



## Publications

## Almah: Virgin or Young Maiden?

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The identity of the mother of Immanuel in [Isaiah 7:14](#) has been a subject of debate over the centuries: Was the prophet Isaiah speaking of a virgin conceiving or not? The Gospel of Matthew quotes [Isaiah 7:14](#), linking Jesus' conception to the sign the prophet Isaiah had given centuries earlier. Those who believe the gospel account regard [Isaiah 7:14](#) as a messianic passage fulfilled by Jesus. Others disagree. Did the prophet intend that word to mean virgin" or merely "young maiden"? Are Christian interpreters reading too much into this verse? Zhava Glaser presents the case for you to decide for yourself:

The word **almah** is rare—usually translated as "maiden" it appears only ten times in the Hebrew Scriptures, six<sup>1</sup> of these in the plural and four<sup>2</sup> in the singular.<sup>3</sup> Some say the word **almah** is merely the feminine of **elem**, or "young man."<sup>4</sup>

In the few verses where **almah** appears, the word clearly denotes a young woman who is not married but is of marriageable age. Although **almah** does not implicitly denote virginity, **it is never used in the Scriptures to describe a "young, presently married woman."** It is important to remember that in the Bible, a young Jewish woman of marriageable age was presumed to be chaste.

The prophet could have chosen a different word had he wanted to describe Immanuel's mother as a virgin. **Betulah** is a more common way to refer to a woman who has never been with a man (both in biblical and modern Hebrew).

In the Hebrew Scriptures, there are two types of **betulot**—the true virgin, and the "betrothed virgin" (**betulah m'orashah**). In Deuteronomy 22, a betrothed virgin is referred to as a man's "wife" (**ishah**). The state of betrothal was just as serious and sacred as the married state<sup>5</sup> and the difference between the two appears, in some instances, to be a mere formality. The word **betulah**, commonly understood as virgin, is still not precise.

[Joel 1:8](#) presents another example of the word **betulah** in a context which does not convey the usual meaning of virginity: "Mourn like a virgin (**betulah**) in sackcloth, grieving for the husband of her youth."

Some commentators say this refers to a betrothed virgin, thus making the lamentation all the more poignant because the marriage had never been consummated. The use of **ba'al** (husband) in this verse, however, seems to imply the opposite. The word **ba'al** is never used in the Jewish Scriptures of the betrothed state, but only of a married man.

Therefore, even if the prophet Isaiah had used the word **betulah**, it could have been argued that he did not intend to say that this woman had never had sexual relations with a man.

A look at the **Septuagint** translation of **almah** by Semitics scholar Dr. Cyrus Gordon, provides additional insight on the matter:

The commonly held view that "virgin" is Christian, whereas "young woman" is Jewish is not quite true. The fact is that the Septuagint, which is the Jewish translation made in pre-Christian Alexandria, takes **almah** to mean "virgin" here. Accordingly, the New Testament follows Jewish interpretation in [Isaiah 7:14](#). Therefore, the New Testament rendering of **almah** as "virgin" for [Isaiah 7:14](#) rests on the older Jewish interpretation, which in turn is now borne out for precisely this annunciation formula by a text that is not only pre-Isaianic but is pre-Mosaic in the form that we now have it on a clay tablet.<sup>6</sup>

Jewish and Christian scholars would be hard pressed to deny that the Greek term **parthenos** and the Hebrew term **almah** may have been used interchangeably by those Jewish communities that adopted the Septuagint.

On the other hand, J. Gresham Machen, who has done a definitive study on this passage, asserts that the translation in the Septuagint of the Hebrew word **almah** as **parthenos** cannot be used to show a Jewish doctrine of the virgin birth, for one also finds the word **parthenos** used in the Septuagint to translate the word **na'arah**, which merely means "young girl."

For Machen, the very fact that the passage does *not* have a history of Jewish messianic interpretation and the very *unlikelihood* of this passage being interpreted messianically makes the New Testament account all the more credible. In other words, the gospel writer, Matthew, was not trying to fit Jesus' life into a traditional mold, but rather turned to Scripture to explain what had taken place in the event of the virgin birth.

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One cannot assert that the prophet was speaking of a virgin technically on the basis of the word **almah**. Nor can a serious student lightly dismiss the word as having no possible reference to a miraculous conception.

## Footnotes

1. [Psalm 9:1, 46:1, 68:26](#); [Song of Solomon 1:3, 6:8](#); [1 Chronicles 15:20](#).
2. [Genesis 24:43](#); [Exodus 2:8](#); [Isaiah 7:14](#); [Proverbs 30:19](#).
3. For a thorough study of these passages, see Young, Edward J., *The Immanuel Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14-16* (Second Article). *The Westminster Theological Journal*, 16:23-50 (November 1953), p. 171-177.
4. LaSor, William Sanford, n.d., [Isaiah 7:14—“Young Woman” or “Virgin,”](#) Unpublished manuscript, Fuller Theological Seminary, p. 5-6.
5. Young, p. 33.
6. Gordon, Cyrus H., *Almah in Isaiah 7:14*, *The Journal of Bible & Religion*, Vol. 21 (April 1953), p. 106.

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## Comments

#8 **Israel**  2012-01-27 01:12

0

Hebrew word Almah= Maiden in English

English word Maiden= Betulah in Hebrew

Hebrew word Betulah= Virgin in English

then we can acknowledge almah as virgin as well.....

That question is going in circle and going nowhere..

Almah means virgin period. Jewish corruption and arguments against the new testament simply don't have the stomic the answer to their claim. anyone can go to [www.freetranslation.com](http://www.freetranslation.com) and type in maiden and find that word translated as Betulah. Mind you the entire web tells christians that Almah is maiden in english. if maiden is betulah and betulah is the word for virgin. What is the problem if Mary is a Almah a virgin?

[Quote](#)

#7 **Jay**  2008-11-12 16:24

0

Unfortunately you all have missed it. The issue here is how well do you know your Torah? If you read in Gen in the subject of Rachel whom Eliezer is seeking as a bride for Yitzchak you will find that the word Almah, Betulah and a Naarah are all attributes given to a single woman Rachel and it is from here we derive that an almah is in fact regarded by Torah as a virgin as well. Now go and read Isaiah under the eyes of Torah and you have the prophecy which the Torah says in Gen 24:16 "a virgin and the husband will not know her."

[Quote](#)

#6 **Mordechai**  2008-01-05 15:40

0

Gary, the absence of a father in Isaiah does not indicate anything. Would you rather he had said, "A young couple will have a child..."? The child is the important element, and not the mother or the father. The only reason the mother is mentioned is because it sounds like Isaiah was speaking about a woman both he and Ahaz knew, which is why Isaiah says "ha'almah", "the (specific) woman", and not just "almah", "a (random, possibly far-off-in-the-future) woman".

[Quote](#)

#5 **Gary**  2007-11-25 01:47

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More compelling than the definition of almah in Isaiah 7:14, is the deafening quiet left by the vacancy of a father, which is surprisingly never debated. Regardless of the meaning of almah, or whether that was the word used, this verse clearly depicts a husbandless mother and fatherless Messiah. In context, Isaiah accuses King Ahaz and the royal family of Davis for trying the patience of the Lord. The importance placed on fathers men, is contrasted by this prophecy that elevates an unmarried maiden and slaps down the king, the royal house of David and all Israel's men. Isaiah 7:17-23 confirms this insult with the promise of injury. "The LORD will bring on you, on your people, and on your father's house such days as have never come since the day that Ephraim separated from Judah, the king of Assyria."

[Quote](#)

#4 **David**  2007-11-12 19:33

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Yehuda: the question is not what 'betula' meant in Jesus' time, but rather what 'almah' meant in Isaiah's time.  
Mark: Interesting that Christians scholars produced the Septuagint's version of the Prophets. Do you have a source on this? Whose version of Isaiah do you think the author of Matthew was using in quoting Isaiah 7:14?  
Mordechai: Thank you for bringing some context into this discussion. Immanuel was a sign from God for Ahaz.

Quote

#3 **Yehuda** 2007-01-02 02:29

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The word betulah, in the time of Jesus, meant a woman who had not begun her menstrual flow, even if she were married (Mishnah Nidd. 1:4). It refers to a minor, and chastity may be assumed, but it is not implicit. For Jesus to have been born of a betulah is still miraculous, I suppose, but that would not eliminate Joseph as the biological father. Betrothal could be effected by intercourse (Mishnah Ket. 4:4) and a minor could conceive at her first ovulation, which would delay menstruation for the duration of pregnancy. There is a way to explain this story in a Jewish context. The common interpretation is not a Jewish one.

Quote

#2 **mark** 2006-04-25 03:51

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Please note the septugant that was written by Jewish scholars was only on the Torah and not on the prophets. The addition on the prophets was added centuries later by Christian scholars clearly for their own benefit

Quote

#1 **Mordechai** 2005-12-01 10:06

0

You left out a serious point that must be included; Isaiah was talking to King Ahaz nearly 500 years before Jesus was born. To say it was a prophecy fulfilled by Jesus is to say God is an idiot because HE was using that as a sign that Ahaz should not worry about two invading armies. Furthermore, the prophecy says the kid will be named Immanuel. Does "Immanuel" sound anything like "Jesus"?

Quote

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