

# Does Isaiah 7:14 Prophecy that a *Virgin* Would Conceive?

Some Notes about *Almah* and Its Translation as "Virgin"

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## Introduction

One of the most maligned verses in the entire Bible is that of Isaiah 7:14. Because this passage is referred to by the Evangelist Matthew as a prophecy which was fulfilled through the conception and birth of Christ, it comes under special assault by Jewish "anti-missionaries" and others who wish to specifically excise the New Testament from its roots and foundation in the Hebrew Tanakh. The primary assault made by these individuals centers about the use by Isaiah of the word *almah* in his prophecy. Whereas *almah* is translated in the KJV as "virgin" and this rendering is supported from the Greek Septuagint translation, Jewish revisers and naturalistic textual critics prefer to render *almah* as "young woman," hoping to undercut the prophetic value of the passage. They claim that if Isaiah were really desiring to prophesy that a virgin would conceive, that he would have used the Hebrew word *bethulah*, which is claimed as a more proper word for "virgin"

Contrary to these claims, it is the purpose of this article to demonstrate that *almah* is in fact a more proper term to denote virginity in Hebrew. Further, its translation by early Jewish scholars into the Greek Septuagint demonstrates that the idea of virginity was understood to be conveyed in Isaiah 7:14 and that in pre-Christian Judaism, there was no problem identifying the *almah* of Isaiah 7:14 as being virginal in her conception.

## *Bethulah*

I will begin by examining the proposed substitute, *bethulah*. Is this word really a more proper word for describing a virgin? In the Hebrew Scriptures, *bethulah* appears 50 times, and its plural *bethuloth* another 10. Out of these 60 uses, though, 14 are figuratively applied to various nations such as Israel, Babylon, Egypt, and so forth, while another 17 are non-committal concerning biological virginity (or the lack thereof), and thus do not directly address the issue at hand (ex. Jeremiah 51:22, "With thee also will I break in pieces man and woman; and with thee will I break in pieces old and young; and with thee will I break in pieces the young man and the **maid**"). When the remainder are examined more closely, it becomes apparent that the thrust of the word *bethulah* is not biological virginity (either explicitly or implicitly), but rather is the **social** context of the person(s) which this word represents. The word itself comes from a biblically unused root meaning "separation, to separate," which would be consistent with a social meaning for this word. As a young woman in an ancient Semitic society, a *bethulah* would indeed have been kept separated from outsiders while under the care of her father, not unlike young women in traditional Middle Eastern cultures such as the Arabs and Berbers today. While the majority of the usage of *bethulah* would connote a young woman who would be virginal due to the social factors involved, this is **not** always the case. In at least two passages (for a total of three appearances), *bethulah* is used in such a way as to indicate, or at least seemingly suggest, a woman who would not be a virgin according to the biological understanding of that word.

Some clues to the exact meaning of *bethulah* may be gleaned by looking at its use in some of the verses where it seems to be "non-committal" with respect to the issue of biological virginity. In Lamentations 5:11, we see,

"They ravished the **women** [*ishshah*] in Zion, and the **maids** [*bethulah*] in the cities of Judah."

Because *ishshah* is a very general term referring to the female gender, this bit of poetic parallelism can be interpreted as being a synthetic construction in which the "women" in the first line are more particularly addressed in the second line as "maids." Given that *bethulah* has no linguistically direct male counterpart (this being, instead, *bachur*, most often translated as a "young man"), we can surmise easily that a *bethulah* refers in particular to a young person of the female gender, which given the familial system of Israel and other ancient Semitic cultures, would seem to support the notion that *bethulah* is primarily a social term, not one necessarily referring to biological status. Helping to elucidate the distinction of just what a *bethulah* is, we see Ezekiel 9:6,

"Slay utterly old and young, both **maids** [*bethulah*], and **little children** [*taph*], and **women** [*ishshah*]..."

Thus, a *bethulah* is clearly distinguished both from women, per se, and from little children (*taph*). The word *taph* is most often translated as "little ones" or "little children" in the King James, and nearly always refers to young children and infants, and is often delineated apart from older children (ex. II Chronicles 20:13). The word itself comes from a root (*taphaph*) which means "to trip, to mince," and its derivation in *taph* is attributed by Strong as referring to the "tripping gait of children."<sup>1</sup> Thus, a *bethulah* is not just any young female, but is older than an infant or pre-adolescent child.

In Job 31:1, Job says that he has made a covenant with his eyes, and asks, "...why then should I look upon a maid [*bethulah*]?" Some commentators interpret this as a statement by Job that he would not look upon the **wife** of another man. Their reasoning is that since the patriarchal society in which Job lived was polygamous, that it would not have been that "out of line" for a man in Job's position to look upon an unmarried girl in desire, as he could simply add her to his harem. However, the testimony of the use of *bethulah* through the rest of scripture would seem to argue against this (though not conclusively, as will be seen with its use in Joel 1:8), and instead be for young, and presumably unmarried, women to be in mind in this passage. Further, the Biblical record of Job pictures him as monogamous, as were most other God-fearing patriarchs in the very early times depicted in the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Strong, *Strong's Hebrew Concordance*, entry #2945

<sup>2</sup> Remember, Abraham (likely contemporary or nearly so with Job) only had one wife at a time (Sarah, and then Keturah), and his going in to the slave-girl Hagar is generally understood as tacitly disapproved by God because of the lack of faith involved in the act (see Galatians 4:24-25, where Hagar and her child are depicted as types of bondage to the law, distinct from the freedom of faith gained through Isaac, the child of promise). Isaac is also depicted as monogamous with Rebekah, as is Moses with Zipporah. While the societies of the Ancient Near East at the time may have been sometime polygamous (some were, some weren't), this does not necessarily mean that the men who knew God and were not part and parcel with the pagan world-system around them also were. Rather, they can be understood as knowing that God's original plan for marriage was monogamous, and lived accordingly. Jacob, the patriarch with two wives and two concubines, we should note took a while to get his life really right with God, even though he enjoyed God's mercy throughout. It was during his less-faithful years that he entered into polygyny.

The near consistent usage of *bethulah* testifies to its representation of a woman who is not married, and therefore is in the house of her father (or other protector). It is applied to those young women who are specifically shown as still residing in the houses of their fathers (ex. Exodus 22:16, Judges 19:24, etc.) For example,

"And if a man entice a **maid** that is not betrothed, and lie with her, he shall surely endow her to be his wife. If her father utterly refuse to give him unto her, he shall pay money according to the dowry of **virgins**." (Exodus 22:16-17)

See also such passages as Deuteronomy 22:13-21 and Judges 19:24.

The use of *bethulah* is found for women who are specifically stated as not having been married yet.

"Neither shall they take for their wives a widow, nor her that is put away: but they shall take **maidens** of the seed of the house of Israel, or a widow that had a priest before." (Ezekiel 44:22)

See likewise Psalm 78:63 and Isaiah 62:5.

The word is also used of women who reside in the house of their brothers, who act as their protectors.

"And for his sister a **virgin**, that is nigh unto him, which hath had no husband; for her may he be defiled." (Leviticus 21:3)

In these and most other cases where the meaning could be reasonably discernible, *bethulah* would indicate a biological virgin, since in the culture of Israel at the time, for a girl to be under her father's roof meant that she would not have known a man carnally, both because she was not yet married and brought into the house of her husband, and because her father was tasked with protecting her purity until her marriage, and this task was aided by the strict punishments of fornication in the Law. It was considered folly and a shame (and punishable by death) for a girl to play the whore in her father's house (see Deuteronomy 22:21)

We see evidence for the social context in the story surrounding Tamar and Amnon, in II Samuel 13:1-22. In v. 2, Amnon is said to be "so vexed that he fell sick for his sister Tamar." The reason given for his vexation is that she was a "virgin," a *bethulah*. Now, logically, the biological fact of Tamar's virginity should not be a source of vexation for Amnon. The source of his frustration lay in that she was his half-sister, and thus inaccessible to him according to the Mosaic law (see Leviticus 18:11), yet that she was still "technically" accessible since she was not married off to another man and absent from David's house. She is likely referred to as a *bethulah* in this passage because of the fact that she was still under her father David's roof, it was her place in her father's home, not her biology. After Amnon's crime, Tamar is said to have torn her multi-colored garment with which "virgins were appareled," symbolizing her status as a favored daughter in the king's house. Afterward, she "remained desolate in her brother Absalom's house"

(v. 20). Tamar seems to have lost both her physical virginity and her social place in David's household, likely due to the pressure of Amnon himself, who was then the firstborn and heir to David's throne, and thus favored by his father. At any rate, this history seems to highlight the social overtones of *bethulah*, which usually is contiguous with the biological understanding of virginity.

However, this social context for *bethulah* does not **always** coincide with biological virginity, at least not as the text always presents the word's use. In Esther chapter 2, the story is told of the search by the Persian king Ahasuerus for a replacement wife for his deposed queen Vashti. He ordered his subordinates to bring to his palace all of the beautiful young virgins of the Empire (Esther 2:2-3). At this point, the "virgins" are referred to as *bethulah*. After the days of the purification of these women, each maiden then came to the king and spent a night with him (vv. 13-14). After this night, these same women are yet still referred to as *bethulah* (vv. 17, 19), even though it is obvious from the context of the passage that they are no longer biological virgins. While this **likely** argues for application of this word to a non-virgin, it may also be explained through the understanding that the reference to *bethulah* is to their condition before their night with the king, using this literary device to provide a unifying frame of reference, or as a shorthand notation for those "who had been virgins." However, this is less likely than the plain reading of the text itself.

More concretely though, we see in Joel 1:8, "Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the **husband of her youth**." Here, a woman clearly married is yet referred to with the term *bethulah*. Some commentators interpret this clause as referring to the man to whom this woman was betrothed too (and thus, not formally married to yet) since those betrothed were often referred to as husband and wife. However, the fact that this husband is listed as the "husband of her youth" would seem to argue against this interpretation. Parallel passages which apply in the opposite direction (i.e. to someone's "wife of his youth") clearly indicate in context that the two are already "fully" married, and in fact have been so for some time (see Proverbs 5:18ff, Malachi 2:14ff). Why is this woman referred to as a *bethulah*? Perhaps because she, after the death of her husband, came again under the roof of her father or other close male relative for protection and support, a common feature in ancient cultures of all types (see I Timothy 5:4,16).

Harris, et al. have noted that *bethulah* is not a technical or specific term denoting virginity,

"*Bethulah*. virgin, maid, maiden; probably from an unused verb *batal* 'to separate.' Although Hebrew lexicons and modern translations generally translate *bethulah* as 'virgin,' G.J. Wenham ('Bethulah 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,' VT 22: 326-48)<sup>3a</sup> and Tsevat (TDOT II, p.338-43)<sup>3b</sup> contest this as a general meaning but prefer 'a young (marriageable) maiden.' But whereas Wenham does not concede the meaning 'virgin' in any text, Tsevat allows this meaning in three out of its fifty-one occurrences (Lev. 21:13f; Deut. 22:19; Ezk. 44:22). In any case, a strong case can be presented that *bethulah* is not a technical term for *virgo intacta* in the OT, a conclusion that has important bearing on the meaning of "almah" in Isa. 7:14."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Eds. R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer, and B.K. Waltke, Vol. 1, Aleph-Mem, p. 137

Another pertinent point when considering the exact meaning of *bethulah* is that, on occasion, the Scriptures deem it necessary to specify the physical virginity of young women referred to by that term. We can see this in the following passages,

"And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead four hundred young **virgins**, that had known no man by lying with any male: and they brought them into the camp to Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan." (Judges 21:12)

"And the damsel was very fair to look upon, a **virgin**, neither had any man known her: and she went down to the well, and filled her pitcher, and came up." (Genesis 24:16)

It has been remarked upon frequently by commentators that the additional explanation in these cases that a virgin (*bethulah*) had not engaged in sexual activity demonstrates that *bethulah* is not necessarily synonymous with "virgin" in the biological sense. There are some possible objections to this understanding, however. As quoted by Glenn Miller in his article on this subject, Hamilton says,

"One argument against taking *bethulah* as *virgo intacta* is that such an understanding makes the following expression (No man had known her) redundant. But this is not necessarily the case, for the Hebrew Bible provides other instances of redundant or idem per idem constructions. Thus Job 24:21 refers to 'the sterile female who does not bear children.' One would think that 'the sterile female' would be sufficient. Of course sterile women do not bear children. Cf. also Isa. 54:1, 'Sing, barren one, who did not bear.' Or 2 Sam. 14:5, 'I am a widow and my husband is dead.' ...A clearer indication that *bethulah* does not necessarily mean 'virgin,' as we use that word today, comes from verses like Joel 1:8, in which a *bethulah* mourns 'the husband of her youth'. Looking again then at the two phrases in v.16, I suggest that *bethulah* designates Rebekah as a marriageable woman. The following sentence, No man had known her, specifies her premarital virginity."<sup>4</sup>

Miller then goes on to note that the redundancies mentioned by Hamilton as counterpoints are all examples of "hyperbolic, dramatic speech" which use the "piling up" of redundancies for greater emotional effect, and which cannot necessarily be applied to simple narrative such as is relayed in Genesis 24 and Judges 21.<sup>5</sup>

It should also be noted that, at least in Judges 21:12, the virgins are also specifically described as "young" (*naarah*). While described with *bethulah*, they are specified separately as *naarah*, perhaps as an explanation for why these particular *bethuloth* had not known men in a carnal way, which would argue against *bethulah* being a term specifically addressing biological

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<sup>3a</sup> G.J. Wenham, "Bethulah, A Girl of Marriageable Age," *Vetus Testamentum* 22, p. 326-348

<sup>3b</sup> M. Tsevat, in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Eds. H. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, p. 338-343

<sup>4</sup> V.P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50, Vol. 2, Comment on Genesis 24:16

<sup>5</sup> G. Miller, *Response to the Fabulous Prophecies of the Messiah*, Part 2, The Isaiah 7:14 Passage, <http://www.christian-thinktank.com/fabprof2.html>

virginity - it was specified that they were young enough not to have been married before and made *bethulah* by the deaths of their husbands and subsequent return to their fathers' houses.

## *Almah*

Seeing that *bethulah* is not a technical term for biological virginity, but rather a social term describing a woman who is separated apart from society (at least symbolically) by being under her father's roof or that of another protector, what then of *almah*? Does *almah* engender a more specific meaning of virginity? The answer to this question is, yes and no.

*Almah* comes from a root word meaning "to veil from sight, to conceal."<sup>6</sup> *Almah* is notably distinct from *bethulah* on the basis of the fact that it, unlike *bethulah*, has a masculine counterpart based off the same root (while *bethulah*'s counterpart is *bachur*, from a root meaning "to try, to select"<sup>7</sup>). This counterpart is *elem*,<sup>8</sup> which also means "something kept out of sight." This is important because, whereas it was noted that *bethulah* is a **social** term, and that its counterpart *bachur* is also a social term of differing meaning and derivation, *almah* appears to be a "biological" term related to age, nubility, and marriageability, and the root applies across gender.

It is more difficult to build a definite understanding of *almah* due to the much less frequent appearance of this word (7 times) in the Hebrew scriptures. Its masculine counterpart *elem* appears even less frequently, only three times. The uses of *elem* are pretty standard in referring to a young male child, whether pre-adolescent or adolescent (the word is used to describe the young and victorious David in I Samuel 17:56, where he is called a "stripling" in the KJV).

The usage of *almah*, however, is more interesting and more difficult to discern. The seven verses where *almah* appears are given below:

"The singers went before, the players on instruments followed after; among them were the **damsels** playing with timbrels." (Psalm 68:25)

"And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the **maid** went and called the child's mother." (Exodus 2:8)

"The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon the rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a **maid**." (Proverbs 30:19)

"Behold, I stand by the well of water; and it shall come to pass, that when the **virgin** cometh forth to draw water, and I say to her, Give me, I pray thee, a little water of thy pitcher to drink;" (Genesis 24:43)

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<sup>6</sup> Strong, *op. cit.*, entry #5959, from entry #5956

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, entry #970, from entry #977

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, entry #5958



"Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the **virgins** love thee." (Song of Solomon 1:3)

"There are threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and **virgins** without number." (Song of Solomon 6:8)

"Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a **virgin** shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14)

The majority of these present no problem for the interpretation of virginity. However, Proverbs 30:19 and Song of Solomon 6:8 require treatment at greater depth.

In Proverbs 30:9, the phrase "the way of a man with a maid" is pointed to as an example of the use of *almah* to refer to a non-virginal woman. However, this interpretation is not readily apparent, and is unlikely. Rather, what is discussed in this verse is the blossoming of romantic love in a young man for a young woman, in a process which will eventually finalize in the consummation of their physical relationship in marriage. In covering the gamut of interpretations, Barker et al. conclude,

"What do the ways of an eagle in the sky...a snake on a rock...a ship in the ocean, and a man with a woman have in common? Some writers say the ways of these four are mysterious; others say their ways are nontraceable; others suggest that they each easily master an element that is seemingly difficult. Another suggestion is that they each go where there are no paths. 'The way of a man with a maiden' refers to a man's affectionate courting of a woman."<sup>9</sup>

Further, we see,

"These verses are another graded (3/4) numerical saying. The understanding of this proverb is not as easy as it appears to be at first sight. Many different solutions have been proposed to explain the wonder occasioned by the four examples. 18 The introductory formula notes that there are four wonderful things in all, with the fourth carrying the main emphasis. These are not objects of investigation, but rather of admiration because they surpass human understanding. The choice of the examples seems to be dictated by what the author felt were truly worthy of wonder. But note that it is not the eagle, serpent, ship, or man that is the real target; it is the "way" (*ûrd*), repeated in each of the examples. Commentators have proposed various solutions to the "wonder." One is "how"—how does the eagle stay up; how does the serpent move without legs—in other words the mystery of movement. Others have seen something marvelous in that supposedly no trace is left by these objects. This solution resembles superficially the words in Wis 5:10–12, which deals with human transience. That understanding, the absence of any trace, seems to be reflected also in the following v 20. However, one must evaluate better the fourfold repetition of the "way." The saying underscores the course of an action—that is "the way." It is not that these objects—eagle,

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<sup>9</sup> *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Eds. K.L. Barker, E.H. Merrill, and S.D. Toussaint, Vol. 1, Old Testament, Gen. Eds. J.F. Walvoord and R.B. Zuck, comment on Proverbs 30:19

serpent, ship—leave no trace. Rather, their course is not recoverable. At any given point one cannot describe the path of the eagle to where it is, or that of the serpent, or the course of the ship in its traversing the water. But the way has not been without its goal. If we follow this lead to contemplating the way of a man with a woman, there is marvel and astonishment at the course of the attachment that has made the two one, the mystery of how this was accomplished. After many encounters and years, they are to become one. This refers not only to the “yearning” of the woman for the man (Gen 3:16), or of the man for the woman (Cant 7:10), but to the whole mystery of their relationship: how it came to be and what brought them together finally. An observation like this is singular in the book of Proverbs. One wishes that more of the numerical sayings would have been handed down. In view of the not uncommon charge that the sages were simplistic in their observations and teachings, this openness to wonder and the contemplation of one of the deepest mysteries in human relationship is not to be forgotten.”<sup>10</sup>

Delitzsch argues that the fourfold wonders are joined by the **tracelessness** of each action described, and that the act of intercourse (which he notes can leave evidence of itself through pregnancy, etc.) is not in view but the **historical occurrence** of the courtship leading up to the physical relationship.

"That 'way of a man with a maid' denotes only the act of coition, which physiologically differs in nothing from that of the lower animals, and which in itself, in the externality of its accomplishment, the poet cannot possibly call something transcendent. And why did he use the word *ba'almah*, and not rather *bethulah* [with a female] or *b'ishah* [*id.*]? For this reason, because he meant the act of coition, not as a physiological event, but as a historical occurrence, as it takes place particularly in youth as the goal of love, not always reached in the divinely-appointed way. The point of comparison hence is not the secret of conception, but the tracelessness of the carnal intercourse.”<sup>11</sup>

What is in view in Proverbs 30:19 is the whole process, traceless and magnificent, of the courtship that occurs between a young man and a young woman, the path of which cannot be followed by an outside observer, the way in which they came together and fell in love that cannot be intimately understood by one not involved. Just as v. 17 contrasts negatively with the three-four combination in vv. 15-16, so also does the adulteress in v. 20 contrast in a negative frame with the way of the man with a maid in v. 19. The adulteress is a parallel counterbalance to the purity and wonder depicted in v. 19, through her impurity and vulgarity.

While this passage offers no **definite** conclusive support for a specific meaning of "virgin" for *almah*, it likewise provides no firm evidence **against** it either, on that count it is inconclusive. The weight of exegetical understanding seems, though, to lean towards the notion that the *almah* is virginal, as the understanding is of the courtship that will eventually lead to her marriage and loss of virginity.

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<sup>10</sup> *Word Biblical Commentary*, Ed. R.E. Murphy, Vol. 22, Proverbs, comment on Proverbs 30:19

<sup>11</sup> F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 6, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, p. 297

The other primary disputed passage is that of Song of Solomon 6:8. Because the "virgins without number" are listed in passage with the queens and the concubines, it is presumed that this indicates that the virgins (*alamoth*) were also women in Solomon's harem, and thus were not biological virgins. This does not seem to be supported by the text, however. This is because the queens, concubines, and virgins are not said to belong to Solomon, or are even associated with him in any sort of personal relationship. In verse 9, immediately after, it says,

"My dove, my undefiled is but one; she is the only one of her mother, she is the choice one of her that bare her. **The daughters saw her, and blessed her; yea, the queens and the concubines, and they blessed her.**" (Song of Solomon 6:9)

Now, it is reasonable to suppose that the "daughters" mentioned in this verse are the daughters of Jerusalem, with whom the lovers have had previous conversation (see. Song. Sol. 1:5-8, 2:7, 3:5, 5:8-6:3). Further, it is also not unreasonable to suppose that these "daughters" in verse 9 are a conceptual parallel to the "virgins" in verse 8, especially as both are juxtaposed with the queens and the concubines in much the same manner. As such, there does not seem to be much contextual evidence to suppose that the aforementioned virgins are directly connected with Solomon as they would be if they were part of his harem. This interpretation finds support amongst commentators,

"The enumeration of the *queens, concubines, and maidens* [note: Carr uses the NIV], and the contrast with the uniqueness of the beloved (v.9) is usually considered to be a reference to the huge harem of Solomon, none of whose 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Ki. 11:3) was as attractive to the king as the lady of the Song. The relatively small numbers, *sixty* and *eighty*, are supposed by Delitzsch to indicate this episode took place early in Solomon's reign before his harem grew to its fullest number. **More probably, no particular harem is being considered. Note the text does not say 'Solomon has' or 'I have', but it is a simple declaration: *There are...., and my beloved 'is unique'* (v. 9 NIV).**"<sup>12</sup>

Thus, it is entirely possible that these "queens, concubines, and virgins" are women with whom Solomon has had **no** formal relations, but are simply women of the city of Jerusalem, both royal and common, against whom Solomon compares his unique and special lover. Criswell<sup>13</sup> also notes that the queens, concubines, and virgins are not said to belong to Solomon, and tenders the argument that they may be royalty which is attending or participating in the marriage procession of Solomon and the Shullamite girl. This argument is supported by Carr, who notes that the particular word for "queens" in this passage (*malkah*) never appears in the Hebrew scriptures in description of the wives of Hebrew kings, but seems to be applied solely the queens of foreign rulers.

"*Queens* occurs in the Song only in these two verses, and elsewhere in the Old Testament only of Esther and Vashti (25 times in Esther) and of the Queen of Sheba in I Kings 10 and 2

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<sup>12</sup> G.L. Carr, *The Song of Solomon - An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Gen. Ed. D.J. Wiseman, p. 148

<sup>13</sup> W.A. Criswell, *The Criswell Study Bible, KJV*, p. 775, note on Song. Sol. 6:8

Chronicles 9. The Aramaic equivalent is used twice in Daniel 5 of the wife of Belshazzar. The word is never used of the wives of Judean or Israelite kings."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, while this is not completely conclusive that the *alamoth* under discussion are biological virgins, there seems to be no good reason to suppose the alternative.

*Almah* can most certainly be understood to refer to **physical**, not social, condition. Speaking of the Isaiah 7:14 prophecy, Delitzsch says,

"But it is altogether improbable that the wife of the prophet should be intended. For if it were to her that he referred, he could hardly have expressed himself in a more ambiguous and unintelligible manner; and we cannot see why he should not have said *ishtiy* or *hanviyah*, to say nothing of the fact that there is no further allusion made to any son of the prophet of that name, and that a sign of this kind founded upon the prophet's own family affairs would have been of a very precarious nature. And the meaning and use of the word *almah* are also at variance with this. **For whilst *bethulah* (from *bathal*, related to *badal*, to separate, *sejungere*) signifies a maiden living in seclusion in her parents' house and still a long way from matrimony, *almah* (from '*alam*, related to *chalam*, and possibly to *alam*, to be strong, full of vigour, or arrived at the age of puberty) is applied to one fully mature, and approaching the time of her marriage.**"<sup>15</sup>

Further, it is recognized that *almah* most likely always is referring to one who would be biologically virginal, and that the reliance upon *bethulah* has less foundation than its proponents often portray.

"If led by these remarkable coincidences to examine more attentively the terms of the prophecy itself, we find, the mother of the promised child described not as *a woman* or as any particular woman merely, but as *ha'almah* a term which has been variously derived from '*Im* to conceal, and from *alam* [Arab.] to grow up, but which, in the six places where it occurs elsewhere, is twice applied to young unmarried females certainly (Gen. xxiv. 43; Exod. ii. 8) and twice most probably (Ps. lxxviii. 25; Sol. Song i. 3), while in the two remaining cases (Sol. Song vi. 8; Prov. xxx. 19) this application is at least probable as any other. It would therefore naturally suggest the idea of a virgin, or at least an unmarried woman. It is said, indeed, that if this had been intended, the word *bethulah* would have been employed; but even that word is not invariably used in its strict sense (see Deut. xxii. 19; Joel i. 8), so that there would still have been room for the same cavils, and perhaps for the assertion that the idea of a virgin could not be expressed except by periphrasis."<sup>16</sup>

This is further supported,

"There is no instance where it can be proved that *almah* designates a young woman who is not a virgin. The fact of virginity is obvious in Gen, 24:43 where *almah* is used of one who

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<sup>14</sup> Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 148

<sup>15</sup> F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 7, Isaiah, Part 1, p. 217

<sup>16</sup> J.A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, pp. 167-8

was being sought as a bride for Isaac. Also obvious is Ex. 2:8. Song 6:8 refers to three types of women, two of whom are called queens and concubines. It could be only reasonable to understand the name of the third group, for which the plural of *almah* is used, as meaning "virgins." In Ugaritic the word is used in poetic parallel with the cognate of *bethulah*.<sup>17</sup>

"The translation virgin (*almah*) is widely disputed on the ground that the word means only 'young woman' and that the technical word for 'virgin' is *bethulah*. Of the nine occurrences of *alma* those in 1 Chronicles 15:20 and the title of Psalm 46 are presumably a musical direction but no longer understood. In Psalm 68:25; Proverbs 30:19 and Song of Solomon 1:3 the context throws no decisive light on the meaning of the word. In Genesis 24:43 and Exodus 2:8 the reference is unquestionably to an unmarried girl, and in Song of Solomon 6:8 the *alamoth* contrasted with queens and concubines, are unmarried and virgin. Thus, wherever the context allows a judgment, *alma* is not a general term meaning 'young woman' but a specific one meaning 'virgin'. It is worth noting that outside the Bible, so far as may be ascertained, *alma* was never used of a married woman.<sup>18</sup>

Unger's conclusion about Isaiah 7:14 is that *almah* was used because it most properly combines the understanding of both virginity **and** marriageable age (the latter being a meaning which is much less obvious in *bethulah*). Concerning *almah*, he notes,

"Although the primary idea of this word is not unspotted virginity, for which the Hebrews had a special word, *bethulah*, "virgin" is, nevertheless, the proper rendering in Isaiah 7:14 of *almah*, which may not only take this meaning (Gen. 24:43), but in light of Matt. 1:23 *must* take this meaning. The Holy Spirit through Isaiah did not use *bethulah*, because both the ideas of virginity and marriageable age had to be combined in one word to meet the immediate historical situation and the prophetic aspect centering in a virgin-borne Messiah."<sup>19</sup>

And while we have seen that Unger's statement about *bethulah* being a special word for unspotted virginity is incorrect, he nevertheless puts forth a strong argument concerning the particular use of *almah* in Isaiah 7:14.

To conclude this section, we can reasonably state that both *bethulah* and *almah*, given the social and moral structure of theocratic Israel, would implicitly contain the meaning of "biological virginity," excluding the figurative and personifying uses of *bethulah*. Both words can be considered to be **roughly** synonymous, though not completely so. Also, **neither** are words which **specifically** mean "virgin." However, there are differences in the implications of these words, and *bethulah* appears to be a word engendering **social** meanings of separation and protection under the father or other protector's roof, while *almah* seems to imply physical characteristics of youth, nubility, and readiness for marriage. Also, while *bethulah* shows some evidence of being used in reference to women who definitely would not be virginal, the same

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<sup>17</sup> *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Eds. R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer, and B.K. Waltke, Vol. 2, Nun-Taw, p. 672

<sup>18</sup> J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, comment on Isaiah 7:14

<sup>19</sup> *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Ed. M.F. Unger, "Virgin," p. 1159

**cannot** be reasonably said for *almah* and thus, *almah* would appear to be a more technical word to convey the idea of virginity, and its use in Isaiah 7:14 would be more appropriate, both contextually and prophetically, than that of the alternative *bethulah*.

### Evidence from Cognate Semitic Languages

To gain a greater understanding of the finer meaning of *almah* and *bethulah*, we may also turn to the concurrent illustration provided by the use of their cognates in other ancient Semitic languages. In doing this, we see the information provided by cognate Ancient Near Eastern languages concerning both of these words tends to give support to the conclusions drawn above from the Hebrew of the Old Testament.

In these cognates, the *btlt* or similar root (analogous to *bethulah*) often describes women who exist in the social condition of being under the lordship of their father, husband, or other *ba'al* (a word meaning "lord" which is often used to describe a husband in ancient Semitic texts, both Biblical and secular). As such, it becomes immediately obvious that *btlt* cannot be considered as a descriptor for biological virginity. The most widely known and obvious example of this is found in the ancient Ugaritic mythological texts, Ugarit being a Canaanite city closely allied philologically to lower Canaan and Phoenicia. In Ugaritic and other Canaanite mythology, the goddess Anat (or Anath) is consistently referred to as *btlt 'nt*, the Virgin Anat.<sup>20</sup> This is despite her quite apparent sexual activity and pregnancy. Cassuto demonstrates some confusion on this point when he states,

"A customary epithet applied to her [Anat] in Ugaritic writings is *btlt* ('the virgin'), and it is impossible to tell whether the Canaanites understood this title literally, or whether they attributed to it a symbolic connotation only."<sup>21</sup>

However, from the available evidence about Anat, the literal interpretation of "virgin" as *virgo intacta* would not likely have been reasonably held by the Canaanites, and that her title "Virgin" was some sort of sacramental designation would seem to make more sense. In this mythological system, Anat is depicted as marrying her brother Baal after she rescues him from his imprisonment in the underworld.<sup>22</sup> Canaanite legend from the Ras Shamra tablets further depicted Anat, in the form of a cow, being impregnated by Baal after his restoration, and giving birth to a wild ox.<sup>23</sup> Canaanite iconography even depicted sexual intercourse between Baal and Anat. In further mythology transferred to the Semites (such as the Aramaeans) from the Canaanites, Anat was presented as the consort of Baal-Hadad, a Semitic storm and fertility god.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, in Canaanite at least, *btlt* does not seem to present itself as denoting biological virginity. In other cognate Semitic languages, as well, we see that *bethulah* does not specifically denote virginity.

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<sup>20</sup> J. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, pp.45, 56, etc., Ed. G.R. Driver

<sup>21</sup> U. Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath*, p. 64

<sup>22</sup> A. Baring and J. Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*, p.457

<sup>23</sup> See R. Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, p.61

<sup>24</sup> M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 90

"The Akkadian cognate, *batultu* denotes 'primarily an age group: only in specific contexts...does it assume the connotation 'virgin' (CAD II: 174).<sup>25a</sup> J.J. Finkelstein ('Sex Offences in Sumerian Laws,' JAOS 86:355:72)<sup>25b</sup> and B. Landsberger 'Jungfräulichkeit: Ein Beitrag zum Thema Beilager und Eheschliessung' in *Symbolae juridicae...M. David...edid.* J.A. Ankum..., II (Leiden, 1968, pp. 41-105) have underscored in independent studies that the word is normally best understood as 'young (unmarried) girl.' In fact, there is no one word for 'virgin' in Sumerian or Akkadian; that concept is expressed negatively by 'who is not deflowered'.

"In Ugaritic *blt* is a frequent epithet for Anat, Baal's wife, who repeatedly has sexual intercourse (cf. A. van Selms, *Marriage and Family Life in Ugaritic Literature*, London, 1954, pp. 69, 109).

"In a Shiite tradition, Fatima, though the mother of Hasan and Hussein along with other children, bears the title *batul* (C. Virolleaud, *Le Theatre Persan*, Paris, 1950, p. 37). And in an Aramaic text from Nippur, Montgomery interprets the phrase, *btwlt* 'travailing and not bearing,' to denote a hapless wife suffering from miscarriages and other female complaints (*Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, Philadelphia, 1913, p.131).

"Tsevat concluded that the word 'does not mean 'virgin' in any language exclusively (Aram.), mainly (Heb.), or generally (Akk.[and Ugar.?). (p. 340)<sup>25c,25</sup>

Harris, et al. also note that the ancient Egyptian (not strictly a cognate) parallel for *bethulah* (*hwn.t*), may denote a young, marriageable girl who has or has not had sexual relations. Further, they reveal that this term is used to describe both the king's protectress in the Pyramid texts, explicitly called his mother, and also the goddess Isis who in a sarcophagal oracle is said to have become mysteriously pregnant.<sup>26</sup> They quote Tsevat as concluding,

"It can be stated that *hwn.t* is not used to denote biological virginity, but rather youthful vigour and potential motherhood."<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the notion that *bethulah* or its cognates would present a more "proper" or "representative" word for "virgin" is not supported by the data from cognates and Egyptian, another important ancient Near East language.

What about *almah*? We find that, much like in Hebrew, this word in cognate languages depicted a woman who would be quite similar to a *bethulah* in most respects, but yet who could more properly be considered as a biological virgin. Looking again to the evidence of Canaanite

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<sup>25</sup> *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. I, p. 137-138

25a *The Assyrian Dictionary*, Eds. I.J. Gelb, et. al., Vol. 2, p. 174

25b *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 86, series 355, p. 72

25c M. Tsevat, in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Eds. H. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, p. 340

<sup>26</sup> *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 137

<sup>27</sup> Tsevat, *op. cit.*, p. 339

mythology, we see *gmlt* (the *almah* cognate) used to describe the girl Huray, sought for marriage by the god Keret, and who is described as an unwedded, virginal lass.<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, we find in Arabic a piece of information concerning *almah*. In the Qur'an, a near-textbook example of early standard Arabic and little changed from antecedent Northern Arabian dialects (Thamudic, Saifitic, etc.), we find *almah* presented as representing biological virgins. In Surah 56:36, we find (transliterated), *FajaaAalnahunna abkaran*, which is variously translated as "And made them virgins" (Pickthall translation) and "And made them virgins - pure (and undefiled)" (Yusuf Ali translation). This usage reflects the sometime tendency in Arabic to render an "n" for what appears as an "m" in other Northern Semitic languages, such as when the pluralization of masculine Hebrew nouns with *-im* appears as *-yyin* in Arabic. The context of this passage is the Quranic description of Paradise, and the virgins under discussion are the perpetual virgins who will accompany the righteous for eternity in the Quranic mythology, so remarked upon by Western commentators. Both Muslim and Western Orientalist commentary on this passage has consistently understood these women to be biological virgins, even to the point that they can "regenerate" their virginity perpetually.<sup>29</sup>

Hence, *almah* as it appears in Semitic cognates seems to evince a much stronger tendency towards denoting biological virginity than does *bethulah*. This, in turn, would strike another blow to the arguments against the use by Isaiah of *almah* in Isaiah 7:14.

### **A Word about *Parthenos* - Its Meaning and Use**

We now turn to the use of the Greek word of interest in our discussion - *parthenos*. *Parthenos* is important both because it is the term which is used in Matthew's interpretation of the Isaiah 7:14 prophecy, and also because it is this word which is found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, at that verse.

Through examination of the use of *parthenos* in secular Greek literature from across a range of time periods, it seems that this word is nigh well synonymous with both *almah* and *bethulah*, which is to be expected when we consider that in the Septuagint, the translators rendered both of these Hebrew terms as *parthenos* in the Greek. However, when we consider the differentiation earlier seen between *bethulah* and *almah*, we see that *parthenos* appears to be much more compatible with *almah* where the issue of biological virginity is concerned.

*Parthenos*, like *almah*, seems to be a word which refers to a young, marriageable woman, but somewhat more strongly implies the pre-sexual nature of the maiden. Euripides (480-406 BC), in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, describes a "maiden's marriage" using the term *parthenois*, and the context is that of a previously unmarried and chaste young woman.<sup>30</sup> In line 738 of the same,

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<sup>28</sup> Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 87

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. E.M Wherry, *Commentary on the Qur'an*, Vol. 4, p. 111, note on Surah 5:35; S.A. Ali, *Qur'an The Fundamental Law of Human Life*, Vol. 14, p. 158; M.A.M. Daryabadi, *Tafsir-ul-Qur'an: Translation and Commentary of the Holy Qur'an*, Vol. 4, p. 301, note #374

<sup>30</sup> Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, lines 718, 740



reference is made to *parthenosi*, a maiden's apartment in which the unmarried daughter is sequestered away, and in line 731, the term *parthenous* is translated as "unmarried daughters"

Strabo (63 BC-24 AD) states,

"Or as the unwedded virgin (*parthenos*) who, dwelling on the holy Didyman hills, in the Dotian Plain, in front of Amyrus, bathed her foot in Lake Boebeïs..."<sup>31</sup>

Plutarch (45-125 AD) further emphasizes both the youth and marriageability of this sort of young woman when he writes,

"And if he discovers a young man in the house of a rich and elderly woman, waxing fat, like a cockpartridge, in her service, he will remove him and give him to some marriageable maid (*parthenon numphên*) that wants a husband. Thus much, then, on this head."<sup>32</sup>

Usage, however, indicates that the term is not applied to any and all young women who are unmarried, but those specifically who are at the age and ready to enter into marriage. Plato (427-327 BC) shows a distinction between very young girls and young women, where he says,

"As to women,--it is not worthwhile to make compulsory laws and rules about their taking part in such sports; but if, as a result of earlier training which has grown into a habit, their nature allows, and does not forbid, girls [*paidas*] or maidens [*parthenous*] to take part, let them do so without blame."<sup>33</sup>

The word is often used to describe a young woman who is still under the care and protection of her father or other protector, demonstrating a *bethulah*-like "social" application of the word. Xenophon (c. 430-355 BC) also uses *parthenous* to describe girls under the care of the father's household.<sup>34</sup> In Sophocles' (496-406 BC) *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the two daughters of Oedipus, Ismene and Antigone, are referred to as,

"My two girls [*parthenoin* - fem. gen. dual], poor hapless ones--who never knew my table spread separately, or lacked their father's presence, but always had a share of all that reached my hands."<sup>35</sup>

However, the father need not be the only protector, as a couple of passages from Pausanias (early 2nd c. AD) indicate. For instance, he describes Callirhoe as a "maiden" (*parthenou*), and mentions that she lives with foster parents.<sup>36</sup> Also, he uses *parthenos* to describe a young, fatherless girl living with her mother, indicating that she is unmarried and under the care of her surviving parent.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, Bk. 14, Chap. 1.40

<sup>32</sup> Plutarch, *Lives*, Solon, Chap. 20.1

<sup>33</sup> Plato, *Laws*, Sect. 843d

<sup>34</sup> Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, Bk. 1, Chap. 5.2

<sup>35</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, line 1462

<sup>36</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, Bk. 7, Chap. 21.3

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk. 4, Chap. 19.1-5

*Parthenos* is used to describe one who is specifically stated to be completely chaste. Further, this word is often used to describe those who were unquestionably biological virgins. In Greek mythology, two goddesses stand out as idealized examples of sexual chastity - Athena and Artemis. Both are frequently given the epithet of "virgin," but unlike the Canaanite myths discussed earlier, there is no hint that either of these goddesses were ever considered to be sexually active, either licitly or illicitly. Athena, who was both unmarried and sexually chaste, was universally considered to be a virgin and was described as such,

"Meanwhile we sing of how the son of Amphitryon, a bold-minded man, left Oechalia devoured by fire, and arrived at the headland with waves all around it; there he was going to sacrifice from his booty nine loud-bellowing bulls for Cenean Zeus, lord of the wide-spread clouds, and two for the god who rouses the sea and subdues the earth, and a high-horned unyoked ox for the **virgin** Athena, whose eyes flash with might. Then a god, useless to fight against, wove for Deianeira, to her great sorrow..."<sup>38</sup> (Bacchylides lived c. 520-450 BC)

Further, in the *Homeric Hymns* (anonymous, most composed about the 7th c. BC), Athena is referred to as a "pure virgin" (*parthenon aidoiēn* - literally, holding herself a virgin) as a mark of her chastity.<sup>39</sup> Apollodorus (c. 150 BC) describes Athena also as a "chaste virgin" (*parthenos*) who defies the attempt by Hephaestus to rape her.<sup>40</sup>

Artemis also was famous for her complete chastity and virginity. Strabo<sup>41</sup> uses the term to describe girls (*parthenous*) who are said to be "ripe for marriage," and certain maidens (*parthenous*) who were coming to sacrifice at the Temple of Artemis at Limnae. These maidens were part of the cult of Artemis, who was in classical mythology strongly attached to her virginity, meaning physical chastity, even to the point of killing a man who accidentally saw her unclothed.<sup>42</sup> Pausanias also describes the priestess of the temple of Artemis at Aegira using the term *parthenos*, saying she remains priestess **until she marries**.<sup>43</sup> Diodorus Siculus (90-21 BC) speaks of the ancient custom of having virgins (*parthenous*) deliver the oracles of Artemis because "They are like Artemis is," and "Their natural innocence is intact," referring to the biological aspect of their virginity.<sup>44</sup>

Pindar (522-443 BC) even refers to a virgin conception, that of Perseus, the son of Danae, who was spontaneously impregnated by a fog of gold (which some sources say was from Zeus). She is called "the virgin [*parthenos*] goddess," and she had actually been shut up in a locked room by her guardian to keep her away from the amorous advances of men.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Bacchylides, *Odes*, Poem 16, line 17

<sup>39</sup> *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, Trans. H.G. Evelyn-White, Chap. 28.5

<sup>40</sup> Apollodorus, *Library and Epitome*, Book 3, Chap. 14.12

<sup>41</sup> Strabo, *op. cit.*, Book 6, Chap. 1.8

<sup>42</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 3, lines 138-249, the story of Actaeon is related here.

<sup>43</sup> Pausanias, *op. cit.*, Bk. 7, Chap. 26.5

<sup>44</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library*, Book 16, Chap. 26.6

<sup>45</sup> Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, Poem 12, line 18

The goddesses were not the only ones described by this word in reference to obvious physical virginity. Demosthenes (384-322 BC) discusses the Attic law that stated concerning the elected king "that he should marry a virgin (*parthenon*) who had never known another man."<sup>46</sup> As with the cases of redundancy with *bethulah*, this demonstrates that *parthenos* is not a technical term for biological virginity, but carries social overtones which need to have the physical aspect specified where necessary.

However, unlike *bethulah*, there do not seem to be any instances in which *parthenos* is used to describe a woman who would, or could, be logically considered as sexually active. In describing married women, the term *gune* is employed, which is a word that properly refers to mature women, ones who in that society would be expected to be married. For instance, Aristotle (384-322 BC, whose extant works use *parthenos* twice, once in a way which is neutral for this discussion, but the other which is quite certain), records a portion of an iambic from Anaxandrides lamenting girls who are slow to marry, which includes "My daughters (*parthenoi*) are 'past the time' of marriage..."<sup>47</sup> Thus, his daughters are old enough that they are expected to have been married by that time, yet were not, and are still referred as *parthenoi*, showing that *gune* is not really a general term for women of a certain age group, but that it seems to more specially refer to those in the social condition of marriage. Xenophon also draws a distinction between "women" (*gunaixi*) and "maidens" (*parthenois*) when he urges the Greeks to avoid the pleasures of Persian women and other luxuries and to return to Greece.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, as with *almah*, *parthenos* is a word which, while not always specifically referring to the biological meaning of "virgin," in practice would carry that connotation throughout, and is often specifically employed in that capacity. Further, it does not demonstrate use which would suggest a non-virginal woman, and thus can be understood to be a good "technical" word for "virgin" as well.

### Hellenistic Jewish Use of *Parthenos* - An Example

Before delving into the Septuagintal use of *parthenos* in Isaiah 7:14, a look at the use by another Jewish source is in order. Josephus (1st c. AD), who lived roughly two and a half centuries after the translation of Isaiah into Greek for the Septuagint, provides us with a picture of *parthenos* which accords well with the other Greek use seen above. Josephus' testimony, though, is important because he wrote **in the Christian era**, and thus demonstrates what a perhaps typical Jewish conception of *parthenos* was, even after Christians began to use Isaiah 7:14 to point to prophetic fulfillment through Christ.

Josephus relates the Biblical story of Abishag, who served as a bedmate for King David, saying,

"David was now in years, and his body, by length of time, was become cold, and benumbed, insomuch that he could get no heat by covering himself with many clothes; and when the

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<sup>46</sup> Demosthenes, *Speeches*, Speech 59 (*Apolodorus Against Neaera*), Sect. 75

<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Section 1411a

<sup>48</sup> Xenophon, *Anabasis*, Bk. 3, Chap. 2.25

physicians came together, they agreed to this advice, that a beautiful virgin, chosen out of the whole country, should sleep by the king's side, and that this damsel would communicate heat to him, and be a remedy against his numbness. Now there was found in the city one woman, of a superior beauty to all other women, (her name was Abishag,) who, sleeping with the king, did no more than communicate warmth to him, for he was so old that he could not know her as a husband knows his wife. But of this woman we shall speak more presently."<sup>49</sup>

Abishag is referred to as a *parthenos*, and was not "known" by King David due to his age and inability. Given the lesson which he learned from the episode with Bathsheba, it is unlikely that Abishag would have been a married woman (given the bad testimony it would engender), nor is she described as a widow, which would be very odd if she were one.

Josephus refers to Rebekah as a virgin,<sup>50</sup> just as the OT uses for both *bethulah* and *almah*, where he records that she says that Laban is the "guardian of her virginity" (*parthenias*)

Josephus also uses the term *parthenos* to refer to a virgin being conducted out with her bridegroom to her wedding,<sup>51</sup> and describes Tamar in David's house (thus before her rape) as "yet a virgin,"<sup>52</sup> which is important because of what was taken from her when Amnon raped her. Afterwards, she had to remain desolate in Absalom's house after this, unable to marry (II Samuel 13:20). Thus, we see that Josephus specifically notes that she was "yet a virgin" **before** she was forced by Amnon, which would seem to imply that Josephus viewed *parthenos* as having specific physical overtones.

Josephus also<sup>53</sup> delineates virgins (*parthenous*) apart from women who have been married before or who are harlots. She is, he cites, to be "of good parents" (who would protect the chastity of their young daughter). Further, in sec. 246, Josephus covers the case of the man who is espoused to a virgin and "afterward" finds her not to be one. If she is found guilty, she is killed because she did not maintain her virginity (*parthenias*) until she was "lawfully" married, which could indicate either an elopement or fornication - either way, the emphasis seems to be clear as to the state of her virgin-borne parts, not whether she was pregnant. I say this because some commentators argue that the "tokens of virginity" required (see Deuteronomy 22:17,20) are evidences of the young girl's menstruation, not to the sheet of the wedding night. While there are good arguments for this case,<sup>54</sup> I would also note that there are problems which could present themselves with that interpretation. If her loss of virginity had occurred within a mere matter of days before her groom found out about it, she may not have reached her next period of menstruation anyway, and thus could elude the command of God on this matter through this "loophole." A more "foolproof" way of determining her virginity would seem to be the outcome of the *de facto* determination made on the wedding night.

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<sup>49</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquity of the Jews*, Bk 7, Sect. 343-4

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk 1, Sect. 248

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk 13, Sect. 20

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk 7, Sect. 162

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Bk 4, Sect. 244ff

<sup>54</sup> See *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 138

At any rate, Josephus' use of *parthenos* does not seem to differ in any substantive degree from that of Greek and Hellenistic writers all across the ages of Greek literature.

### **The Translation of Isaiah 7:14 in the Septuagint**

Let us now turn to the use of *parthenos* in the Greek rendering of Isaiah 7:14 in the Septuagint. The Septuagint provides for us probably the most neutral, non-sectarian glimpse of how pre-Christian Hellenistic Jews interpreted Isaiah 7:14. This verse, of course, renders *almah* as *parthenos* in the Greek. It is important to note that the Septuagint translators were Hebrews of the Hebrews, well-educated and respected Jewish rabbis. It is **also** important to note that the translation work on the Septuagint was completed nearly two centuries **prior** to the Christian era. Unlike the calumniations against Matthew's use of the word *parthenos* to describe Mary, it is patently impossible for one to make the charge of "Christian interpolation" against the appearance of *parthenos* in the Septuagint Isaiah 7:14.

Unlike later Jewish and Judaizing revisers of the Septuagint in the Christian era, such as Aquila and Symmachus, both of whom retranslated the verse using *neanis* for sectarian purposes, the original Septuagint translators had no reason to bias their translation, and thus their use of *parthenos* can be considered most authentic, and it is fairly obvious that they were interpreting Isaiah 7:14 to be referring to an unmarried (and therefore either specifically or implicitly virginal) young woman, for this is what the record of Greek usage of *parthenos* from before, at, and after their time would suggest. This would seem to argue **against** modern Jewish arguments that the verse is (or was) understood to be referring to either Ahaz's or Isaiah's wife conceiving and bearing a child, as *parthenos* is not used in this sense in Greek. If this were the understanding, the translators would likely have used *gune* to describe the woman in Isaiah 7:14.

Throughout the Septuagint, the general word used to translate both *almah* and *bethulah* is *parthenos*, though *neanis* is used to render *almah* in both of that word's appearances in the Song of Solomon. Interestingly, the most explicit place in the Hebrew Old Testament where *bethulah* is used to denote a woman who is obviously **not** a virgin is translated as *numphos* (young), not as *parthenos*, in Joel 1:8.

### **Closing**

From the study above, it should be clear to the reader that the traditional view of the conception of Jesus Christ as a fulfillment of prophecy given in Isaiah 7:14 is the correct assessment. Despite arguments to the contrary, *almah*, used in that verse, indeed appears to be a better technical term to describe a biological virgin than is *bethulah*, even though neither carry that specific connotation. The appearance of *parthenos* in the Gospel of Matthew with respect to the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 and the interpretation of this as speaking of a physically virginal girl, both also appear to be correct, and in fact rest on prior Jewish interpretation as found in the Greek Septuagint translation which was the initial Jewish Old Testament in Greek. Thus, while Jewish "anti-missionaries" and a host of others may wish to assail the accuracy, propheticity, and veracity of the Bible, they would be wrong to make their attempts with this prophecy. Though the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 forms only one, small facet of the testimony to Christ's

Messianicity, it is a brick in the foundation in which Christians can put their full and complete trust.