A NOTE ON THE ARAMAIC COGNATE OF 'ALMAH IN THE TARGUMIM

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The Aramaic of the Targumim in regard to the cognate of 'almah, one of the most famous words in the Bible due to its use in Isaiah 7:14 and the Christological interpretations of it there as "virgin", has not received sufficient attention in the standard lexicons and in scholarly literature up to now. These both routinely survey the 'almah passages in the Bible, and point all too briefly at the Aramaic, leaving the student unaware of the flood of light which the Targumim cast upon this term. This brief note is intended to remedy this deficiency.

The Aramaic word for 'almah is uleimta. Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon (CAL) defines this word simply as 'girl'. It is derived from the root 'l-m ('to be strong'): see Deuteronomy 31:6, 7, 32; Joshua 1:6, 7; 10:25; Psalms 27:14; 31:25; 38:20; I Chronicles 22:13 in the Targumim.

While 'almah occurs only nine times in the Bible (two times it refers to a musical term whose meaning is uncertain), the Aramaic term uleimta occurs over seventy times in the Targumim. In Aramaic, 'almah and na'arah are translated as the same word. In Genesis 24:14, where Rebecca is called na'ara(h) in the Torah, she is called uleimta in Targum Onkelos; the same in Genesis 24:16a, 28, 43, 55, 57. See the seventh occurrence in that chapter in Genesis 24:61, where the plural is used for Rebecca's ‘maids’– a second meaning of the term not found in CAL. The Hebrew betulah in Genesis 24:16b is betulta. In Genesis 34, uleimta occurs three times and describes Dinah after her rape (Genesis 34:3[2x], 12). In Judges 19 Targum Yonatan, it occurs six times and describes the concubine of a Levite (Judges 19:3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9). In Targum Ruth 2:5, 6; 4:12, it describes Ruth, formerly the wife of Mahlon. In Deuteronomy 22:20-21, it refers to the case of a married non-virgin, and in Isaiah 7:14 to a pregnant young lady. Consequently, the saying echoed by Christian writers since the days of Jerome (Against Jovinianus 1.32) that nowhere is the word 'almah used of a non-virgin or a married

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woman in the Scriptures does not hold true if the Targumim are taken into account. Nor does uleimta mean only 'marriageable girl', as in the definition of 'almah in Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT): as proof see 2 Kings 5:2,4 Targum Yonatan.

Further light is shed on our term by looking at the masculine uleima (עָלֵיָמָא). While 'elem ('lad'), the masculine of 'almah, occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible (Ernest Klein in A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English [Jerusalem, 1987], page 473, incorrectly calls it a hapax legomenon), uleima, its Aramaic cognate, occurs far over 200 times in the Targumim. In Isaiah 7:15, it describes a child, an infant, the son of the uleimta of Isaiah 7:14 in the Immanuel prophecy; in Isaiah 8:4, the similar-aged son of Isaiah and his wife, the prophetess. In 2 Samuel 18:5 and 12, it describes Absalom, the son of David, and a married man and father of three sons and a daughter (2 Samuel 14:27). This demonstrates clearly that its range of meaning is the same as the feminine uleimta.

This abundant set of data from Aramaic makes recourse to Punic or Latin (Jerome) or Arabic (Gesenius, Brown-Driver-Briggs) or Ugaritic (HALOT) unnecessary to shed light on the sparsely used term 'almah in the Tanakh. Neither can the above-named Targumim be accused of anti-Christian bias in regard to the translation of 'almah, as Aquila and Theodotion have been until their recent vindication. For they translate 'almah consistently as uleimta, in contrast to the inconsistency of the Septuagint's παρθένος at Genesis 24:43 and Isaiah 7:14, but νεανίς elsewhere. The same goes for the Vulgate's virgo. Likewise the Syriac Peshitta's betulah at Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23 rather than 'elaymtah, the cognate of 'almah—clear evidence of Christian bias. Apparently, the translators responsible for the translation of these two texts recognized that the Aramaic for betulah indicated virginity and the Aramaic for 'almah did not. That 'elem=na'ar and 'almah=na'arah is demonstrated already in the Hebrew of the Tanakh ('elem in I Samuel 17:56 = na'ar in I Samuel 17:55, and 'almah in Genesis 24:43 = na'ara(h) in Genesis 24:14), but the Aramaic of Targumim amplifies this manifold, extending the meaning of both terms to include childhood on the one hand and marital youth on the other hand.