

Virgin or Young Woman?

An Exegetical Study of Isaiah 7:14

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When the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of 1952 appeared with “young woman” in the text of Is. 7:14 and the traditional “virgin” relegated to the footnotes, a barrage of heated articles appeared charging that the translation was a denial of the virgin birth of Christ. Many evangelicals did not take such an extreme view and in time a variety of opinions were expressed. This diversity gave rise to real questions in the minds of laymen which are still unanswered. The exegesis of this verse is far more complex and intricate than most of the articles would indicate, and if all the facts are to be faced objectively it is necessary for the writer (and also the reader) to approach the study with a cool head and a warm heart.

The works by Wilson¹ and Machen² are classics among evangelicals and generally considered to be the last word on the subject; therefore, this article will make repeated reference to the findings of these scholars. Delitzsch³ and Orr⁴ will also be referred to.

The Hebrew word which gives rise to this whole problem is ‘*almah*. No variant readings are indicated by any of the known manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, and even the Dead Sea Isaiah Scroll (from about 100 B.C.) has this form. Thus, the Hebrew text is clear and consideration may be given to the etymological and contextual phases of the study.

I. THE USE AND MEANING OF ‘ALMAH’

The word actually occurs nine times in the Old Testament (O.T.), but two of these (1 Chr. 15:20 and the heading of Ps. 46) are musical terms and the versions and translations generally transliterate them as “Alamoth”; therefore, only the seven remaining occurrences are indicated in the following table:

¹ Robert Dick Wilson, “The Meaning of ‘Alma (A.V. ‘Virgin’) in Isaiah VII.14,” *The Princeton Theological Review*, XXIV (1926), pp. 308-316.

² J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, New York, Harper, 1930.

³ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, trans. by James Martin, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1949.

⁴ James Orr, *The Problem of the Old Testament*, London, Nisbet, 1909.

Ref.	LXX (Septuagint)	KJV	ASV	RSV
Gen. 24:43	<i>parthenos</i>	virgin	maiden	young woman
Ex. 2:8	<i>neanis</i>	maid	maiden	girl
Ps. 68:25	<i>neanis</i>	damsels	damsels	maidens
Prov. 30:19	<i>neotes</i>	maid	maiden	maiden
Cant. 1:3	<i>neanis</i>	virgins	virgins	maidens
Cant. 6:8	<i>neanis</i>	virgins	virgins	maidens
Is. 7:14	<i>parthenos</i>	virgin	virgin	young woman

Wilson⁵ tabulated the renderings of the versions which appeared after the translation of the LXX, but such a compilation has been omitted here inasmuch as the readings generally followed the LXX. The glaring exceptions to this generalization were the uses of *neanis* in 7:14 in the translations by Aquila, Theodotian, and Symmachus. Wilson noted that these translators “were all probably renegades from Christianity and Jewish proselytes,”⁶ and there can be little doubt that the deep feelings between the Jewish and Christian groups places suspicion on these readings.

Some would point to the general unanimity among the versions as proof that the traditional view is correct. It points in that direction, but clear proof must come from the study as a whole.

The derivation of *'almah* has bearing on the basic meaning of the word. The most logical source would seem to be the verb *'alam*. It occurs about 26 times in the O.T., always meaning “hide, conceal,” so the supporters of the traditional view have been inclined to define *'almah* as a young woman or girl who had not been uncovered; i.e. not known by a man, therefore, a virgin. Wilson concurred in this etymology though his qualification “possibly”⁷ is an indication that he was not completely convinced in his own mind.

The study of comparative Semitic linguistics has greatly increased our knowledge and given us new tools to use in determining the meaning of a word. It is now known that the original Semitic alphabet had more consonants than the 22 found in Hebrew. The related letters *'ain* and *ghain* (still preserved in Arabic) fell together in Hebrew and appeared only as *'ayin*. Thus, in attempting to determine the etymology of any word which contains an *'ayin* we must also allow for the possibility that it was originally a *ghain*. A clear example of this phenomenon is the Hebrew proper name *'azzah*. The LXX transliterated it as *Gaza* and the English form

⁵ Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 308-310.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

⁷ Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

was derived from it. The letter "g" is clear proof that the name originally began with a *ghain*, and that the pronunciation continued on after the letter had become an 'ayin in Hebrew. The name Gomorrah ('*amorah*) is similar.

Arabic literature has a root *ghalima* "to be lustful," and a related noun *ghulam* "young vigorous man." Wilson cited this and noted further that "under this root the Arabs put the words corresponding to the Hebrew 'elem and 'alma."⁸ He had the evidence and the technical training to determine the correct etymology of the word in question, but his zeal to defend a point of view unconsciously influenced his judgment in this instance. Oswald T. Allis wrote a series of articles in 1952 in which he attacked the RSV. In discussing Is. 7:14 and Wilson's study of the problem he concluded, "The situation has not changed nor has the evidence presented by Dr. Wilson been weakened or nullified during the quarter-century which has elapsed since he penned these words."⁹ This sweeping statement is evidence that Allis has not taken the pains to keep up to date in his research. Wilson wrote his article in 1926, but in 1929 and the following years excavations at Ugarit on the shores of the Mediterranean north of Palestine unearthed clay tablets inscribed in a completely unknown script and dialect. This linguistic find proved to be related to Hebrew and study of the contents revealed occurrences of the word *glm* (probably vocalized *galmat*). It is used once in parallel with *bilt*¹⁰ which is equivalent to Hebrew *bethulah* "virgin." This further evidence has proven conclusively that '*almah* originated from the root *ghalima* which in Hebrew would have become '*alem*. This verb does not appear in the O.T., and it may have dropped out of Hebrew entirely, but the derived noun survived.

The masculine form corresponding to '*almah* is '*elem*. It is found twice (1 Sam. 17:56 and 20:22) and is translated "stripling, youth, boy, young man." This word occurs in Ugaritic as *glm*. The abstract plural form '*alumim* occurs in Job 20:11; 33:25, Ps. 89:46(45), and Is. 54:4 and is translated "youth, youthful vigor." It is clear that all three words discussed thus far are derivatives of

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

⁹ Oswald T. Allis, "Evangelicals and 'The New Version,'" *United Evangelical Action*, Nov. 15, 1952, p. 10.

¹⁰ Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature*, Rome, Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1949, pp. 63-64.

'*alem*, and it is equally certain that the etymology has primarily the idea of "youth"—the time of sexual vigor and special inclination to lust. Nothing is implied either one way or the other as to virginity or marriage. Such connotations must be derived from the context.

In Gen. 24:16 Rebekah is called a *bethulah* "virgin," and this definition is made explicit by the statement, "no man had known her." In vs. 43 Rebekah is called an '*almah*, so it is absolutely certain that this '*almah* was a virgin, but we learn this from the context, not the word itself. When we examine Ex. 2:8, Ps. 68:25, and Cant. 1:3 there is nothing in the context which would deny the element of virginity, but at the same time there is nothing to indicate that this idea was *specifically* intended.

In the passage in Cant. 6:8 the plural form '*alamoth* is used in a series with "queens" and "concubines." In vs. 9 the same three groups are referred to, but this time *banoth* "daughters, young women" appears as the parallel form of '*alamoth*. Had the author intended the idea of virginity in this case he would certainly have used the plural form *bethuloth*.

Prov. 30:19 "the way of a man with a maid(en)" has been used as a "proof text" for widely divergent views. The author of the verse did not give enough evidence to fix the situation, so the assumption of each interpreter is the determining factor. If one assumes a courtship situation as the background then the idea of "virgin" is preferable, but if the author had a picture of a young married couple in mind then "young woman" is to be preferred.

The use of *glmt* in parallel with *btlt* in Ugaritic text 77 shows that it could be used as a close equivalent of *btlt*, and this adds support to the use of '*almah* in Gen. 24:43. However, the "poetical license" present in parallelism does not permit us to conclude that the two terms were synonymous.

It has been claimed that the appearance of *glmt* in the second part of the parallelism is proof that it was not only a true synonym of *btlt*, but that it was the more definite, distinctive term to express "virgin." The basis for this deduction is the assumption that in Hebrew poetry the second of two words in parallel is the stronger term. This is surely true in some cases, but by no means can it be proven to be the general rule. Furthermore, it is venturesome, to say the least, to cite a 14th or 15th century B.C. example as etymological proof of the usage of a word in the 8th century B.C.

It should be noted that the expression *bn glmt* also occurs. It

has been translated "sons of (the goddess) *Ġalmat*" but it also has been read "son(s) of a *ġalmat*." If the former is correct then nothing can be said further concerning *ġlmt*, but if the latter is correct then it could be said that "virgin" was definitely not intended.

If it were true that *'almah* was the real synonym of *bethulah* it would be natural to expect the LXX to translate it by *parthenos* in each case, but the preceding tabulation shows that in *five* of the seven instances the forms *neanis* and *neotes* "girl, maiden, young woman" were used.

II. THE USE AND MEANING OF BETHULAH

This word occurs 50 times in the O.T. Its basic meaning is "a female who has not had sex relations with a man." The first use is in Gen. 24:16 and this definition is made crystal clear. However, some scholars feel that *bethulah* had a wider usage and cite Biblical evidence to support their view. Ps. 148:12, Jer. 51:22 and Zech. 9:17 have been so used, but these are simply a few of the occurrences of the combination of *bahur* with *bethulah*. This expression appears (in singular or plural) 12 times¹¹ in the O.T. indicating an idiomatic usage in which case the whole expression might appear in a context where *bethulah* by itself would not have been used. Therefore, to cite such examples is no proof that *bethulah* had other meanings than "virgin."

Joel 1:8 is often used to demonstrate that *bethulah* had a wider usage. At first glance the argument seems clear, and the LXX use of *numphe* "young wife, bride" seems to concur in the interpretation. However, it is well known that the Hebrews had a custom of sealing a marriage contract some period of time before the actual consummation of the marriage when the bridegroom took the bride to himself. This verse could very well apply to a young woman who was legally a bride and yet still a virgin inasmuch as her legal husband died before actually living with her. Deut. 22:23 begins a law pertaining to a virgin that is betrothed to a man, whereas vs. 28 deals with a virgin who is not betrothed. Both of these are in contrast to vs. 22 which deals with a woman who is married and living with her husband. Thus, in the Hebrew mind there was a distinct classification of "betrothed virgins" who were truly virgins, and

¹¹ Singular forms: Deut. 32:25, 2 Chr. 36:17, Jer. 51:22, and Ezek. 9:6. Plural forms: Ps. 78:63; 148:12, Is. 23:4, Jer. 31:13, Lam. 1:18; 2:21, Amos 8:13, and Zech. 9:17.

Joel 1:8 could well be an accurate description of such a virgin in her time of bereavement.

Job 31:1 and Jer. 2:32 have also been cited, but again, there is nothing to clearly indicate that *bethulah* was used in a broader sense than "virgin." Job 31:9 "If my heart has been enticed to a woman," seems to be supplemental to "how then could I look upon a virgin?" of vs. 1.

The LXX never translates *bethulah* by *neanis* or *neotes* (as in the case of 'almah) so we can be sure that the translators considered *bethulah* as more specifically virgin than 'almah.

The evidence from Arabic, Syriac, Aramaic, and Assyrian is equally clear and unanimous. Robert Dick Wilson after noting this evidence wrote, "There seems no doubt that *bethula* is the specific and unambiguous word for 'virgin,'"¹² and with this all must agree.

III. THE USE AND MEANING OF NA'ARAH

This word occurs 63 times in the O.T. In Gen. 24:16 Rebekah is called a *na'arah* and in this case it refers to a virgin, but Ruth 1:4 proves that the *na'arah* of Ruth 2:5, 6 and 4:12 was definitely not a virgin. In Gen. 34:3, Dinah, after being humbled by Shechem, is twice called a *na'arah*. Thus, the term referred more to the idea of youth and the implications of virginity or marriage had to come from the context. In this respect *na'arah* is similar to 'almah, but there is a slight difference in that the former is qualified five times (including Deut. 22:23, 28) by *bethulah*, whereas the latter is never thus qualified.

IV. THE USE AND MEANING OF PARTHENOS

It has been indicated above that the LXX usage of *parthenos* in Is. 7:14 was the basis for most of the readings of the versions. Tradition has held that *parthenos* was used only in the sense of "virgin," therefore, it has also held that the LXX is an early witness to the true meaning of 'almah. However, in Gen. 24:16, 43 *parthenos* is used for *na'arah*, *bethulah*, and 'almah, while in Gen. 34:3 it is used for both cases of *na'arah*, referring to Dinah after she had been seduced.

Machen in studying this problem wrote, "On the whole, it seems evident that the Septuagint is inclined to use the Greek word for 'virgin' in rather a loose way, or in places where no special emphasis upon virginity appears. The word, therefore, might well

¹² Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

have crept into the translation at Is. vii. 14 without any special cause, or certainly without influence from any Jewish doctrine of a virgin birth of the Messiah. It must be remembered that such a doctrine is entirely without attestation elsewhere. To find it merely in the Septuagint translation of 'almah by 'virgin,' a translation that appears in another passage where there is no suspicion of any doctrinal significance, and that is paralleled by the occasional use of the same Greek word to translate a simple Hebrew word for young woman, is surely venturesome in the extreme."¹³

V. SUMMARY OF THE ETYMOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

It is by no means clear that the idea of "virginity" was in the mind of the LXX translator of Is. 7:14. The loose usage of *parthenos* and the failure to translate 'almah consistently by *parthenos* are indications that the translator did *not* intend to stress the aspect of "virginity."

On the other hand, it is quite certain (from Hebrew and Greek) that *bethulah* is the specific term for "virgin." The word is found in Is. 23:4, 12; 37:22; 47:1; 62:5 and the Dead Sea Isaiah Scroll reads the same in each case, so Isaiah knew the term and had he intended to point out *solely* the idea of "virginity" he would have used *bethulah*, but the unanimous witness of the manuscripts is that Isaiah used 'almah in 7:14.

It is certain that 'almah had the basic idea of youthful vigor and nothing was implied one way or the other as to virginity or marriage. The contexts in Hebrew and Ugaritic indicate its usage as a close equivalent of *bethulah*, but there is not enough evidence to show that the two were synonymous. Gen. 24:16, 43 cannot be used for this purpose as the same verses can be similarly employed to prove that 'almah is a synonym of *na'arah*.

Wilson, after his etymological study concluded, "that 'alma, so far as known, never meant 'young married woman'; and secondly since the presumption in common law and usage was and is, that every 'alma is virgin and virtuous, until she is proven not to be, we have a right to assume that Rebecca and the 'alma of Is. vii. 14 and all other 'almas were virgin, until and unless it shall be proven that they were not."¹⁴ It is true that 'almah is never qualified by *bethulah*, and further, that there is no case of a *clearly defined* married

¹³ Machen, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

¹⁴ Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

woman being called an *'almah*. However, Cant. 6:8 negates the *assumption* of virginity, and possibly Prov. 30:19 does the same. It is on the basis of these verses and Is. 7:14 that the definitions "young woman (ripe sexually; maid or newly married),"¹⁵ and "marriageable girl, young woman (until the birth of her first child),"¹⁶ were derived. However, the idea of marriage comes from the context and *not* the etymology. The will to see the meaning "virgin" in each occurrence of *'almah* is the basis for Wilson's assumption and not etymological data.

On the basis of the facts at hand the writer is inclined to agree with Delitzsch when he states, "It is also admitted that the idea of spotless virginity was not necessarily connected with *'almah* (as in Gen. xxiv.43, cf. 16), since there are passages—such, for example, as Song of Sol. vi.8—where it can hardly be distinguished from the Arabic *surrije*; and a person who had a very young-looking wife might be said to have an *'almah* for his wife."¹⁷

Yet, having said all this, it should be apparent that Machen was correct in concluding that the problem "cannot be settled merely by a consideration of the meaning of the Hebrew word *'almah*."¹⁸ We must turn our attention to the total context in which Is. 7:14 is found.

VI. THE CONTEXT OF ISAIAH 7:14

The broader context of this prophecy extends from 7:1 through 9:1 (8:23 in the Hebrew). The background is the Syro-Ephraimitic war which dates about 734 B.C. Pekah of Samaria in Israel, and Rezin of Damascus in Syria had allied themselves against Ahaz, king of Judah, and came to wage war against Jerusalem. The king and his people were terribly frightened (7:2), but instead of trusting God for deliverance Ahaz sent a present of gold and silver to the king of Assyria along with an urgent plea for help (2 Kgs. 16:7-9). At this time the Lord sent Isaiah to reassure Ahaz and to challenge him to believe in God rather than to trust in foreign kings. Isaiah prophesied that within 65 years Ephraim (Israel) would no longer be a people. We know that Samaria fell in 721 B.C., but

¹⁵ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1907, p. 761.

¹⁶ Koehler and Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, Leiden, Brill, 1952, p. 709.

¹⁷ Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

¹⁸ Machen, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

Ezra 4:2 tells of Esarhaddon's importation of people to Samaria. This probably occurred in connection with his long military journey to Egypt and the subsequent destruction of Memphis in 671. If such is the case, then the prediction is generally accurate.

At any rate, Ahaz was warned that if he did not believe the prophecy he would not be established (7:9). Then the Lord challenged Ahaz to ask for the most difficult sign (Hebrew *'oth*) he could imagine. This was intended to give reassurance to Ahaz, but he had made up his mind to depend on the king of Assyria so he declined the Lord's offer, and then rationalized his refusal by adding that he did not want to put the Lord to the test. Then in vs. 13 Isaiah addresses a rebuke to the "house of David." Some interpreters cite this as proof that vs. 14 was addressed to the people of Israel and not to Ahaz, but in vs. 2 "the house of David" is referred to as "his heart and the heart of his people." Without question Isaiah was speaking to Ahaz in vs. 13 and following, and *the prophecy had to have meaning for the king in his situation* or else God would not have sent Isaiah to him with this message.

After rebuking Ahaz, Isaiah informs him that the Lord will give him a sign whether he wants it or not. It has often been held that this sign (*'oth*) had to be a *miracle* of extraordinary proportions, and that the birth of a child in the time of Ahaz would not have been any sign at all. It seems that the prediction of the boy's birth, his name, and events which would transpire in his youth constitutes a very good *sign* for Ahaz. The best means of settling this issue is to let Isaiah himself define what the Lord meant by "signs." In 8:18 Isaiah wrote, "Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs (*'othoth*) and portents (KJV and ASV "wonders") in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion." Isaiah's own name meant "salvation of the Lord" and it was a sign to Ahaz. In 7:3 Isaiah is told to take his son, Shearjashub, with him to meet Ahaz. The boy's name meant "a remnant shall return," and it too was a sign. Some would interpret it as an encouragement, but Delitzsch sees in it a threat to Ahaz.¹⁹ In either case the name was indeed a sign.

Another son of Isaiah was named Maher-shalal-hash-baz, meaning "the spoil speeds, the prey hastes." He was so named since the "riches of Damascus," and the "spoil of Samaria," would be carried away to the king of Assyria before the child would be able

¹⁹ Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

to cry, "My father, and, My mother." The name of this boy was also a sign to Ahaz. If the context is to count for anything, it seems clear that the sign of vs. 14 is similar. The boy is to be named Immanuel, "God with us," and before he knows how to choose between good and evil the lands of Rezin and Pekah will be deserted. This too was a *real* sign to Ahaz, and in no way does the *immediate* context demand the idea of miracle in the sense in which we find it in Mt. 1:23.

We know that Tiglath-pileser III came to the aid of Ahaz, and in 733-732 B.C. he conquered Damascus, took away Galilee and Gilead, and placed Hoshea on the throne of Israel after Pekah was assassinated (2 Kgs. 15:30). Ahaz met his ally at Damascus and while there he observed the altar which was used for the Syrian worship and had Urijah the priest construct a copy and substitute it for the regular altar in Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 16:10-16).

Later, when Hoshea refused to pay his yearly tribute to Assyria, Shalmaneser V besieged Samaria. His successor, Sargon II, finished the destruction of the city in 721 B.C. This same king gave Judah a scare (Is. 20:1), and his son Sennacherib devastated most of Judah. Thus, Isaiah's prophecy in vss. 15-17 was literally fulfilled.

Inasmuch as the child of vss. 15-16 is the Immanuel of vs. 14 it would seem necessary to consider 14-17 as a unit, and, further, it would follow that Immanuel was born in the time of Ahaz. However, this view has difficulties too. Who was this '*almah*? If she were Isaiah's wife she would have been referred to as the "prophetess," as she was in 8:3. Furthermore, there is no *clear* statement that this child was ever born in the reign of Ahaz. However, Immanuel is addressed in 8:8 and a distinct person is indicated thereby, and the connection with the Assyrian difficulties ties the person to the contemporary scene. The implications are apparent, so it requires more than the argument from silence to disprove an immediate fulfillment.

Some interpreters place great stress on the use of the definite article with '*almah*. If the article is important it only serves to show that Isaiah had a definite '*almah* in mind. However, the Hebrew O.T. is filled with examples of the article being used in an indefinite sense so one cannot speak too dogmatically in this case. On the other hand, Delitzsch goes so far as to say, "the expression itself warrants the assumption that by *ha'almah* the prophet meant one

of the 'alamoth of the king's harem (Luzzatto); and if we consider that the birth of the child was to take place, as the prophet foresaw, in the immediate future, his thoughts might very well have been fixed upon *Abijah* . . . who became the mother of king Hezekiah, to whom apparently the virtues of the mother descended, in marked contrast with the vices of his father. This is certainly possible."²⁰

Machen in discussing this possibility says it is an ancient idea which was later refuted by Jerome.²¹ If the refutation was so conclusive one wonders why Delitzsch (no mean scholar) would revive it. Jerome probably reasoned as follows: Hezekiah came to the throne when he was 25 (2 Kgs. 18:2), but inasmuch as Ahaz reigned only 16 years (2 Kgs. 16:2), it would appear that Hezekiah was born before Ahaz became king, therefore, Isaiah would not have thought of Hezekiah's mother as the 'almah who was to bear a child in the future. However, if all of 2 Kgs. 16:2 is read and taken into consideration the only conclusion possible is that Ahaz was 36 when he died. If Hezekiah was 25 at the death of his father then Ahaz was 11 at the birth of Hezekiah. This is quite improbable, and it certainly indicates that something has happened to the dates regarding Hezekiah's reign. As further evidence 2 Kgs. 18:13 can be cited. Sennacherib is said to have invaded Judah in the 14th year of Hezekiah. Archaeological and linguistic evidence has accurately fixed this event in 701 B.C. Thus, Hezekiah began his reign in 715; i.e., after the fall of Samaria. This line of reasoning does not purport to prove the suggestion of Delitzsch; it only shows that Jerome's refutation has failed to remove the possibility.

In summary, it should be noted that the evidence from the context is not sufficient to settle the issue with certainty. As in the case of the etymology, the theological presuppositions seem to be the deciding factor. Before discussing these it is necessary to define the theoretical possibilities of treating our problem.

VII. VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF IS. 7:14

From a theoretical standpoint there are four possible interpretations of Is. 7:14; (1) the prophecy relates only to the time of Ahaz and Matthew was wrong in applying it to Jesus, (2) the prophecy pertains only to the birth of Jesus and Isaiah in writing vss. 15-17 is picturing what would happen *if* such a child as de-

²⁰ Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 217-218.

²¹ Machen, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

scribed in vs. 14 should be born in the time of Ahaz, (3) the prophecy pertains only to the birth of Jesus, but Isaiah thought it was to happen shortly, therefore he wrote vss. 15-17 to indicate how near the event would be, and (4) the prophecy has a dual application, being fulfilled in the time of Ahaz, but in a fuller, deeper sense in the birth of Jesus.

The first possibility is that held by the extreme liberal segment of the Church, but the basis for such a view is entirely subjective and stems from a spirit which denies the inspiration of the Scriptures; therefore it need not be considered further.

The second possibility is best represented by Machen. He wrote, "it may be held that the prophet has before him in vision the birth of the child Immanuel, and that irrespective of the ultimate fulfillment the vision itself is present. 'I see a wonderful child,' the prophet on this interpretation would say, "a wonderful child whose birth shall bring salvation to his people; and before such a period of time shall elapse as would lie between the conception of the child in his mother's womb and his coming to years of discretion, the land of Israel and of Syria shall be forsaken.'"²² Machen recognized the difficulties of this view when he added, "This interpretation, we think, is by no means impossible. It is difficult, indeed, to set it forth adequately in our bald modern speech; but the objections to it largely fall away when one reads the exalted language of the prophet as the language of prophetic vision ought really to be read."²³

Those who hold this view do so because of two basic reasons. First, they are reacting violently from the excesses of the liberals who hold the first view; and, second, they are inclined to deny any human element in the Scriptures for fear of divesting them of all-pervading inspiration. If one's theological outlook is rooted in these then the objections to this second possibility will "fall away," but is it really necessary to take such an irrational view in order to protect God's Word and the prophet Isaiah? Machen claims to be an adherent to the grammatico-historical method of exegesis and adds that he is not wishing to return to the allegorical exegesis of Origen, but the mental gymnastics involved in ignoring the clear sense of immediacy in the mind of Isaiah appears to cut the Gordian knot instead of untying it.

²² Machen, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

The third possibility is that expressed by Delitzsch. He concluded, "On the other hand, however, we may see from what he says, that the prophecy has its human side as well. When Isaiah speaks of Immanuel as eating thickened milk and honey, like all who survived the Assyrian troubles in the Holy Land, he evidently looks upon and thinks of the childhood of Immanuel as connected with the time of the Assyrian calamities. And it was in such a perspective combinations of events lying far apart, that the *complex* character of prophecy consisted. The reason for this complex character was a double one, viz. the human limits associated with the prophet's telescopic view of distant times, and the pedagogical wisdom of God, in accordance with which He entered into these limits instead of removing them. If, therefore, we adhere to the letter of prophecy, we may easily throw doubt upon its veracity; but if we look at the substance of the prophecy, we soon find that the complex character by no means invalidates its truth."²⁴ Thus, Delitzsch is willing to say that the true fulfillment was Jesus and Isaiah saw it so clearly, as viewing a distant mountain on a clear day, he felt it was to come soon. This view surely has its merits and it is an improvement over the view of Machen in that it frankly admits the presumption that the context of Is. 7:14 is the result of Isaiah's inaccurate judgment with respect to the time factor. This is not to agree with Delitzsch that Isaiah was incorrect, but to point out that *if* there was no contemporary fulfillment it is more objective to recognize Isaiah's inaccuracy than to insist that Isaiah knew there would be no immediate application but he gave the prophecy in the form he did just to frighten Ahaz.

The fourth possibility is that of a dual fulfillment of the prophecy. It considers the context as sufficiently clear to warrant the birth of a child in the time of Ahaz. It recognizes that there are difficulties to such a literal interpretation, but such is the case in Mt. 1:23. Matthew quotes Is. 7:14 as having been fulfilled in the birth of the Christ, yet 1:21, 25 tell of his being named Jesus according to instructions from the angel. There is no mention of his ever being called Immanuel.

Machen mentions the dual fulfillment view and comments, "Does an immediate reference to a child of the prophet's own day really exclude the remoter and grander reference that determines the quotation in the first chapter of Matthew? Certainly it does so

²⁴ Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

in accordance with the prevailing view which rejects altogether the typology in which the Church of all the ages has found so much of beauty and so much of the grace of God. But has that prevailing view really penetrated to the full meaning of these Old Testament books? We think not; and because we think not (or else because we adopt the other of the two possible interpretations that have just been set forth) we are able to accept still the use which the First Evangelist makes of the prophecy in the seventh chapter of Isaiah.”²⁵

However, Machen does not really give a good reason for rejecting this fourth view. He rejects it on the assumption that only liberals who reject typology would think of holding it. Therefore, he and those who think like him are in effect saying *either* a person believes in the translation “virgin” *or* he is denying the virgin birth of Christ. Instead of this problem being a rigid *either/or* situation, there is more evidence to warrant a *both/and* situation, but to see this involves a different view of prophecy than the view held by Machen. Orr, in setting down a basic view of prophecy wrote, “It was certainly an error of the older apologetic to place the essence of prophecy, as was often done, in prediction. The prophet was in the first instance a man speaking to his own time. His message was called forth by, and had its adaptation to, some real and urgent need of his own age: it was the word of God to that people, time and occasion. It needs, therefore, in order to be properly understood, to be put in its historical setting, and interpreted through that. It must be put to the account of modern criticism that it has done much to foster this better way of regarding prophecy, and has in consequence greatly vivified the study of the prophetic writings, and promoted a better understanding of their meaning.”²⁶ Orr is without doubt one of the great conservative scholars of all time, and often he is quoted to bolster evangelical views, but these same persons who use him for a witness in other areas refuse to acknowledge his judgment in this area.

It is to be admitted that in a few cases like Micah 5:2 the contemporary application is not apparent from the facts, but a few exceptions cannot refute the solid basis on which Orr’s statement rests.

²⁵ Machen, *op. cit.*, pp. 292-293.

²⁶ Orr, *op. cit.*, pp. 452-453.

VIII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The present writer prefers the fourth possible interpretation: i.e. the dual fulfillment; therefore he prefers the reading "young woman." To admit the possibility of an immediate application and still to insist on "virgin" would put one in the awkward position of holding to a virgin birth in the time of Ahaz, but all would reject this. To contend for the reading "unmarried woman" or "maiden" does not solve the problem. The former is simply following Wilson's assumption and is thus equivalent to reading "virgin." The technical meaning for "maiden" would allow its use in Is. 7:14, but the cases in KJV, ASV, and RSV where *bethulah* is translated "maiden," and Williams' use of "maiden" in Mt. 1:23 indicate that in the minds of most people the word is synonymous with "virgin."

The translation "young woman" accords with the etymology of '*almah*, it permits the contemporary fulfillment of the prophecy without postulating a "virgin birth," and in a real sense it allows for the more glorious fulfillment in the birth of Jesus Christ our Savior. Furthermore, it supports the accuracy of Isaiah and at the same time it accords with the doctrine of the "virgin birth" which is clearly taught in Mt. 1:18,20,23 and Lk. 1:34,35. It must be remembered that it is the N.T. which explicitly teaches this doctrine. The O.T. cannot be made to say exactly what the N.T. says concerning it or it would be necessary to change Is. 11:1b "a branch shall grow out of his roots," to read "He shall be called a Nazarene," in order to justify Matthew's play on words (*Nezer*, i.e. branch, and *Nazareth*) in 2:23.

Isaiah envisioned the child Immanuel as an immediate event, therefore he did not use *bethulah*, but the Spirit of God, knowing the end from the beginning, must have moved on the prophet in his choice of '*almah*. It appears that notwithstanding any conscious motives on the part of the LXX translators the use of *parthenos* made it possible for Matthew to see in Is. 7:14 a prophecy of the Incarnation of Christ.

To deny the translation "young woman" because it appears in a version which was translated by men who are liberal in theology is to resort to dogmatism and prejudice. In the areas where the liberals are in error they must be refuted with facts. Furthermore, if our position as evangelicals is as sound as we claim, then we should have no fear of being completely honest with the facts.