Concordia Theological Monthly

AUGUST • 1 9 5 3

The Almah Translation in Is. 7:14

By Alfred von Rohr Sauer

(The following article presents the essential contents of a paper that was read at the Sixth University of Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, Lexington, Ky., April 23—25, 1953.)

THE *almah* translation in Is. 7:14 is not merely a question of Hebrew philology; it also has very important theological implications. To arrive at a satisfactory interpretation of this passage, it is necessary not only to define the term *almah*, but also to be very clear in regard to the nature and scope of Hebrew prophecy. The exegete who regards the Hebrew prophet merely as an interpreter of history, as a seer who reads a prediction of the future in the events of the present and the past, will translate *almah* in one way. The exegete, on the other hand, for whom the prophets were divine messengers sent to announce the coming of a future Deliverer may have quite a different concept of *almah*. More specifically, the student who regards Is. 7:14 as a prophecy of the birth of Christ, finds in this passage Old Testament support for the doctrine of the virgin birth. But a student who sees no reference to the birth of Christ in Is. 7:14 will challenge the fact that *almah* means anything but a young woman. The viewpoint of this paper is that of St. Matthew (1:23), who looked upon the virgin birth as the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy in Is. 7:14. The decisive question will therefore be this: Is a translation of *almah* that suggests maidenhood (without emphasizing it) admissible in this passage or not?

Of the seven *almah* passages in the Old Testament three may be regarded as inconclusive, throwing little light on the meaning of *almah*. Psalm 68:25 is a reference to a festive procession in which three groups participated: singers, musicians, and alamoth; no clue to the meaning of *alamoth* is afforded by the context. Song of Songs 6:8 refers to the sixty queens, eighty concubines, and unnumbered *alamoth* who were included among the ladies of the court; again the context is of little help. Song of Songs 1:3 makes mention of the love of the *alamoth* for the bridegroom, but

gives no further definition or qualification of this kind of feminine being. Significantly all three of these inconclusive passages have the same plural form *(alamoth)* as the enigmatic superscription of Psalm 46 and the reference to psalteries in 1 Chron. 15:20. In these passages, where it makes little difference whether the translation be virgin, damsel, girl, or woman, the RSV chooses to use the term "maiden" consistently.

In the other four references, however, the RSV appears to be quite arbitrary in its rendering of the word *almah*. When Miriam is introduced in the account of Moses' birth, she is called his sister (Ex. 2:7, 8); later, when Miriam goes to fetch the child's mother, she is called an *almah* (AV, maid). To translate *almah* as "girl" in this passage, as the RSV does, does not seem justifiable. Had the author wanted to refer to Miriam as a "girl," he could have used the more common Hebrew word for girl which is *na'arah*. He had just used the word *na'aroth* in 2:5 to refer to the girls who accompanied Pharoah's daughter along the banks of the Nile. But when he spoke of Miriam, he apparently wanted to indicate that she was more than a *na'arah*, and so he used the word *almah*, with its clear emphasis on maturity, as will be shown later.

It has been contended that *na'arah* is the Hebrew word that describes the girl just before she reaches puberty, while *almah* refers to the girl who has just attained to puberty. The latter certainly conforms to the meaning of the verb *alam*, with which *almah* is associated. The former view, however, is hardly tenable. In the account of Eliezer's effort to obtain a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:16) the first word that is used to describe Rebekah is *na'arah;* she is called a beautiful girl. In the later verse, however, in which Eliezer refers to his prayer to the Lord, he speaks of Rebekah as an *almah* (v. 43). It is obvious that Rebekah could not be mature and immature at the same time. It may therefore be suggested that *na'arah* means a "girl" without designating any particular stage of her development. That *almah*, however, refers not merely to maturity, but may also suggest the idea of maidenhood in v. 43, is clearly indicated in v. 16, where Rebekah is called a virgin *(bethulah)* with whom no man had had any sexual relations. It seems rather strange that in the light of this 16th verse the RSV should by-pass its most frequently used translation of *almah*

(maiden) and resort to "young woman," which is inaccurate in the light of the context. To the student of Hebrew the English word "woman" not only calls to mind the Hebrew *"ishshah,"* but also suggests the meaning "wife," which is synonymous with "woman" in Hebrew. Yet there is not the slightest suggestion in any of the seven *almah* passages that this word ever includes a married woman.

That holds true also of Prov. 30:18-20. In this passage the author observes first of all that there are four actions or processes which leave no discernible traces: the flight of an eagle through the air; the crawling of a serpent over a rock; the passing of a ship across the sea, the cohabitation of a man with an *almah* (AV, maid; RSV, maiden). Then he goes on to show that just as one cannot tell afterwards whether one of these actions has taken place or not, so it is impossible to confront a woman *(ishshah)* who has committed adultery with any evidence of her sin. It appears that in this passage the author deliberately made a distinction between an *almah* and an *ishshah* who engaged in illicit relations with a man. In the first instance he spoke of the unchastity of the unwed maiden; then he proceeded to the adultery of the married woman.[1] The analysis of the four Hebrew nouns which throw light on our problem thus reveals the following: 1) the translation "young woman" for *almah* is inaccurate because it carries too much of the connotation of the Hebrew *ishshah;* 2) the translation "virgin" for *almah* is too broad because it suggests too much of the meaning of *bethulah;* 3) the translation "girl" for *almah* is too narrow and encroaches upon the area covered by *na'arah;* 4) the most acceptable translation of *almah* ought to be "maid," or "maiden," which may imply virginity, but does not emphasize it.

Related Hebrew words that come from the same root do not throw much light on the meaning of *almah.* The masculine form of this noun occurs but twice in the Old Testament. When Saul saw David go out to engage Goliath, he asked Abner who this youth was (1 Sam. 17:55, 56); first he called him a *na'ar,* then he called him an *elem* (AV, youth and stripling; RSV, same). Similarly the boy whom Jonathan sent out to chase arrows as a signal to his friend David (1 Sam. 20:21, 22) is designated both a *na'ar* and an *elem* (AV, lad and young man; RSV, lad and

youth). Except for the close relationship between *na'ar* and *elem* that is indicated by the parallelism, these two passages add little to our knowledge of *almah*.

Modern Hebrew lexicographers agree that the word *almah* means a feminine being sufficiently developed to be able to bear children.[2] They favor the view that the word refers neither to virginity nor to the state of being married or unmarried. One suggests that a girl may be called an *almah* until she gives birth to her first child.[3] It must be noted, however, that the specific connotation of sexual maturity derives not from the noun forms, but from the verb *alam*.

That the meaning of being virile, sexually mature, is the correct one for the verb *alam* is verified by a number of cognate forms that occur in Arabic. In the first stem the Arabic verb *galima* means "to be excited by lust," in the eighth stem it means "to attain puberty."[4] Both of these verbal forms are associated with the noun *galamun*, which means "lust," and the noun *gulamiyyatun*, which means "puberty." A *gulam*, then, or a *gulamatun* is a lad or a lass who has reached the age at which a physical attraction to the opposite sex is experienced. This would be the counterpart of the Hebrew *elem* and *almah*.

There is, however, another meaning of the noun forms of this root in Syriac and Arabic which the noun forms do not have in Hebrew. In Syriac *elaimah* means a youth, and *elaimtah* means a lass; this is comparable to *elem* and *almah* in Hebrew. But these two Syriac words also mean "serving lad" and "handmaiden" respectively; they are thus associated simply with male and female servants.[5] The same relationship is to be noted in the meaning of Arabic *gulam* and *gulamatun;* these words do not stand merely for youth and lass, but also have the meanings "young slave" and "female slave" respectively.[6] Identical relationships may be noted in modern languages. The German word *Maid,* which means maiden, is closely related to the German word *Magd,* which means serving girl. In English the same word "maid" refers both to a "maiden" and to a female servant who does housework.

Further light is shed on the word *almah* by a glance at the ancient versions of the Bible. The Septuagint treats the seven *almah* passages as follows:[7] four times *almah* is translated *neanis,*

once it is rendered *neotes,* and twice the word *parthenos* is used. Thus the most common translation is girl or lass. In the Rebekah account in Gen. 24:43 *almah* is translated *parthenos* quite obviously because the earlier verse (16) has stated that Rebekah was a *bethulah* whom no man had known. In Is. 7:14 *almah* is just as deliberately translated *parthenos,* possibly on the basis of the analogous rendering in Gen. 24:43.

The other Greek versions (Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion) use the word *neanis* for *Almah* also in Is. 7:14. It must, however, be noted that Aquila, originally a pagan, first professed Christianity, then became a Jewish convert. As such he translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek in the first part of the second century A. D.[8] It seems quite natural, then, that Aquila would avoid the word *parthenos* because his Christian contemporaries saw in it a reference to the Virgin Mother.[9]

The Syriac Version (Peshitto) is of interest at this point because it offers us a translation of both the Old and the New Testaments in another Semitic language. In Is. 7:14 the Peshitto does not render *almah* with the Syriac cognate *elaimtah,* but uses the more common Semitic word for virgin, namely, *bethulthah.*[10] Similarly in Matt. 1:23, where the Evangelist refers to Is. 7:14, the Peshitto does not render *parthenos* with *elaimtah,* but rather with *bethulthah.* Again in Luke 1:26, 27 the Peshitto states that the angel Gabriel was sent to a *bethulthah* (not *elaimtah*) espoused to a man whose name was Joseph.[11] When the Syriac writers referred to Mary "ever virgin," they called her *bethulath olmim* (not *elaimath olmim*).[12] In passing it may also be noted that the Arabs refer to the Blessed Virgin as *al-batul* and that their word for virginity is *batuliyya* (in contrast to *gulamiyya,* which means puberty).[13]

The study of *almah* and its related roots in Hebrew, Arabic, and Syriac thus reveals that this word refers to a girl who has reached female maturity, who has begun to experience a desire for the other sex, who is able to conceive and to bear children. The word *bethulah* and its related roots in the same three Semitic languages refer to a girl who has had no sexual relations with a man, i. e., a virgin. The two passages in which the Septuagint translated *almah* as virgin (Gen. 24:43; Is. 7:14) suggest the thought that

this word could occasionally be so interpreted. Allowance is indeed
made for such usage by a modern Jewish commentator. In his
recent work on Isaiah, Slotki observes, "The Hebrew for virgin is
bethulah, though *almah* too sometimes bears this meaning." [14]

The translation of *almah* is closely related to another important
question in Is. 7:14, namely, the significance of the sign *(oth)*
which the Lord refers to in this verse. It has been proposed that
the sign mentioned here is a miraculous sign, that the miraculous
sign must refer to the child that will be born of a virgin, and that
the sign is deprived of its miraculous character if the child's mother
is not a virgin.[15] This interpretation is advanced in support of the
view that *almah* must be rendered "virgin." There may be those,
however, who will argue just as strongly that the sign is a purely
natural one, that it refers not to the child's birth, but to the child's
name, Immanuel, meaning "God with us!" that the sign therefore
has nothing to do with the translation of *almah.* This possible dif-
ference of interpretation calls for a closer look at the Hebrew word
for sign *(oth).*

Delitzsch once defined an *oth* as a thing or an act or an event
whose purpose is to establish the divine certainty of some other
thing, act, or event.[16] The word *oth* itself does not indicate whether
a miraculous element is involved in it or not. It is used of natural
signs, and it is used of miraculous signs. The sun and the moon
are natural signs on which men have learned to base the data on
their calendars (Gen. 1:14). Some natural signs were reminders
of great events of the past. The Passover served as a sign that the
Lord had delivered His people out of the land of Egypt (Ex. 13:9).
The words of the Great Shema were called a sign which indicated
that the Lord, the covenant God of Israel, was one God (Deut.
6:8). The rainbow and the rite of circumcision were signs (Gen.
9:13; 17:11) which reminded the people that the Lord had estab-
lished His covenant with them. There were also natural signs
which pointed to great events of the future. Ezekiel was bidden
to set up a brick and a skillet as a sign that the city of Jerusalem
would be subjected to a great siege (Ezek. 4:1-3). The names of
Isaiah's sons were signs that pointed to the future judgment and
deliverance of Israel (Is. 8:18). The prophet himself walked
naked and barefoot for three years as a sign that the Egyptians

and the Ethiopians would be led into captivity (Is. 20:3,4). Still another type of the natural sign served the purpose of protecting people. Cain had a sign placed upon him by the Lord which prevented people from slaying him (Gen. 4:15). The lamb's blood painted on the doorposts of the Israelite houses in Egypt was a sign that rendered the Israelites immune to death (Ex. 12:13). The scarlet cord hanging in the window of Rahab's house in Jericho was a sign that assured her family of deliverance (Joshua 2:12). These references show conclusively that a sign was not necessarily something miraculous.

That the sign, however, frequently was of a miraculous character is also clearly indicated in the Old Testament. When the Lord directed Moses to go before Pharaoh, he equipped him with the power to use two miraculous signs. He told him that if the changing of his rod into a serpent did not convince the Egyptians, then he would be empowered to use the other sign of the leprous hand (Ex. 4:8). Moses showed many other miraculous signs with the rod that he had in his hand (Ex. 4:17; Deut. 6:22). As an assurance that it was really the Lord who commissioned him, Gideon received the sign of the fire that consumed the flesh and the cakes (Judg. 6:17,21), and also the sign of the fleece which was damp or dry according to Gideon's will (Judg. 6:37,39). The Lord caused the shadow on the sundial to go back ten degrees as a sign that King Hezekiah would recover from his illness (2 Kings 20:8-11).

Old Testament usage thus shows that the sign in Is. 7:14 may be either a natural one or a miraculous one, that it may refer only to the name Immanuel and its meaning, but that it may also point to the child's miraculous birth. Which of the two kinds of signs is the one intended in Is. 7:14? A miraculous sign is definitely suggested by the sweeping offer which the Lord originally made to Ahaz. For his choice of a sign there were no limits in the heavenly heights above, nor in the depths of the underworld below; [17] in other words, Ahaz could choose a miracle of any dimension. Delitzsch argues that only a miraculous sign like that of a virgin-born child could have carried sufficient force to penetrate the skepticism of Ahaz. [18] Finally the Hebrew particle *"hinneh"* (behold) was hardly used by the prophet merely to introduce a child's

name; rather the use of this particle suggests that something extra-ordinary, something wonderful, is to follow, as Stoeckhardt recognized.[19]

It would therefore appear that this study of the *almah* translation in Is. 7:14 justifies the following premises and conclusions:

1. *Almah* is never used of a girl *before* she attains to puberty, as the etymology of the word shows.

2. *Almah* is never used of a girl *after* she has become a married woman, as the usage in the Old Testament shows.

3. This means that a girl is called an *almah* only during a very restricted period of her life, namely, *from* the point of her becoming mature *to* the point of her becoming married.

4. It is proposed that this is precisely the period in which the Hebrew girl normally possessed the characteristics of maidenhood.

5. It is further proposed that the word "maid" or "maiden" is an accurate translation of the word *almah,* which implies virginity without stressing it, as *bethulah* does.

6. It is finally proposed that this translation is supported by the *probability* that the sign in Is. 7:14 is a miraculous sign.[20]

St. Louis, Mo.

NOTES

1. Cf. G. Stoeckhardt, *Kommentar ueber den Propheten Jesaia* (St. Louis, 1902), p. 84.
2. Wilhelm Gesenius, *Habraeisches und Aramaeisches Handwoerterbuch ueber das Alte Testament,* bearbeitet von Dr. Frants Buhl (17. Auflage; Leipzig, 1921), *s. v.*
   Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros, ed. Ludwig Koehler (Leiden, 1948—1952), *s. v.*
   Cf. Benjamin Davidson, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (London, 1794 [Reprint]), *s. v.*
3. Koehler, *loc. cit.*
4. J. G. Hava, *Arabic-English Dictionary* (Beirut [Syria], 1915), *s. v.*
5. J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford, 1903), *s. v.*
6. Hava, *loc. cit.*
7. Alfred Rahlfs, *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart, 1935).
8. Cf. Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York, 1948), p. 77.
9. Cf. Gerhart Kittel, *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart, 1953), Band V, Lieferung 13, Seite 831, Linie 30—35.
10. *The Sacred Scripture of the Old Testament,* Syriac (London, Trinitarian Bible Society, 1913).
11. *The Scripture of the New Testament,* Syriac (New York, 1911).

12. Payne Smith, *loc. cit.*

13. Hava, *s. v.*

14. I. W. Slotki, *Isaiah, Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Intro-duction and Commentary,* Soncino Series (London, 1949), p. 35.

15. Cf. Stoeckhardt, *op. cit.,* p. 85.

16. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblischer Kommentar ueber den Propheten Jesaia* (2te Ausgabe; Leipzig, 1869), p. 133.

17. Is. 7:10.

18. Delitzsch, *op. cit.,* p. 134.

19. Stoeckhardt, *op. cit.,* p. 83.

20. That modern scholarship has by no means given up the thought that Is. 7:14 refers to the Virgin Birth is indicated by the viewpoints of two recognized German scholars of the 20th century. Writing between the two World Wars, Eduard Koenig (*Das Buch Jesaja,* Guetersloh, 1926, p. 109) comments: "Jesaja meinte mit der alma die bestimmte, von Gott zur Mutter des Immanuel erlesene Jungfrau, die vor dem Auge der Prophetie in ein immer helleres Licht trat, je nachdem ihr Sohn eine bestimmtere Gestalt annahm." Writing after the Second World War in the ATD, Volkmar Herntrich (*Der Prophet Jesaja,* Kap. 1—12, Goettingen, 1950, p. 130) states: "Den Glaubenden ist 'die Jungfrau' ebenso bekannt wie 'die Ge-baerende' von Micha 5, 2. Was der Prophet — vielleicht im Gesicht, jeden-falls aber unter der Lenkung des goettlichen Geistes schaut, ist der Anbruch der Zeit Gottes, ist die Geburt des Erloesers."