

Virgin or Young Woman: *What the Septuagint Tells Us About Biblical Prophecies*

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible is a treasure trove of ancient wisdom, but sometimes the meanings of its words get lost in translation. One of the most famous examples is Isaiah 7:14, where the Hebrew word *‘almâ* has been the subject of intense debate. Does it mean “*virgin*” or simply “*young woman*”? The answer has big implications, especially for Christians who see this verse as a prophecy of Jesus’ virgin birth.

This paper explores how the Septuagint, the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, handled *‘almâ* and other key words. Produced by Jewish scholars long before Christianity, the Septuagint provides a fascinating glimpse into how ancient Jews understood their Scriptures. By examining its translation choices, we can uncover valuable insights about biblical prophecy and theology.

WHAT DO THESE WORDS REALLY MEAN?

- **‘Almâ: A Virgin by Assumption**

In the Hebrew Bible, *‘almâ* refers to a young woman of marriageable age, but in every context, it carries the assumption that she is a virgin. For example, in Genesis 24:43, *‘almâ* describes Rebekah, whose virginity is confirmed earlier in the story. The Septuagint translates *‘almâ* as *parthenos*, the Greek word for

“*virgin*,” showing that ancient Jewish scholars understood the term to mean more than just “*young woman*.”

- **Bethulah: The Ambiguous Term**

Unlike *‘almâ*, the Hebrew word *bethulah* can mean “*virgin*,” but it doesn’t always. Sometimes it needs clarification, as in Genesis 24:16, where the text adds, “*no man had known her*,” to make it clear. In Joel 1:8, *bethulah* even refers to a widow. This broader usage makes it a less precise term for passages like Isaiah 7:14, which emphasizes a miraculous sign.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

- **The Septuagint and Isaiah 7:14**

When the Septuagint translated Isaiah 7:14 as “*the virgin shall conceive and bear a son*,” it wasn’t inventing something new—it was faithfully reflecting the Jewish understanding of *‘almâ* at the time. This translation was later quoted in Matthew 1:23, connecting the prophecy to the birth of Jesus.

- **Modern Debates**

Some critics argue that *‘almâ* only means “*young woman*” and that the Septuagint mistranslated it. But the evidence suggests otherwise. Ancient Jewish scholars, working long before Christianity, consistently understood *‘almâ* to mean “*virgin*.” The real question is why some modern interpretations have shifted away from this understanding.

- This prophetic foundation for the virgin birth is further strengthened by Genesis 3:15, where God declares that the Messiah will come from the “*seed of the*

woman." In Jewish tradition, lineage is traced through the father, yet this passage uniquely attributes the coming Redeemer to the woman's lineage alone. Such an irregularity finds its fulfillment only in Christ's birth to a virgin, bypassing human paternity altogether. If Jesus had a human father, He would be the "*seed of man*," contradicting the prophecy. Thus, the virgin birth is not just a miraculous sign—it is a theological necessity for Jesus to be the promised Messiah, fulfilling the first gospel (*protoevangelium*) of Genesis 3:15. This further reinforces the reliability of the LXX's translation of 'almâ as *parthenos*, showing that the expectation of a miraculous birth existed long before Christianity's rise.

THE SEPTUAGINT'S ROLE IN CHRISTIANITY

The Septuagint wasn't just important for Jewish scholars—it became the Bible of the early Church. New Testament writers, including Paul and the Gospel authors, quoted from the Septuagint extensively. For example:

- **Matthew 1:23:** Uses the Septuagint's translation of Isaiah 7:14 to highlight the virgin birth of Jesus.
- **Luke 4:18-19:** Jesus reads from the Septuagint's version of Isaiah 61 in the synagogue.

The Septuagint played a crucial role in shaping Christian theology, making it more than just a translation—it's a bridge between Judaism and Christianity.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SEPTUAGINT?

After the rise of Christianity, the Septuagint fell out of favor with many Jewish communities. Around the 2nd century CE, Jewish leaders began to favor the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), partly because the Septuagint was so closely associated with Christian theology. This rejection created a divide that still influences how we view biblical translations today.

CONCLUSION

The Septuagint offers a unique window into how ancient Jews understood their Scriptures. Its translation of *‘almâ* as “*virgin*” in Isaiah 7:14 reflects an authentic interpretation rooted in Jewish tradition, not a Christian invention. By studying the Septuagint, we can better understand the rich history of biblical prophecy and its fulfillment.

Whether you’re exploring the origins of the Bible or seeking to deepen your faith, the Septuagint is a vital part of the story—one that continues to connect Jews and Christians across centuries.

APPENDIX A: COMPARATIVE TABLE OF ‘ALMĀ

Reference	Hebrew Text	LXX Rendering	Contextual Analysis
Genesis 24:43	<i>ha ‘almā yōṣē’^t liš ‘ōb mayim</i>	<i>hē parthenos</i>	Refers to Rebekah, the young woman who draws water for Abraham’s servant. The narrative context (Genesis 24:16) confirms her virginity. The LXX renders ‘ <i>almā</i> as <i>parthenos</i> (virgin), aligning with this presumption.
Exodus 2:8	<i>wattēlek ha ‘almā</i>	<i>hē parthenos</i>	Describes Miriam, Moses’ sister, offering assistance to Pharaoh’s daughter. The term ‘ <i>almā</i> is used without further clarification, presuming her virginity. The LXX translates it as <i>parthenos</i> .
Psalm 68:25 (Hebrew 68:26)	<i>bəmaḥālōt bəmaśśībōt ‘ālāmōt</i>	<i>neanisai (young women)</i>	Used in the context of young women playing tambourines in a celebratory procession. The LXX uses <i>neanisai</i> (young women), emphasizing their role in worship rather than virginity.
Proverbs 30:19	<i>dereḳ geber bə ‘almā</i>	<i>hodos andros en neotēti</i>	Discusses the “way of a man with a young woman.” The term ‘ <i>almā</i> is used generically, implying youth and marriageability. The LXX translates it as <i>neotēti</i> (youth), focusing on the age of the woman rather than her virginity.
Song of Songs 1:3	<i>‘ālāmōt ‘ahēbūkā</i>	<i>neanides</i>	Describes young women expressing admiration for the beloved. The term implies youth and desirability. The LXX renders it as <i>neanides</i> (young women), reflecting the context of romantic longing.

Song of Songs 6:8	<i>‘ālāmôt eyn mišpār</i>	<i>neanides</i>	Refers to an innumerable group of young women among queens and concubines. The focus is on youth and beauty rather than virginity. The LXX uses <i>neanides</i> (young women) consistently with its rendering in Song of Songs 1:3.
Isaiah 7:14	<i>hinneh ha ‘almâ hārâ wəyōledeṭ bēn</i>	<i>hē parthenos</i>	The prophecy of a virgin conceiving and bearing a son. The LXX explicitly renders <i>‘almâ</i> as <i>parthenos</i> (virgin), emphasizing the miraculous nature of the sign.

Analysis

Consistency in LXX Rendering:

- The LXX predominantly uses *parthenos* (virgin) for *‘almâ* when the context emphasizes individual identity or a miraculous event (e.g., Genesis 24:43, Isaiah 7:14).
- In poetic or figurative contexts (e.g., Psalms, Song of Songs), the LXX opts for *neanisai* or *neanides* (young women), focusing on youth or beauty rather than virginity.

Contextual Implications:

- In every occurrence, *‘almâ* implies a young woman of marriageable age, and virginity is either assumed (Genesis 24:43, Exodus 2:8) or irrelevant to the context (Proverbs 30:19, Song of Songs).

Isaiah 7:14:

- The LXX’s rendering of *‘almâ* as *parthenos* (virgin) in Isaiah 7:14 reflects the interpretive understanding of ancient Jewish translators that the prophecy involves a miraculous sign.

**APPENDIX B: OCCURRENCES OF BETHULAH IN THE HEBREW BIBLE, THE
CORRESPONDING SEPTUAGINT (LXX)**

The following table lists occurrences of *bethulah* in the Hebrew Bible, the corresponding Septuagint (LXX) rendering, and contextual analysis for each instance. This helps demonstrate the broader semantic range of *bethulah* and its differences from *‘almâ*.

Reference	Hebrew Text	LXX Rendering	Contextual Analysis
Genesis 24:16	<i>wəhannə ‘ārāh ṭōbat-mar’eh m’ōd bātūlāh wə’iš lō’ yəda ‘āh</i>	<i>parthenos</i>	Refers to Rebekah as a virgin, but the text clarifies her virginity with “no man had known her,” indicating that <i>bethulah</i> alone was insufficient to convey virginity. The LXX uses <i>parthenos</i> to preserve this meaning.
Exodus 22:16	<i>kī jāpathē ’iš bātūlāh ’āšer lō’ ’ōrašāh</i>	<i>parthenos</i>	Describes a man seducing an unmarried virgin (<i>bethulah</i>) who is not betrothed. The LXX uses <i>parthenos</i> to indicate her virginity, which is central to the legal context.
Leviticus 21:3	<i>wə’al-bātūlāh ’āšer lō’-hāyətāh lə’iš</i>	<i>parthenos</i>	Refers to a priest mourning for a virgin relative who has not been married. The LXX renders <i>bethulah</i> as <i>parthenos</i> to emphasize her unmarried and virgin status.
Deuteronomy 22:23	<i>kī-yihyə hānā ‘ārāh bātūlāh mə’ōrašāh lə’iš</i>	<i>parthenos</i>	Refers to a virgin (<i>bethulah</i>) betrothed to a man. The text assumes virginity but ties it to the legal status of betrothal. The LXX translates it as <i>parthenos</i> .

Judges 11:37	<i>'ārānāh šəṇayim ḥādāšīm wə'ēlkā wəyāradtī 'al-hehārīm wə'ebkeh 'al-bətūlātī</i>	<i>parthenia</i> (virginity)	Jephthah's daughter mourns her virginity, emphasizing her unmarried status before her death. The LXX reflects this with <i>parthenia</i> , focusing on her loss of the potential for marriage and family.
Judges 21:12	<i>bətūlīm</i>	<i>parthenoi</i>	Refers to young virgin women spared during the war. The term <i>bethulim</i> (plural of <i>bethulah</i>) is rendered as <i>parthenoi</i> in the LXX, indicating their virgin status.
Joel 1:8	<i>biḳī kəḥətūlāh ḥāgurat-šaqqīm 'al- ba'al nə'ūreyhā</i>	<i>nymphē</i> (young bride)	Describes a virgin mourning for the husband of her youth. The term <i>bethulah</i> is used figuratively here, referring to a widow. The LXX translates it as <i>nymphē</i> (bride), which does not imply virginity.
Isaiah 62:5	<i>ūməšôs ḥātān 'al- bətūlāh</i>	<i>parthenos</i>	Compares the joy of a bridegroom over a virgin (<i>bethulah</i>) to God's joy over His people. The LXX uses <i>parthenos</i> to preserve the imagery of purity and marriage.

Analysis

LXX Consistency:

- The LXX generally translates *bethulah* as *parthenos* (virgin) when the context explicitly involves virginity or legal purity.
- However, in cases like Joel 1:8, where *bethulah* refers to a widow, the LXX adapts its translation to *nymphē* (bride) to better reflect the figurative context.

Clarifications in the Hebrew:

- Several passages (e.g., Genesis 24:16, Deuteronomy 22:23) explicitly clarify virginity with additional phrases, such as “no man had known her,” indicating that *bethulah* alone could be ambiguous.

Joel 1:8 as a Key Example:

- The use of *bethulah* for a widow in Joel 1:8 highlights the term's broader semantic range compared to *almā*, which always implies a young, unmarried woman presumed to be a virgin.

APPENDIX C: KEY EXAMPLES FROM ORIGEN'S HEXAPLA

Origen's *Hexapla*, a monumental work of textual comparison, provided a side-by-side analysis of six versions of the Hebrew Scriptures, including the Hebrew text, a transliteration, and four Greek translations (Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, and the Septuagint). This section highlights key examples where Origen's *Hexapla* reveals significant textual differences, with references to your earlier work where applicable.

Isaiah 7:14 – The Virgin Birth

- **Textual Difference:**
 - The Septuagint (LXX): Translates 'almâ as *parthenos* (παρθένος, "virgin"), emphasizing a miraculous conception.
 - Aquila and Symmachus: Translate 'almâ as *neanis* (νεάνις, "young woman"), reflecting a rejection of the LXX's Christological implications.
- **Significance:**
 - Origen's *Hexapla* preserves the LXX's rendering, affirming its Jewish origin before Christianity.
 - The deliberate shift in Aquila's and Symmachus' translations highlights post-Christian attempts to undermine the LXX's theological readings, particularly those used by early Christians.¹

Deuteronomy 32:43 – Worship of God by the Nations

- **Textual Difference:**
 - The Septuagint: Includes additional phrases such as "*Rejoice, O heavens, with Him, and let all the sons of God worship Him*" and "*Rejoice, O nations, with His people.*"
 - The Masoretic Text (MT): These phrases are absent.
- **Significance:**
 - The LXX's expanded reading aligns with early Christian theology, particularly in Hebrews 1:6, which quotes this verse to affirm Jesus' divinity.
 - Origen's *Hexapla* reveals the divergence between the LXX and the MT, providing evidence that the LXX reflects an ancient Hebrew textual tradition not preserved in the MT.²

Psalms 22:16 (Hebrew 22:17) – "They Pierced My Hands and Feet"

- **Textual Difference:**
 - The Septuagint: Renders the verse as "*They pierced my hands and feet,*" aligning with Christian interpretations of messianic prophecy.

¹ Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 138-140.

² Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament*, 21-22.

- The Masoretic Text: Reads “*Like a lion at my hands and feet,*” a phrase that is difficult to interpret and lacks the messianic overtone.
- **Significance:**
 - Origen’s *Hexapla* documents this key difference, showing the LXX’s translation as more consistent with early Jewish expectations of suffering and deliverance.
 - The MT’s reading appears to reflect later editing that removes the explicit imagery of piercing, which is central to Christian typology.³

Daniel 7:13 – The Son of Man

- **Textual Difference:**
 - The Septuagint: Uses “*Son of Man*” language that emphasizes the figure’s divine authority.
 - Theodotion: A later revision, aligns more closely with the MT and diminishes the messianic imagery.
- **Significance:**
 - Origen’s *Hexapla* preserves the Septuagint’s earlier rendering, showing how later translations like Theodotion sought to reinterpret passages to downplay messianic associations used by Christians.⁴

Integration with Previous Work

- Refer to *The Recognition of the Biblical Canon* for detailed discussions of Deuteronomy 32:43 and Isaiah 7:14 as key examples of the LXX’s textual tradition.⁵
- The *Hexapla*’s systematic comparison underscores the theological shifts that motivated alternative translations, particularly by Aquila and Theodotion.

³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 53-54.

⁴ Benjamin G. Wright, *The Letter of Aristeas*, 128.

⁵ D. Gene Williams Jr., *The Recognition of the Biblical Canon: A Brief Historical Overview*, accessed December 3, 2024, <https://trinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/academic-papers.html>.

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