

NOTES AND NOTICES

THE MEANING OF 'ALMA (A. V. "VIRGIN") IN
ISAIAH VII. 14

Having frequently been asked concerning the meaning of 'Alma in Is. vii. 14—a very important question in view of the fact that it is rendered in the Greek version and cited in Matthew i. 23 as meaning *παρθένος*—I have undertaken in the following pages to give a *résumé* of the evidence which I have collected upon the subject. Whatever else this evidence shows, it seems to afford no support for the view that the word means "young married woman."

I. THE RENDERING OF 'ALMA (עלמה) IN THE VERSIONS

'Alma occurs seven to nine times in the Old Testament.¹ In these places it is translated in the ancient versions as follows:

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

VERSIONS: LXX, *παρθένος*; Targum of Onkelos, 'ulemta; Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan, *riba*; Peshitto, 'alaimta; Jerome, *virgo*; Coptic, *parthenos*; Armenian, *gohs*; Ethiopic, *dengel*; Aquila, *ἀπόκρυφος*; Arabic, *gariya*; Samaritan, *rebitha*.

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

VERSIONS: LXX, *νεάνις*; Targ. Onk., 'ulemta; Targ. Pseudo-Jon., *ḥalya*; Pesh., 'alaimta; Jer., *puella*; Copt. *talou*; Arm., *aghtshig*; Eth., *walat*; Arab., *gariya*; Sam., 'alaimta.

3. Prov. xxx. 19: "The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid (עלמה)."

VERSIONS: LXX, *νεότης*; Targ., 'ulemta; Pesh., 'alaimutha; Hark., *ḥalyutha*; Jer., *adolescentia*; Arm., *yeritasardi*; Symmachus, *νεάνις*; Arab., *hadathiyyat*.

4. Cant. i. 3: "Because of the *savour* of thy good ointments

¹ In 1 Chr. xv. 20 and the heading of Ps. xlvi., where the plural is used, it is not certain that the singular is 'alma.

thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins (עלמות) love thee."

VERSIONS: LXX, *veánides*; Targ. paraphrases; Pesh., *'alaimotho*; Arab., *šabab*; Jer., *adolescentulae*; Arm., *harsin*; Aquila and E' = LXX; Harklensian = Peshitto.

5. Cant. vi. 7 (8): "There are threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and virgins (עלמות) without number."

VERSIONS: LXX, *veánides*; Latin, *adolescentula*; Pesh., *'alaimotho*; Arab., *šawab*; Eth., *awled*; Arm., *oriordk*; Hark. = Peshitto.

6. I Chr. xv. 20: "And Zechariah, and Aziel, and Shemiramoth, and Jehiel, and Unni, and Eliab, and Maaseiah, and Benaiah, with psalteries on Alamoth (עלמות)."

VERSIONS: LXX, *ἀλαιμώθ*; Jer. *arcana*; Arab. "They praise God"; Pesh. "who praise with psalms"; other versions in Greek, either *κρυφίων* or *αιωνίων*; Armenian transliterates the Greek.

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

VERSIONS: LXX, *παρθένος*; Targ., *'ulemta*; Pesh., *bethula*; Jer., *virgo*; Hark., *bethula*; Arab., *'adra*; Copt., *parthenos*; Arm., *gohs*; Eth., *dengel*; Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion, *veāns*.²

8. Ps. xlvi. (heading): "To the chief Musician for the sons of Korah, a song upon Alamoth (עלמות)."

VERSIONS: LXX, *κρυφίων*; Targ., *אתנבם*; Arab., *sara'ir*; Latin Vulgate, *arcanis*; Jer., (*Juxta Heb.*) *juventutibus*; Aq., *νεανιοτήτων*; Sym., *αιωνίων*; *Αλλος: *νεοτήτων*;

² Field in his *Hexapla* says as follows (1) under Is. vii. 14 *παρθένος* but A, S, Θ *veāns*. So Iren. in Eus. *Hist. Ecc.*, v. *ὡς θεοτίων ἡρμήνευσεν ὁ Εφέσιος καὶ Ἀκύλας ὁ Ποντικός*. Jerome says: "praeter LXX omnes *adolescentulam* transtulerant, Porro ALMA apud eos verbum ambiguum est; dicitur enim et *adolescentula*, et *abscondita*, id est *ἀπόκρυφος* . . . Ergo ALMA non solum puella vel virgo, sed cum *ἐπιτάσει virgo abscondita* dicitur et *secreta*; quae nunquam virorum patuerit aspectibus, sed magna parentum diligentia custodita sit. (2) On Gen. xxiv. 43, "Jerome adds: Ubi Rebecca dicitur ALMA, Aquila non *adolescentulam* nec *puellam*, sed *absconditam* "transtulit."

Memphitic and Sahidic Copt., *ethēp*; Arm., *kaztn-yeatz*; Hark. *metašyotho*.

9. Ps. lxxviii. 26: "The singers went before, the players on instruments followed after; among them were the damsels (עלמות) playing with timbrels."

VERSIONS: LXX, *veāvis*; Targ., נשיא צדיקתא; Pesh., 'alaimotho; Arab., *fatayat*; Lat. Vulg., *juvencularum*; Jer. (*Juxta Heb.*), *puellarum*; Arm., *tousanato*; Memphitic Coptic, *lešairi*; Sahidic Coptic, *šeerešem*; Hark. = Pesh.

The above evidence shows that:

1. The LXX version of Is. vii. 14, made about 200 B.C., Matthew i. 23, from the first century A.D., the Syriac Peshitto, from the second century A.D., and Jerome's Latin Vulgate, from about A.D. 400, all render 'alma by *παρθένος* (virgin) or its equivalents *bethula* and *virgo*.

2. The LXX of Gen. xxiv. 43, also, renders 'alma by *παρθένος* and Jerome by *virgo*.

3. The Coptic version of Is. vii. 14, and Gen. xxiv. 43, as if to emphasize the *παρθένος*, transliterates it; although it has *alou* in Ex. ii. 7 and *lešairi* (Memphitic) and *šeerešem* (Sahidic) in Ps. lxxviii. 26 and also has the words *lelou* (girl) and *launi* (virgin) and *mnt rooune* (virginity).

4. The Armenian version renders *παρθένος* by *gohs* (virgin) in Gen. xxiv. 43, Is. vii. 14 and Mat. i. 23; *veāvis* by *aghtshig* (maid, virgin), Ex. ii. 8, by *harsin* (bride), Cant. i. 3, by *oriorak* (girls, virgins), Cant. vi. 8, by *tousanato* (daughters, girls), Ps. lxxviii. 26; *veōtēs* by *yeritasardi* (youth), Prov. xxx. 19; *κρυφίων* by *kaztnyeatz* (secrets), Ps. xlvi. i; and transliterates the *ἀλαιμώθ* of 1 Chr. xv. 20.

5. The Harklensian Syriac renders *παρθένος* in Is. vii. 14 by *bethula* (virgin); *veāvis* by *ṭalyutha* (youth) in Prov. xxx. 19 by 'alaimta in Cant. i. 3, vi. 8, Ps. lxxviii. 26; *κρυφίων* Ps. xlvi. 1 by *metašyotho* (secrets).

6. The Ethiopic renders *παρθένος* by *dengel* (virgin) in Is. vii. 14, Mat. i. 23; and *veāvis* by *walat* (daughter, girl), Ex. ii. 8.

7. The Arabic version renders the *παρθένος* of Is. vii. 14 by 'adrā (virgin) and in Gen. xxiv. 43 by *gariya* (girl). *Neāvis* Ex. ii. 8 and Prov. xxx. 19 is rendered by *gariya* (girl); in Cant. i. 3 by *šabāb* (youth from puberty to thirty); in Cant. vi. 8 by

šawāb (virgin in the night of her devirgination); Ps. lxxviii. 26 by *fatayāt* (girls). Κρυφίω in Ps. xlvi. 1 is rendered by *sarayār* (secrets); and in 1 Chr. xv. 20 for *'alamoth* the Arabic has "they praise God."

8. The Samaritan version renders *'alma* in Gen. xxiv. 43 by *rebitha* (girl) and in Ex. ii. 8 by *'alaimta*.

9. The Targum of the Pseudo-Jonathan has *riba* (girl) in Gen. xxiv. 43 and in Ex. ii. 8 *ṭalya* (maid).

10. The Targum of Onkelos renders *'alma* by *'ulamta* in Gen. xxiv. 43 and Ex. ii. 8.

11. The other Targums render it by *'ulamta* in Is. vii. 14 and Prov. xxx. 19; paraphrase in Cant. i. 3 and vi. 8; render by "pious women" in Ps. lxxviii. 26 and by "was covered" in Ps. xlvi. 1.

12. The Syriac Peshitto renders by *bethula* (virgin) in Is. vii. 14 and by *'alaimta* in Gen. xxiv. 43, Ex. ii. 8, Cant. i. 3, vi. 8, and Ps. lxxviii. 26; by *'alaimutha* (youth) in Prov. xxx. 19; and paraphrases in 1 Chr. xv. 20 by "who praise with psalms."

13. The Latin Vulgate has *virgo* in Gen. xxiv. 43 and Is. vii. 14; *puella* in Ex. ii. 8; *adolescentia* in Prov. xxx. 19; *adolescentula* in Cant. i. 3, vi. 8; *arcana* in 1 Chr. xv. 20, Ps. xlvi. 1; and *juvencula* in Ps. lxxviii. 26.

14. Jerome *Juxta Hebraeos* has *juventus* in Ps. xlvi. 1 and *puella* in Ps. lxxviii. 26.

15. Aquila renders *'alma* by ἀπόκρυφος (hidden) in Gen. xxiv. 43; by *veāvis* in Cant. i. 3, Is. vii. 14.

16. Symmachus and Theodotion render by *veāvis* (girl), in Is. vii. 14 and Symmachus in Prov. xxx. 19.

17. The lack of further evidence in the case of Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, the Harklensian Syriac, the Coptic versions and the Ethiopic is due to the non-existence, absence, or inaccessibility of manuscripts and texts. Fortunately, we have practically all the evidence for the primary and secondary versions for Is. vii. 14.

II. MEANING OF THE ROOT 'ALAM IN THE SEMITIC LANGUAGES

1. In the Hebrew, the root occurs 26 times (Kal, once; Niphal, 10 times; Hiphil, 10 times; and Hithpael, 5 times); always in the sense of "hide." *'Olam* (eternity, age, ever) may come from this root. It occurs about 400 times in the Old

Testament. Also, *'alamoth* (*'almuth*) of Pss. ix. 1. xlv. 1 and I Chron. xv. 20 may come from this root; possibly, also *'elem* and *'alma*.

2. The Arabic has two roots which correspond in spelling to the Hebrew *'alam*; one of these begins with the smooth guttural *'ain* and means "to know." Under this root the Arabs put *'alam* (age, world, etc.). A second root begins with the rough guttural *ghain* "to lust after" and under this root the Arabs put the words corresponding to the Hebrew *'elem* and *'alma*.

Lane in his great Arabic Dictionary defines *ghulâm* as "a male child from the time of its birth until it attains to the period of the 17th year" or "a little son," i.e., "one who has not attained to puberty." In the Koran, Abraham is made to say concerning the promise of Isaac: "My Lord how can there be to me a boy" (*ghulâm*; so in Suras xv. 53, li. 28, xxxvii, 99). Joseph in the pit is called by this name (xii. 19). In xviii. 73-81 it is used of two youths who had not yet attained the age of puberty. Zachariah says in xix. 9: "How can I have a boy, when my wife is barren?" In xix. 19 the angel says to Mary: "I am a messenger of thy Lord, to give to thee a pure boy." To which, in xix. 20 Mary replies: "How can I have a boy seeing that no man has touched me and I am not a harlot?"

Unfortunately, the Koran does not contain the feminine form of this noun; but it is evident that the masculine did not mean a "young married man." Dr. Van Ess of Bosrah assures me that the feminine never means "young married woman" in modern Arabic.

3. In Syriac, the root does not occur in the simple stem and in the intensive stem the verb has a denominative meaning "to make one young again" (*juventutem alicui reddidit*). Payne Smith in his *Thesaurus* defines the noun as meaning "one who has not taken a wife" or as equivalent even to *bethulo* "virgin."

4. In Ethiopic the root means "to write," or "subscribe." There is no derivative for "boy" or "girl."

5. The root and derivatives are not found in Assyrio-Babylonian.

6. In the Aramaic of the Targums and Talmud the root is found a few times in the simple stem (if the pointing is correct) in the sense of "be strong" for the Hebrew אָמַץ. So in the

Targum to Jos. i. 6, x. 25, Deut. xxxi. 6, 7, 23; and in the intensive stem in the sense of "to strengthen" Ps. xxvii. 14.

The noun עֲלִימָה occurs as a translation of נָעִר in 1 Sam. xvii. 55, of David when he was going to fight Goliath; and in xvi. 11, when he was feeding the flock, and often elsewhere. The feminine of this noun renders נַעֲרָה in Onkelos in Gen. xxiv. 14, 16 and עֲלִמָּה in Gen. xxiv. 43 (all referring to the as yet unmarried Rebecca) and Exodus ii. 8 (for the child Miriam when she came down to watch the boy עֲלִימָה Moses in the ark among the bulrushes). Esther is called an *'ulaima* before she was married to Xerxes (Est. ii. 2); and the same name is given to the seven maidens who waited on her.

In Onkelos, *'ulaima* translates the Hebrew בְּתוּלָה (Deut. xxxii. 25), יְלִידָה (Gen. xxxiv. 4), עֲלִמָּה (Gen. xxiv. 43, Ex. ii. 8) and נַעֲרָה (always).

In the LXX, *'alma* is translated by παρθένος (2 times), νεάνις (4 times), νεότης (2 times).

III. MEANING AND USE OF NA'ARA (נַעֲרָה) IN THE HEBREW

I. The word *na'ara* occurs 63 times in the Old Testament, 24 of them being in the Pentateuch. The AV renders it by "damsel" (34 times), "maiden" (15 times), "maid" (8 times), "young woman" (Ruth iv. 12), "young maiden" (1 Sam. ix. 11), and by the adjective "young" (4 times, always in connection with *bethula* "virgin," viz., Jud. xxi. 12, 1 Kings i. 2, Est. ii. 2, 3). The "damsel" of Deut. xxii. 23 is, also, followed by the Hebrew word *bethula*; so that five times out of the 63 times the *na'ara* is defined specifically as a *virgin*. In Deut. xxii. 25, 27, she is called "betrothed" and in Gen. xxxiv. 12 the "damsel" Dinah is asked for by Hamor as a wife for his son Shekem.

In New Hebrew *na'ara* is "a maiden from 12 to 12½ years old." The word does not occur in Syriac nor in any Aramaic dialect. It is rendered in Onkelos invariably by *'ulaima*. It is not found in Arabic, nor in Ethiopic; nor in Babylonian, unless it is equivalent to *nartu* "songstress."

In the LXX *na'ara* is translated by παρθένος (5 times: Gen. xxiv. 14, 16, 55, xxxiv. 3 *bis*); by ἄβρα (5 times); by νεάνις (20 times); by κοράσιον (13 times); by παιδίσκη (2 times); by θεράπινα (once) and by γυνή (once, Est. ii. 4).

IV. MEANING AND USE OF BETHULA (בתולה) "VIRGIN" IN
THE SEMITIC LANGUAGES

1. The word occurs 50 times in the Old Testament, and is rendered in the A.V. by "virgin" (38 times), by "maid" (7 times), and by "maiden" (5 times). Of the 9 times in which it is used in the Pentateuch the A.V. renders it always by "virgin" (except Ex. xxii. 16 (15)), and Onkelos always by *bethula* (except Deut. xxxii. 25).

2. The LXX renders it usually by *παρθένος* (47 times), by *παρθένικος* (Est. ii. 3), once by *νόμφη* (Joel i. 8) and once by *ἄφθορος* (Est. ii. 3).

3. In the Hebrew it is used 5 times to define *na'ara* as a "virgin" but never to define *'alma*.

4. In Arabic, it is defined as "a virgin girl, a eunuch, a celibate or unmarried person, a chaste one." The Greek *παρθένος* is translated in Is. vii. 14 by *'adra*, "virgin."³

5. The Syriac *bethula* corresponds to the Hebrew in form and usage; as also does the Aramaic of the Jewish and Samaritan Targums.

6. In the Assyrian inscriptions of Asurnasirpal and Shalmaneser II., *batuli* and *batulati* are used for boys and girls

V. CONCLUSIONS

1. None of the ancient languages or versions gives any evidence to show that *'alma* ever meant "a young married woman."

2. There seems no doubt that *bethula* is the specific and unambiguous word for "virgin."

3. A *na'ara* may not have been virgin. Otherwise, it would scarcely have been necessary to define her five times by the word *bethula*, "virgin."

³In Arabic there are two words for virgin *bikr* and *'udhra* or *'adra* each meaning one who has preserved her maidenhood. The latter does not occur in the Koran, but *bikr* is found in Suras lvi. 35 and lxvi. 5. The former reads: "And we caused them to grow up as a growth and found them virgins." The latter reads: "It may be that the Lord, if he divorce you, will give him in exchange wives better than you . . . young women who have been married and virgins too." The word *thayyab* used in the last citation is the most proper word in Arabic to denote "young married woman." It is never used to translate *na'ara*, *'alma*, or *yalda* and Dr. Van Ess tells me that it is only used in Arabic to denote "young married woman" and that *ghulama* is never used for this purpose.

4. An *'alma* must have been presumed to be a "virgin," since it is never defined by *bethula*.

5. Since the LXX version was made in the case of Genesis 280 years B.C. and in the case of Isaiah 200 years B.C., it is to be presumed that their rendering of *'alma* by *παρθένος* in Gen. xxiv. 43 and Is. vii. 14 was in their minds a justifiable rendering. So far as we have any evidence, the citation of Is. vii. 14 in Matt. i. 23 is thus justified by the Jewish interpretation up to the time when Matthew was written.

6. Since the Peshitto Syriac version of the Old Testament was probably made by Jews, their rendering of the word *'alma* by *bethula* in Is. vii. 14 must have been considered proper even as late as the second century A.D.

7. Jerome, who studied Hebrew under the Jewish rabbis of his time (about A.D. 400), still thought it possible to render *'alma* by *virgo*, in Gen. xxiv. 43 and Is. vii. 14.

8. Since Aquila, Theodotian and Symmachus were all probably renegades from Christianity and Jewish proselytes, their rendering of *'alma* in Is. vii. 14 by *νεᾶνις* instead of *παρθένος* is easily understood.

9. The rendering *'ulemta* of the Targum to Is. vii. 14 cannot possibly argue in favor of the meaning "young married woman" in view of the following facts:

- (1) *'Alma* in the Old Testament never has this meaning elsewhere.
- (2) *'Ulemta* translates not merely *'alma* but also *na'ara*, *yalda*, and *bethula*, none of which means "young married woman."
- (3) *'Ulemta* is used of Rebecca when she came to the well and met Eliezar; of Miriam when she was set to watch the infant Moses; of the 400 virgins of Jabesh Gilead (Jud. xxi. 12); of Esther and the other virgins who were selected for the choice of Xerxes as wife.

10. The feminine noun is not found in the Koran; but the masculine is used of the as yet unborn Isaac and John the Baptist, and of Jesus the son of the virgin Mary, of Joseph in the pit, and of two young men who are expressly said to have been killed before they had reached the age of puberty.

11. All the versions of the Greek *παρθένος*—Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Harklensian, Syriac and Arabic—render the word in

both Is. vii. 14 and Matt. i. 23 by the best word for "virgin" which they possess.

12. The evidence that Mary was a virgin does not after all depend on the meaning of the words *'alma* and *παρθένος* alone; for it is said, also, of Mary that "she had not known man." This phrase is used in the Old Testament of Rebecca "a virgin that had not known man" (Gen. xxiv. 16), of Jephthah's daughter (Jud. xi. 39) and of the virgins of Jabesh Gilead (Jud. xxi. 12).

Finally, two conclusions from the evidence seem clear; first, 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. If Is. vii. 14 is a prediction of the Conception and if the events recorded in Matthew i. 18-25 and Luke i. 26-38 are true and the Holy Spirit of God really overshadowed the virgin Mary, all difficulties are cleared away. The language itself is not the difficulty. The great and only difficulty lies in disbelief in predictive prophecy and in the almighty power of God; or in the desire to throw discredit upon the divine Sonship of Jesus.

In the third Sura of the Koran, Mohammed represents Mary as saying to the angel: "Lord how can I have a son when man has not yet touched me?" And the angel said: "Thus God creates what He pleaseth. When He decrees a matter He only says BE and it is." Mohammed was a better Theist than many who profess to be followers of Christ today.

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