, that is the word they settled upon.

As Christianity spread, the Jews began to call the Septuagint into question, especially regarding '*almah'* in **Isaiah 7:14**. For that reason, both Justin Martyr and Irenaeus addressed both the translation of '*almah'* and the credibility of the Septuagint as a whole in the second century A.D. (See Justin Martyr's "*Hortatory Address to the Greeks*" chapter 13 and Irenaeus' "Against Heresies chapter 21.) It is noteworthy that Trypho was not arguing that Jesus was not born of a virgin. He was simply arguing that Isaiah had not predicted a virgin birth of the Messiah.

Further evidence of this is the Greek translation of the Old Testament done by the Jewish convert, Aquila, early in the second century A.D. He produced his own translation specifically to oppose the Septuagint and focused on the passages that Christians quoted as referring to Jesus.

As you can imagine, he translated **Isaiah 7:14** as "…the **young maid** shall conceive…" rather than "…the **virgin** shall conceive…" The false and malicious claim, unfortunately passed along uncritically in more modern times, was that Christians had altered the text of the Septuagint. But as Edward J. Young states in his book "*Studies in Isaiah*", "*There is no evidence whatever that Christians tampered with the text of the LXX [Septuagint] at this point.*"

There are some facts here that ought to convince any Christian that '*almah'* should be translated "virgin":

1. The Jewish translators of the Septuagint believed so more

than two centuries before the birth of Christ.

2. These same translators were not trying to build up the Messiah with their translation of this verse. In fact, it likely created a difficulty for them.
3. The Jews accepted and used the Septuagint as a valid translation until Christianity began to spread partly due to their use of this Greek version of the Old Testament Scriptures.
4. Matthew, as an inspired writer, used the Septuagint's translation of '*almah*' as '*parthenos*' (meaning "virgin" in Greek) giving it Divine sanction.

However, like the Jewish apologists of the early second century, the modern Jewish apologists are not convinced by any of this. They reject the idea that Matthew was an inspired writer, and they are still working to discredit the Septuagint. Thus, the question arises as to what evidence there is outside of **Matthew** and the Septuagint that the Hebrew word '*almah*' should be translated "virgin" in **Isaiah 7:14**.

Before we proceed, it should be pointed out that translating '*almah*' as "young maid" rather than "virgin" certainly doesn't prove that the woman spoken of in this verse was not a virgin.

Further, it does nothing to discredit the fact that Jesus was born of a virgin. Finally, it falls way short of any proof that Jesus is not the Messiah.

Under the Law of Moses, the virginity of a young maid who was not married was taken very seriously. In fact, it was a matter of life or death. If a woman married and was found by her new husband to not be a virgin, she could be stoned. It was her parent's responsibility to keep the evidence of her virginity in case of a false accusation by her new husband. This and more laws of this sort can be found in **Deuteronomy 22**.

The point is that a young maid who was not married put her life in jeopardy if she were not a virgin.

Thus, generally speaking, "young maid" and "virgin" were synonymous unlike our culture today.

Now to the argument against translating '*almah*' as "virgin". It is a twofold argument:

1. The word '*almah*', they tell us, does not mean "virgin" but simply "a young woman", or "maid", of marriageable age. Gesenius is often cited as proof here. Sometimes it is erroneously said that such a woman was called an '*almah*' whether married or not.
2. They claim that if Isaiah really wanted to speak of a virgin, he should have used the Hebrew word, '*bethulah*' which, they say, would indicate a virgin.

We shall examine both arguments in turn.

THE MEANING OF '*ALMAH*'

It is true that Gesenius defines the word '*almah*' as "a girl of marriageable age". He expands upon this by stating that it does not convey the idea of unspotted virginity and further says that the Septuagint rendered it incorrectly. However, that is certainly not the end of the story.

My copy of Gesenius' lexicon includes a translator's note immediately after the definition of '*almah*' that says the following:

"*The object in view in seeking to undermine the opinion which would assign the signification of **virgin** to this word is clearly to raise a discrepancy between **Isa. 7:14** and **Matt. 1:23**: nothing which has been stated does, however, really give us any ground for assigning another meaning. The ancient versions, which gave a different rendering [than virgin], did so for party purposes, while the LXX [Septuagint], who could have no such motive, render it, **virgin** in the very passage where it must to their minds occasioned a difficulty. **Alma** in the Punic language signified **virgin** as Gesenius rightly states in Thes. [another work of Gesenius] on the authority of Jerome. The absolute authority of the New Test. is, however, quite sufficient to settle the question to a Christian.*"

As clearly stated in the "Preface" and "To the Student", Gesenius was a rationalist and that clearly affected his work. However, the translator, Tregelles, was a believer of the inspiration of the Bible. Thus, not surprisingly, the rationalist Gesenius denies that '*almah*' means "virgin" while the believer Tregelles affirms that it does.

This ought to be enough evidence for an honest student that Gesenius' definition should not be the end of the discussion about this word. Indeed, other language experts disagree with him on this very point although many commentators simply parrot him.

After doing a careful survey of both the Biblical and extra-Biblical usage of the word '*almah*', Edward J. Young, from Westminster Theological Seminary, concludes that it is precisely the right Hebrew word for Isaiah to use if he wanted to indicate a virgin birth. His lengthy but interesting and informative study of this can be found in his book "*Studies in Isaiah*".

Anyone familiar with the work of Robert Dick Wilson will concur that he was certainly an expert in Biblical languages. He wrote about the use of '*almah*' in **Isaiah 7:14** in the *Princeton Theological Review* in 1926 stating the following:

"*Finally, two conclusions from the evidence seem clear: first, that '**alma** so far as known, never meant 'young married woman,' and secondly, since the presumption in common law and usage was and is, that every '**alma** is virgin and virtuous, until she is proved not to be, we have a right to assume that Rebecca and the '**alma** of **Isaiah 7:14** and all other '**almas** were virgin until and unless it shall be proven that they were not…The language is not the difficulty. The great and only difficulty lies in disbelief in the predictive prophecy and the Almighty power of God; or in the desire to throw discredit upon the divine Sonship of Jesus.*"

James E. Smith, in his book "*What the Bible Says about the Promised*

Messiah", sums this up nicely by saying: "*The word 'almah' (KJV **virgin**) has been a battleground through the centuries. The translators of the Septuagint version long before the Christian age clearly saw the implications of this context and rendered the word '**parthenos**', virgin. This translation was adopted by the King James translators. On the other hand, the Revised Standard Version rendered the word '**young woman**'. In this rendering the RSV translators were following the lead of the radically anti-Christian Jewish translator Aquila.*"

Though many have stated that '*almah*' could refer to a young maiden who was married, the fact remains that '*almah*' is never used of a married woman, nor is it ever used of an older woman who is a virgin. Martin Luther challenged anyone to demonstrate that this word was ever used of a married woman. No such usage of the word has ever been produced.

The final remaining question is whether '*almah*' in **Isaiah 7:14** could refer to a young, unmarried maiden who was not a virgin. The answer here ought to be obvious to any thinking person. Such a woman would be of dubious character and morals. Clearly that is not the kind of woman in view of the prophecy here. Further, for such a woman to conceive and bear a son would certainly not be any kind of a sign.

Ultimately the meaning of any word is not determined by any dictionary, lexicon, or language expert (as I believe we have adequately shown above). The meaning must be determined by how the word is actually used.

As '*almah*' is only used seven times in the Old Testament, it doesn't take long to consider each usage.

In none of these passages can it be shown that '*almah*' refers to a woman who is not a virgin. I have already mentioned the conclusion of Edward J. Young after he examined the usage of the word outside of the Old Testament. There simply is no reason to assume that the '*almah*' of **Isaiah 7:14** was not, in fact, a virgin based on the Hebrew word.

THE MEANING OF '*BETHULAH*'

Why didn't Isaiah use the word '*bethulah*', instead of '*almah*' if he wanted to indicate a virgin? The answer is simply that while '*bethulah*' can refer to a virgin, it can also refer to a woman who is engaged or even married. In **Deuteronomy**, it is used of an engaged woman who is also called a wife.
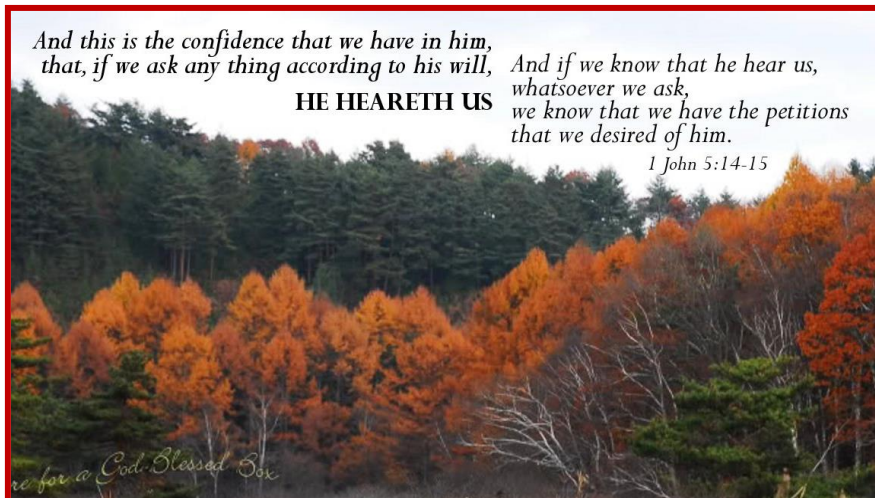
"23 "If a young woman who is a **virgin** is **betrothed** to a husband, and a man finds her in the city and lies with her, 24 "then you shall bring them

And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will,
HE HEARETH US

And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.
1 John 5:14-15

both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry out in the city, and the man because he humbled his neighbor's **wife**; so you shall put away the evil from among you." **Deuteronomy 22:23-24 (NKJV)**

In Joel, '*bethulah*' is used of a married woman.

"Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth **For the husband of her youth**." **Joel 1:8 (NKJV)**

The contention that Joel is portraying an engaged woman whose groom, or

just married husband, who suddenly died before the marriage had been consummated only shows how desperate some are to protect their incorrect position concerning this Hebrew word.

The nation of Israel is called a '*bethulah*' yet she is also pictured as being in a marriage relationship with God but was unfaithful to Him.

"Therefore thus says the LORD: "Ask now among the Gentiles, Who has heard such things? The **virgin** of Israel has done a very horrible thing." **Jeremiah 18:13 (NKJV)**

Further, if '*bethulah*' clearly means "virgin", then why did it need clarification when used of Rebekah? "Now the young woman was very beautiful to behold, a **virgin**; **no man had known her**. And she went down to the well, filled her pitcher, and came up." **Genesis 24:16 (NKJV)**

The fact that she is also called an '*almah*' in **verse 43** of that passage makes it clear that a virgin can be called an '*almah*'.

Considering these uses of '*bethulah*', it is hard to believe that this word would have been a better choice for Isaiah if he wanted to indicate a virgin.

The bottom line of all this is that the word '*almah*' can certainly refer to a virgin and it would definitely not rule out the virginity of the one who was to conceive. However, if the word '*bethulah*' had been used, we would not know if it referred to a virgin, an engaged woman, or even a young married woman.

Only the use of '*almah*' indicates a young, unmarried woman. The context demands that this be a moral woman. Thus, the woman is not only a young maid, but she is also a virgin. The translators of the Septuagint understood this as did the inspired writer, Matthew.