

ISAIAH 7:14B IN NEW MAJOR CHRISTIAN BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

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Recent major Christian Bible translations have finally admitted after nearly 2,000 years that Isaiah did not prophesy a virgin birth or, more precisely, a supernatural virginal conception of the Messiah. Beginning with *The Revised Standard Version* in 1952, followed by *The Jerusalem Bible* in 1966, *The New English Bible* in 1970, *The New Jerusalem Bible* in 1985, *The Revised English Bible*, *The Good News Bible* and *The New Revised Standard Version* in 1989, and, just recently, *The New American Bible Revised Edition* (2011), translators have decided that the time is right to reveal that Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus – Jewish and Judaeo-Christian translators of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek in the second century – were right in translating *almah* in Isaiah 7:14b as *neanis* ("young woman") rather than *parthenos* ("virgin"), and that Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, who opposed the use of "young woman", were wrong.

An examination of the complete text and context of Isaiah 7:14b in the original Hebrew rather than the Greek of the Septuagint that not only confirms that *ha-almah* has been mistranslated as "the virgin" or "a virgin" but that *harah* has been mistranslated as well. Furthermore, it is clear that it is part of a near-time prophecy delivered *ca.* 734 BCE about the imminent birth of a son to a then-pregnant mother, who would call him (*karat*) Immanuel ("With-us-is-El"), who would be a sign to Ahaz and the house of Judah that Rezin and Pekah would be soon defeated, rather than a far-term prophecy of the birth of the Messiah non-metaphorically-God-fathered and *betulah*-born.

As these new translations read it, Isaiah 7:14b is partly in implied present time. The first part of the first clause consists of a demonstrative particle, a definite article, a noun, and an adjective: 'Look, the young woman pregnant.' This is a common construction in Hebrew. In English, we supply a context-dependent form of the linking verb "to be," in this case "Look, the young woman is pregnant." If the *almah* pointed out was already pregnant (*harah*),

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this automatically rules out the claim that Isaiah was prophesying a distant, future virginal conception. Jewish tradition unanimously agrees that Immanuel was a contemporary of Isaiah, and this is clearly indicated by Isaiah 7:16.

"Young woman" and "virgin" were not synonyms in ancient Judaism, when it was common for twelve-year-old girls to be married and become pregnant. There is no indication in the oracle that this young woman is not pregnant through normal intercourse with a man.

Harah, too, has been translated imprecisely. There is in fact no verb in the first clause. It does not say the *almah* "shall conceive." The RSV, which translated *almah* correctly in 1952, mistranslated the adjective *harah* ("pregnant") as "shall conceive" and, moreover, failed to translate the definite article and used the indefinite article instead: "Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, . . ." This translation of the adjective *harah*, the fourth word in the first clause, as the verb "conceive" began in the Vulgate. Jerome, despite the fact that he learned Hebrew from a Jewish teacher and made his translation of the Hebrew Bible into Latin from the Hebrew text (not the Greek Septuagint), translated thus: *Ecce virgo concipiet, et pariet filium, et vocabitur nomen ejus Emmanuel* ("Behold, the virgin shall conceive, and shall bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel"). The NRSV corrected these items in 1989: "Look, the young woman is with child . . ." "With child", an archaic prepositional phrase, renders *harah*, the present tense copula is supplied, and the definite article is restored after being overlooked for centuries.

The NRSV has the sixth word of this compound clause in the Hebrew in the future tense: "Look, the young woman is with child and *shall bear* a son, . . ." The word *yoledet* is an active participle and can be translated "is bearing/giving birth to." It signifies in this case a very near-term event and thus can also be rendered "about to give birth to." The NABRE reads: "the young woman, pregnant and about to bear a son, shall name him Emmanuel." But why Emmanuel, the Greek form, rather than Immanuel, the Hebrew form? In a footnote, we are informed that "Emmanuel" means "with us is God." That is correct. "Immanuel" (properly *immanu El*) is a verbless clause functioning as a name and consisting of a preposition, a pronoun and a noun. As in the first clause of the prophecy, "the young woman is pregnant", a form

of the verb "to be" must be supplied. Yet the NABRE failed to supply the verb "is" in the first clause. *Harah* and *yoledet* are not attributives here, but predicates. Furthermore, the second conjunction *ve-* before *karat* ("she shall call") is omitted. The correct translation is: "Look, the young woman is pregnant and about to bear a son, and she shall call his name Immanuel."

These multiple mistranslations of the Hebrew text, beginning in the LXX, caused it to be misinterpreted for centuries in Christianity. An inordinate focus upon only two words in the prophecy in the Greek version, *parthenos* ("virgin") and *Immanuel* – the one as a proof of the virgin birth (traditionally, that Mary was a virgin *ante partum*, *in partu*, that is, before the birth, during the birth), and the other as a proof that the child to which the prophet refers would be God incarnate, a paradoxical "God-man" – led to a neglect of the rest of the words in the text, starting with the definite article! But this has changed in recent scholarship. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, a first-class work of modern Catholic Biblical scholarship which Raymond Brown, the Vatican II peritus, edited along with Roland Murphy and Joseph Fitzmyer, declares: "A critical examination of Is 7:14 . . . gives no evidence that Isaiah was thinking of Jesus' conception. Isaiah does not speak about a virgin; it is not clear that he is referring to a future conception; and the whole import of the scene in ch. 7 of Is *implies that the birth will take place ca. 734 BC*. Clearly Mt's [Matthew's] interpretation of Is is more-than-literal" (italics mine).¹

The later use of Isaiah 7:14b by Matthew 1:22-23 was non-contextual and midrashic and based on the Greek Bible. It is not a *sensus plenior* ("fuller sense") of the Hebrew Bible text. As Samuel Sandmel says in *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament*, "In all traditions, proof-texting ignores the total context and plucks out a gratifying verse."² The use of Isaiah 7:14b by the translator of the Hebrew Gospel of Matthew is a *peshet*, not *peshat*, that is, it is an oracular application of the verse to a contemporaneous event over seven hundred years after its fulfillment; it is not the plain meaning of the text in its context. While a *peshet* is legitimate as long as it is recognized as a *peshet*, it is illegitimate once the *peshet* is considered the *peshat*. This is what happened in Christian literature with Isaiah 7:14b.

Christianity's Isaiah 7:14b-LXX-supported virgin birth narratives contended with antecedent analogues and Jewish and Roman objections (see

Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 67.2; 70.5; I Apology 22.5; 54.8). The account of the conception of Plato by his virgin mother Perictione through Apollo, as related by Diogenes Laertius in *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers* 3.2, is a Greek parallel to the Matthean conception story. It opens with a genealogy to indicate his distinguished family line and then merely by implication points to Apollo as the father of Plato. The legend of the virginal conception of Perictione is also found in Apuleius, *De Platone* 1.1; *Anonymous Prolegomena* 1.41-46, 2.12-16; Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 717 b-e.

Justin Martyr indicates in *Dialogue with Trypho* 48 that there were Christians even in his day who did not accept the *peshet* found in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, produced, as Jerome tells us (*Lives of Illustrious Men* 3), by an unknown translator: "For there are some of our race, my friends, who admit that he is the Anointed One, while holding him to be man of men . . ." This view, held by Theodotion and Symmachus, was later anathematized.

The Roman Catholic translators of *The New American Bible* (1970) knew over forty years ago the truth about Isaiah 7:14b. As Raymond E. Brown openly admitted, but in a small footnote (!) in 1977 in his magisterial and monumental work on Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2, "The reading 'virgin' was imposed by a decision of the American bishops on the reluctant Catholic translators of the NAB."³ They finally gave a green light and a *nihil obstat* and imprimatur to "young woman" in 2011.

Almah as "young woman" is not a non-Christian or Jewish translation: it is the correct translation. Lexicography confirms it. This is the plain meaning of the word *almah* as found in Proverbs 30:19, *the way of a man with a young woman [almah, MT; neanis, LXX]*, referring to sexual intimacy and proving it need not connote "virgin." There is only one word for "virgin" in Hebrew, *betulah*, and Isaiah did not use it. Christianity has now honestly admitted what even Jerome knew but dared not to admit into the Vulgate.⁴ As the NABRE puts it succinctly in a note: "Hebrew *almah* designates a young woman of marriageable age without specific reference to virginity. The Septuagint translated the Hebrew term as *parthenos*, which normally does mean virgin, and this translation underlies Mt 1:23." In other words, the LXX translation uses a word that signifies something which the Hebrew word does

not, and the Greek Gospel of Matthew based its proof-from-prophecy upon a term which Isaiah did not use.

The Jewish Christians who accepted the Greek Gospel of Matthew and its use of the Septuagint translation of Isaiah 7:14b were evidently Greek-speaking or Hellenistic Jews who did not carefully check the LXX against the Hebrew of Isaiah. Isaiah 7:14b-LXX at Matthew 1:23 is a mistranslation and misquotation of Hebrew Isaiah 7:14b. *The Great Isaiah Scroll* discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 confirms that the Hebrew *almah* of Isaiah 7:14b is correct and has not been changed in the course of Judaism's controversy with Christianity.

Isaac ben Abraham of Troki (16th century), in his *Hizzuk Emunah* [*Faith Strengthened*] (Part 2, chapter 2), stated: "We have had frequent occasion to speak of the method employed in the New Testament and other Christian works, of citing from our Scriptures certain passages which, on careful examination, have no reference whatever to the immediate subject. Thus they quote also the passage from Isaiah 7:14, 'Behold, *ha-almah* (meaning young woman and not virgin) is with child and about to bring forth a son.' The prophecy was given to Ahaz, King of Judah, in order to allay his apprehensions regarding the two kings who had come to wage war against Jerusalem. How could Ahaz receive consolation from prophecy, the fulfillment of which he would not live to see?" In chapter 3, Troki completed his discussion of the quotation in Matthew 1:23 with these words: "The English version of Matthew 1:23 has, 'And they shall call his name Emmanuel,' but in the Hebrew original we have *ve-karat*, 'and she shall call.' It is also a striking fact that the name Emmanuel was not given to Jesus by the virgin. Nor do we find that the Emmanuel mentioned in Isaiah was ever considered to be the Messiah." There, in plain and simple language, was the correct translation of all of Isaiah 7:14b.

Ulrich Luz, in his commentary on Matthew, writes: "Luther declared his willingness to pay the 'stubborn, condemned Jews' a hundred guilders if [*almah* at] Isaiah 7:14 really means 'young woman' and not 'virgin.' He owes them."⁵

Isaiah 7:14b in recent major Christian Bible translations spells the dénouement of the ad infinitum *almah-betulah/parthenos-neanis* debates between Jews and Christians. This is good news.

