

Chapter 10

עֲלָמָה

The storm center of the text is, of course, the word 'almah. Reams have been written upon it and, doubtless, reams will be written on it in the future.
--Charles Lee Feinberg

Introduction to Etymology

Etymology is the study of the origin and development of the words used in a given language at a given time. Although it has a place in the overall effort to determine the meaning of a word, it must be used with caution. Etymology, as usually understood, entails two aspects: first, determining, if possible, the original meaning of a word and second, comparing the current use of that word with the use of corresponding words in cognate languages.

The potential danger with the first branch of etymology is noted by Milton Terry:

To understand, therefore, the language of a speaker or writer, it is necessary, first of all, to know the meaning of his words. The interpreter, especially, needs to keep in mind the difference, so frequently apparent, between the primitive signification of a word and that which it subsequently obtains. We first naturally inquire after the original meaning of a word, or what is commonly called its etymology. Next we examine the *usus loquendi*, or actual meaning which it bears in common usage; and then we are prepared to understand the occasion and import of synonyms, and how a language becomes enriched by them.¹

However, the potential danger of the second branch is perhaps even greater. Again, Terry writes,

Additional interest is given to the study of words by the science of comparative philology. In tracing a word through a whole family of languages, we note not only the variety of forms it may have taken, but the different usage and shades of meaning it acquired among different peoples...Some words, especially verbs, acquire new meanings as they pass from one language to another. Hence the meaning which a word bears in Arabic or Syriac may not be the meaning it was designed to convey in Hebrew...Hence great caution is necessary in tracing etymologies.²

Terry gives a rather humorous example of this misuse of etymology and then concludes, "Hence appears the necessity, in interpretation, of observing the general usage rather than the etymology of words."³

Moisés Silva, a modern writer on the subject of hermeneutics, emphasizes the same cautions:

1 Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.; original publication date, 1890), p. 175. *Usus loquendi* is Latin for *usage in speaking*; it means "current usage of words as employed by a particular writer, or prevalent in a particular age" (p. 181).

2 Ibid., p. 178.

3 Ibid., p. 188.

Perhaps the most common error one comes across in discussions involving the biblical languages is the tendency to misuse the study of etymology...Etymological reconstructions are often tentative and sometimes purely imaginary...Some thinkers have nevertheless been known to develop great conceptual edifices based on such reconstructions...One of the unfortunate results of appealing to etymology is that it lends to the argument a scientific tone and makes the speaker's [*sic*; interpreter's] position sound much more authoritative than it really is. Some writers, aware of the tentativeness of their etymological arguments, but unable to resist the temptation of using them anyway, include a "perhaps" or some other qualification, but more readers are unduly influenced by the arguments and end up accepting the conclusion, even though no real evidence has been presented.⁴

Silva gives this example:

In biblical commentaries and other serious works, one also comes across etymological comments that usually shed no real light on the meaning of the text. It is common, for example, for writers to comment that the Hebrew word translated "glory," *kabōd*, basically means "weight, heaviness." (Incidentally, the words *basic* and *basically*, when applied to word meaning, are exceedingly ambiguous and are usually--and wrongly--taken to imply something like the "real" or "essential" meaning.) In this case, the connection cannot be doubted, and one can easily see how the notion of "weight" can be related to the concept of "importance" and thence to the more specific meaning when used in reference to God. While this historical development of the word is accurate and interesting, does it genuinely enhance our understanding of the word (or even the concept behind the word) in passages that speak of God's awesome manifestations? Most doubtful--unless we have good *contextual* reason to think that the biblical author himself was associating this word with the concept of weight...

We cannot presume that an author would necessarily have been aware of a word's etymology. And if he was, we cannot assume, without some evidence, that he intended his readers to grasp the connection. About the only evidence available to us, we must emphasize again, is the context, the thrust of a passage (or even the book) as a whole. With very few exceptions, we will find that the context supports the common usage of a word rather than unfamiliar senses.⁵

This whole issue of etymology is most relevant to the study of the word עֲלְמָה (‘*almah*). Due to the great difficulty interpreters have had for two millennia in the attempt to determine the precise meaning of עֲלְמָה in Isaiah 7:14, an endeavor compounded by the fact that it occurs only nine times in the Hebrew Scriptures, etymology has played a major role in their efforts. However, the more difficult the task of determining the meaning of a given word at a given point in history, the more care must be taken in the use of etymology. Nevertheless, since many of the commentaries and papers on Isaiah 7:14 address the etymology of עֲלְמָה, the results are reviewed here. Despite this data, though, the reader must always bear in mind two important principles of interpretation:

- The most important source for determining the meaning of a word intended by the author who used it is the context.
- The source second in importance is the use of the word in biblical Hebrew.⁶

4 Moisés Silva, in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), p. 56.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

6 After commenting on an Arabic cognate of עֲלְמָה, Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), I:286, n. 34, adds succinctly: "Here, it is not etymology, however, but usage, which plays the decisive role."

This chapter gives a brief discussion of the etymology of both עַלְמָה (‘*almah*) and בְּתוּלָה (*bethulah*) and then analyses their uses in the Bible. Chapter 11, "The Grammar of Isaiah 7:14," attempts to discover the meaning of עַלְמָה intended by Isaiah in this verse and its immediate context.

The Etymology of עַלְמָה:

The Hebrew Root

The word עַלְמָה (‘*almah*) is one of three words in biblical Hebrew that are classified together and assumed to have the same root:

- עֵלֶם (‘*elem*)
- עַלְמָה (‘*almah*)
- עֲלוּמִים (‘*alumim*)

However, as Allan MacRae rather bluntly put it, "There is no certain root for these words."⁷

Theory One: A Root Meaning "to be sexually mature"

BDB lists three roots, presumed distinct, consisting of the same consonants, עֵלֶם (‘*lm*), with the following basic meanings:⁸

- I עֵלֶם *to conceal*
- II עֵלֶם perhaps *to be mature* (sexually)
- III עֵלֶם *world, age* (meaning dubious)⁹

The three words, ‘*elem*, ‘*almah*, and ‘*alumim*, and these alone, are grouped by *BDB* under root II with these meanings:

- עֵלֶם (‘*elem*): *young man*; 1 Sam. 17:56; 20:22; possibly 16:12; 17:42¹⁰

7 Allan A. MacRae, "עֵלֶם," *TWOT*, II:672.

8 *BDB*, pp. 761-63.

9 Only one word is listed by *BDB* under this root, viz., the masculine noun עֲלוּמִים. The meaning of the root may be "dubious," but the meaning of this noun certainly is not. It occurs about four hundred times and means *long duration, antiquity, futurity, forever, everlasting*. It thus cannot be the root for עַלְמָה (Richard Niessen, "The Virginity of the עַלְמָה in Isaiah 7:14," *BSac* 137 [April-June 1980], p. 133, n. 2).

10 The "possibly" is the conjecture of *BDB*. For 16:12 the critical apparatus in *Biblia Hebraica* suggests an emendation of the text, replacing עִם (*with*) in the Leningrad Codex of the *MT* with עֵלֶם, making the phrase read "he was [a] ruddy *young man* of beautiful eyes," instead of the *MT*, "he was ruddy *with* beauty of eyes." The critical apparatus suggests

- עַלְמָה (‘*almah*): *young woman* (ripe sexually; maid or newly married); singular: Gen. 24:43; Exod. 2:8; Prov. 30:19; Isa. 7:14; plural: Ps. 68:26; 46:1; 1 Chron. 15:20; Song 1:3; 6:8; Ps. 9:1; 48:15¹¹
- עַלְוִמִּים (‘*alumim*): *youth, youthful vigor*: Job 20:11; 33:25; Ps. 89:46; Isa. 54:4

Whether there is justification in taking the "young woman" to be either a "maid or newly married" is discussed later in this chapter. But it would seem that *BDB* is deriving the meaning of the root of עַלְמָה from the presumed meaning of עַלְמָה itself. Of course, the role played by the root should be just the opposite: the basic meaning of the root generally sheds light on the meaning of a word derived from it.

Theory Two: A Root Meaning "to conceal"

Whereas *BDB* considered עַלְמָה to be derived from a root meaning *to be sexually mature*, a much older view took it to be derived from *BDB's* root I, viz., a root meaning *to conceal*.

Most of biblical Hebrew's triconsonantal roots are verbs, which by custom are listed in the form of a third person masculine singular Qal, since it has no formative additions and is the simplest form of a verb.¹² Nouns derived from verbal roots are called *derivative nouns*.¹³ Unlike *BDB's* root II and III, root I is a known verbal root, עָלַם, whose basic meaning is *to conceal* or *to hide*. The verb itself is used twenty-six times in the Tanakh and according to *BDB* has five derivative nouns. However, four are proper nouns with the fifth being the feminine noun תַּעְלָמָה, meaning *hidden thing, secret*; this noun is used three times.¹⁴

There are at least two ways in which the concept of a *virgin* can be associated with a root meaning *to conceal*. Hengstenberg describes the first way as follows:

עַלְמָה is, by old expositors, commonly derived from עָלַם in the signification "to conceal." A virgin, they assume, is called a *concealed* one, with reference to the customs of the East, where the virgins are obliged to lead a concealed life.¹⁵

This view goes back at least as early as Jerome (ca. A.D. 347 - 420). He wrote,

‘*Almah* is not applied to girls or virgins generally, but is used emphatically of a hidden or concealed virgin, who is never accessible to the looks of males, but who is with great care watched by the parents.¹⁶

the same emendation for 17:42.

- 11 The word עַלְמוֹת does not occur in Ps. 9:1 or 48:15. *BDB* suggests a textual emendation for both these verses to match 46:1 and 1 Chron. 15:20, עַלְעַלְמוֹת, which he translates, "to (the voice of) *young women*."
- 12 *GKC*, § 30a.
- 13 *Ibid.*, § 81a.
- 14 *BDB*, p. 761.
- 15 E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament and a Commentary on the Messianic Prophecies*, 2nd ed., 4 vols., trans. Theod. Meyer (Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 1858), II:45.
- 16 Cited by Hengstenberg, *ibid.*

Calvin took the same view:

The word **עַלְמָה**, (*gnālmāh*.) a *virgin*, is derived from **עַלַּם**, (*gnālām*.) which signifies *to hide*, because the shame and modesty of *virgins* does not allow them to appear in public...¹⁷

However, there is a problem associated with this view of how the concept of a virgin can be related to a root meaning *to conceal* or *to hide*. Adam Clarke in his commentary explains why the view of Jerome and Calvin is likely in error. He cites a number of examples where young, unmarried women drew water, tended sheep, and gleaned publicly after the harvest--all quite public and quite visible to young, unmarried men. He concludes that "this being *concealed* or *kept at home*, on which so much stress is laid, is purely fanciful."¹⁸

The second way a *virgin* can be related to the idea of concealing is explained by Richard Niessen:

A more fruitful enterprise [for connecting virginity with concealment] is the examination of **גְּלָה**, an antonym of **עַלַּם**, which means *to uncover* or *to remove*. To "uncover the nakedness" of someone is a Hebrew circumlocution for "having illegal intercourse" with that person (e.g., Lev. 20:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21). The word **עַלְמָה**, therefore, when it has a sexual connotation, implies the "concealment" of the **עַלְמָה** as *such*, until lawful marriage has taken place. Clarke concludes, "A virgin was not called **עַלְמָה** *almah* because she was concealed by being kept at home in her father's house, which is not true; but *literally* and *physically*, because as a *woman* she had not been *uncovered*-- she had not known a man."¹⁹

One senses that both of these ways to make **עַלַּם**, *to conceal*, the root of **עַלְמָה** are predicated upon the assumption that **עַלְמָה** actually means *virgin*, and the theories were developed to answer the question, "In what sense is the noun "virgin" related to concealing or hiding?" But again this is moving in the wrong direction--from derivative noun to root. If the root of **עַלְמָה** is sought in this way, it can shed no light on the meaning of **עַלְמָה**. The question at hand is the meaning of this word. If its root is clearly known, then that root might shed light on the meaning of **עַלְמָה**. However, except by using a circular argument, there is no way either of these two theories can help fix the meaning of **עַלְמָה**. Since the view of *BDB* has a similar problem, the conclusion drawn by MacRae would seem to be correct: "There is no certain root for these words."²⁰

"Who Has Not Known a Man"

A female virgin is one "who has not known a man." Since this clause plays a significant role in the material to follow, it is important to understand its meaning. In particular, why is the word "know" used? The Hebrew verb,

17 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, 2 vols., trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003; original Latin publication date, 1555), I:247.

18 Cited by Niessen, "The Virginity of the **עַלְמָה** in Isaiah 7:14," p. 134; emphasis belongs to cited scholar, Adam Clarke.

19 Niessen, "The Virginity of the **עַלְמָה** in Isaiah 7:14," p. 134; emphasis original and brackets added.

20 MacRae, "עַלַּם," II:672.

יָדַע, is very widely used, but its basic meaning is *to know*.²¹ In phrases such as "to know a man" or "to know a woman" the word is used somewhat euphemistically in the sense of "to know a person carnally." "Carnal" is the word used in the definition by *BDB*, but its use today is generally pejorative. However, when יָדַע is used in this way in the Bible, the phrase simply means "to know sexually," a rather intense form of knowing, whether within a marriage (e.g., Gen. 4:17; 1 Sam. 1:19) or outside a marriage (e.g., Gen. 38:26; 1 Kgs. 1:4). Modern translations, however, do not translate these clauses literally, so the word "know" does not appear. The *KJV* and the *ASV* give literal translations.

The first passage in which the verb *to know* is used in this way is Genesis 4:1, where the subject is a man :

And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain (*KJV*)

In other texts the verb *to know* is used with a female subject *to specify virginity unequivocally*. Genesis 19:8 is an example of this use:

I have two daughters which have not known man (*KJV*)

This particular use is most important in the discussion to follow on the words בְּתוּלָה and עַלְמָה.

Sometimes an additional phrase, such as "lying with a man" is added in either a positive or negative clause. For example, Numbers 31:17 and 31:35:

...every woman that hath known man by lying with him (*KJV*)

...women that had not known man by lying with him (*KJV*)

The Etymology of עַלְמָה:

Cognate Languages

C. Dohmen makes a statement similar to that cited by MacRae: "To date, no generally satisfactory etymology for Heb. *‘almâ* has been proposed."²² Regarding the attempt to determine the meaning of עַלְמָה by investigating the use of corresponding words in other Semitic languages, he adds this rather striking comment about the uncertain results of such a procedure:

The uncertainty is especially clear when studies focusing on Hebrew cite Ugar. *glm* in support of the meaning "young woman," while studies focusing on Ugaritic cite Heb. *‘almâ* in support of the same meaning.²³

Nevertheless, since so many attempts have been made to shed light on the meaning of the Hebrew word עַלְמָה by investigating cognate languages, this section reviews the presumed corresponding word in several of these languages.

21 *BDB*, pp. 393-96.

22 C. Dohmen, "עַלְמָה," *TDOT*, XI:158.

23 *Ibid.*

According to most scholars, a number of Semitic languages have equivalents to the masculine noun עֶלְם and feminine noun עֶלְמָה. To date, there are no clear parallels to עֶלְמָה in East Semitic (e.g., Akkadian). Most occurrences are in West Semitic (e.g., Phoenician, Ugaritic, Hebrew, and Aramaic) with a few in South Semitic (e.g., Arabic). The earliest occurrences are restricted to nouns. Even so, the noun is very rare, except in Ugaritic.²⁴

Ugaritic

Ugarit was an ancient city-state on the northern Mediterranean coast roughly opposite modern Cyprus. Its discovery has furnished "the most detailed body of material of the 'Canaanite' culture which the Israelite tribes found in the 'promised land' at the time of the conquest."²⁵ Gleason Archer gives the following summary of the Ugaritic language and tablets:

The Ugaritic or Ras Shamra Tablets (discovered by [Claude] Schaeffer in 1929) date from about 1400 B.C. They are written in a thirty-letter alphabet and couched in a language more closely related to Hebrew than any other known Semitic dialect. They principally consist in religious epic poetry referring to such deities as El, Baal, Anath, Asherat, and Mot, and exhibit the depraved polytheism which characterized the Canaanites at the time of the Israelite conquest.²⁶

The Ugaritic cognates of עֶלְם and עֶלְמָה are *glm* (masculine) and *glmt* (feminine), respectively.²⁷ However, Dohmen points out that

Lexically, a wide range in meanings is usually posited for Ugar. *glm/glmt*: "youth, child, male offspring, servant, messenger, girl, maid, etc."²⁸

He goes on to state that the great majority of occurrences of *glm* refer to messengers or servants of the gods, and on this basis suggests a basic meaning represented by the notion of "representation."

Unfortunately, there are very few occurrences of *glmt*, and "only three can be interpreted with certainty as the fem. form of *glm*;" all three refer to a goddess.²⁹

The Legend of King Keret

The first two references occur in "The Legend of King Keret."³⁰

- The first occurrence is in KRT A, iv, line 204.³¹ Hurriya, King Keret's bride to be, is referred to as a *glmt*. Ginsberg translates it simply as *lass* in *ANET*. According to Bruce Vawter, "*glmt* [here] certainly refers to

24 The summary in this paragraph is based on Dohmen, *ibid.*, XI:155-56. Chaim Rabin, "Semitic Languages," *EncJudaica*, XIV:1149, uses the designation "Northwest Semitic" rather than Dohmen's "West Semitic."

25 Mario Liverani, "Ugarit; Ugaritic," *ISBE*, IV:937.

26 Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 167; brackets added.

27 The verb form is unattested in Ugaritic (*ibid.*, p. 158).

28 Dohmen, "עֶלְמָה," XI:157.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *ANET*, pp. 142-49; reconstruction and translation by H. L. Ginsberg.

31 *Ibid.* p. 145.

a young, unmarried girl."³²

- The second occurrence is in KRT B, ii, lines 22 and 23.³³ *glmt* in line 23 parallels *att*, which can be used to mean either *woman* or *wife*. Here Ginsberg translates *glmt* as *maid*.

Dohmen, however, thinks that these two uses, as well as the third use to be discussed presently, all refer to a woman of alien ethnicity who has entered into a relationship with a man of different origins.³⁴ However, if this observation points to the essential meaning of *glmt*, it is certainly open to question. That these women were alien with respect to their corresponding men was concluded on grounds other than the meaning of *glmt*. Thus *glmt* is not needed to establish this fact and could simply be used to describe these alien women as "young, unmarried girls." Nevertheless, Dohmen pursues his tentative conclusion for the meaning of *glmt* by tracing the use of *עַלְמָה* in the Bible and arguing that these uses reflect the meaning of "alien woman" or "foreign woman."

The "Poem of Nikkal"

The third occurrence of *glmt* is a bit more complicated and much more discussed. It occurs in the "Poem of Nikkal," a "charming lyric which is quite distinct from the wooden style of the major epics"³⁵ and somewhat of a precursor to the modern romance novel. It deals³⁶ with the marriage of *Nkl*, or Nikkal, the Sumerian and Hurrian moon goddess³⁷ to the West Semitic moon god, *Yrh*, or *Yarah*.³⁸ The poem is inscribed on a small clay tablet about 12 by 8 centimeters that was excavated by Charles Virolleaud at Ras Shamra (Ugarit) in 1933. Virolleaud also was the first to publish a copy of the text. The tablet contains 50 short lines that are arranged in two paragraphs (lines 1-39 and lines 40-50), separated from each other by a line drawn across the tablet. The second paragraph is not part of the Nikkal poem. H. L. Ginsberg points out that the difficulties in translating and interpreting the poem "include numerous lacunae, a sparing use of the word-divider and linguistic conundrums."³⁹ The poem is divided into four parts: prologue, part 1, part 2, and epilogue. The two parts of the body of the poem consists of lines 3-15 and lines 16-37, respectively. The first part of the poem is much more difficult to understand than the second part, due both to its poorer state of preservation and its abrupt style that apparently alludes to events rather than relates them.

(1) Line 7

Line 7 in the first part of the poem is where *glmt* is used. Only one letter in this line is damaged, but it is almost certainly *n*. Thus it reads as follows: *hl glmt tld b[n]*. Since Ugaritic does not distinguish tenses or moods,⁴⁰ verbs can be difficult to translate into English. The verb *tld* here could be past, present, or future. In the following translation, *glmt* is translated "girl":

32 Bruce Vawter, "The Ugaritic Use of GLMT," *CBQ* 14 (October 1952):319.; brackets added.

33 *ANET*, p. 146.

34 Dohmen, "עַלְמָה," XI:157.

35 Vawter, "The Ugaritic Use of GLMT," pp. 319-20.

36 Most of the following material in this summary is taken from Albrecht Goetze, "The Nikkal Poem from Ras Shamra," *JBL* 60 (1941):353-54, 359, 371.

37 According to H. L. Ginsberg, "Two Religious Borrowings In Ugaritic Literature," Part I: "A Hurrian Myth in Semitic Dress." *Orientalia*, Nova Series 8 (1939):322, Nikkal was a prominent goddess of Sumerian origin, called Nin-Gal or "Great Lady," but "who also attained a considerable vogue among the Hurrians at Boghazkeui." The Hurrians were quite prominent at Ugarit and likely introduced her cult there.

38 Ugaritic, like Hebrew, has no vowels. Goetze vocalizes *Yrh* as *Yarah*, while Ginsberg vocalizes it as *Yarih*.

39 Ginsberg, "Two Religious Borrowings In Ugaritic Literature," Part I: "A Hurrian Myth in Semitic Dress." p. 317.

40 Verbs in Ugaritic, like Hebrew, are based on *aspects*. Also like Hebrew, it has two aspects: perfect for completed action and imperfect for uncompleted action. See Goetze, "The Nikkal Poem from Ras Shamra," p. 370.

Line 7: *hl glmt tld bn* "Behold, the girl bears [has borne] [will bear] a son"⁴¹

This line has been interpreted in two different ways.

Cyrus Gordon⁴² and Theodor Gaster⁴³ interpreted this line as prophesying an event consequent on a union (marriage) not yet consummated. Thus line 7 would be translated somewhat as follows:

Gordon on Line 7: "Behold, the girl will bear a son."

On the other hand, Ginsberg and Goetze take line 7 to be

part of a short introduction in which the poet explains what has occasioned the groom's decision to take himself a wife. It is something not unheard of before, inside mythology or out. *Nkl* has been seduced by her lover and is about to bear, or has already borne a child.⁴⁴

With this interpretation, the verb in line 7 would be translated either "bears" or "has borne":

"Behold, the girl bears a son."
or
"Behold, the girl has borne a son."

Goetze actually translates line 7 as follows:

Goetze on Line 7: "Surely the young woman gave birth to a son."⁴⁵

These two interpretations are radically different. The difference between them is actually based on how lines 3-5 are reconstructed and interpreted, but especially line 5.

(2) Line 5

The first part of line 3 is damaged, but Goetze translates the second part "at sunset."⁴⁶ Line 4 starts with the name *Yarah* (*yrh*) followed by the verb *tkh*. Although he admits the verb is difficult, Goetze translates it "went out,"⁴⁷ Ginsberg translates the verb as "seized,"⁴⁸ and Vawter suggests "came forth."⁴⁹ So the clause would be either "Yarah went out," "Yarah seized," or "Yarah came forth." However, Goetze draws the following conclusion:

41 Vawter, "The Ugaritic Use of GLMT," p. 320; brackets original. Note that Goetze, "The Nikkal Poem from Ras Shamra," pp. 372, 374, accepts either "girl" or "young woman." Vawter also points out that the verbal correspondence between line 7 and Isaiah 7:14 "has, of course, not escaped notice" (n. 3). Theodore H. Gaster, "The 'Graces' in Semitic Folklore: A Wedding-song from Ras Shamra," *JRAS* (January 1938):50, states that "these words equate with the famous utterance, Isaiah vii, 14...thus shown to be a quotation!" According to Vawter, Gordon believes it to be only a coincidence (p. 320, n. 3).

42 An undocumented comment by Vawter, "The Ugaritic Use of GLMT," p. 320, probably from Gordon's *Ugaritic Literature* (Rome, 1949).

43 Theodor H. Gaster, "On A Proto-Hebrew Poem from Ras Shamra," *JBL* 57 (March 1938):83. However, according to Gaster's paper, "The 'Graces' in Semitic Folklore: A Wedding-song from Ras Shamra," pp. 37-38, he does not believe the bride-to-be is Nikkal.

44 Vawter, "The Ugaritic Use of GLMT," p. 320.

45 Goetze, "The Nikkal Poem from Ras Shamra," p. 372. On p. 374 he gives the same translation but with "girl" instead of "young woman."

46 Or, "at the setting of the sun." This is the translation of Ginsberg, "Two Religious Borrowings In Ugaritic Literature," Part I: "A Hurrian Myth in Semitic Dress." p. 323, except that he transliterates *špš* (*sun*) as *Shapsh*.

47 Goetze, "The Nikkal Poem from Ras Shamra," pp. 371-72.

48 Ginsberg, "Two Religious Borrowings In Ugaritic Literature," Part I: "A Hurrian Myth in Semitic Dress." p. 323.

49 Vawter, "The Ugaritic Use of GLMT," p. 320.

"That Nikkal is the object of Yarah's action is obvious at any rate."⁵⁰

The remainder of line 4 is significantly damaged. Goetze reconstructs it to say, "he made love to her,"⁵¹ while Ginsberg translates it "he embraced."⁵²

Line 5 is also severely damaged. It begins with the verb *tld* (*to bear*) followed by a *b*. In Goetze's reconstruction, he places an *n* after the *b*, making the word *bn*, or *son*, and translates the verb as an English past tense. So he translates lines 3-5 as follows:

"At sunset"
"Yarah went out, he made love to her"
"So that she finally bore him a son"⁵³

On the basis of this reconstruction Goetze draws his conclusion: "The situation [in lines 3-5], then, is this: Yarah had seduced Nikkal. Section two [beginning with line 7] seems to describe the plight in which the young mother found herself."⁵⁴

On the other hand, in Gordon's reconstruction, instead of an *n*, he places *tlt* after the *b*, making the word *btlt*. This noun, *btlt*, which Gordon translates "virgin," is the cognate of Hebrew בְּתוּלָה (*bethulah*). He translates the verb as an English future tense, and instead of "she" as the subject coming from the verb, Gordon gives the verb an explicit subject, namely the "virgin": "a virgin will give birth."⁵⁵

Gordon on Line 5: "A virgin will give birth"

On the basis of this reconstruction, Gordon draws the conclusion that both lines 5 and 7 are predictions of a future birth of a child after the marriage is consummated.

This material can be summarized as follows:

50 Goetze, "The Nikkal Poem from Ras Shamra," p. 372.

51 Ibid., p. 371.

52 Ginsberg, "Two Religious Borrowings In Ugaritic Literature," Part I: "A Hurrian Myth in Semitic Dress," p. 323. Vawter, "The Ugaritic Use of GLMT," p. 320, makes a humorous observation at this point: "Thereupon [after the first part of line 4], in the best tradition of a modern novel, the text trails off into a tantalizing series of dots, having given only the beginning of a verb to express what *Yrh* did."

53 Goetze, "The Nikkal Poem from Ras Shamra," p. 371.

54 Ibid., p. 372; brackets added. According to Vawter, "The Ugaritic Use of GLMT," p. 320, line 6 consists of "an obscure reference to the *Krt*, the *kwšrw* of Ps. 68, 7, which in Ugaritic are personified, benign beings who watch over such joyful events as weddings and births." (See also Gaster, "The 'Graces' in Semitic Folklore: A Wedding-song from Ras Shamra.") Vawter continues, "There are further fragmentary indications in lines 8, 9, and 12, of the mutual love between the moon-god and the girl, who is obviously *Nkl*. On such admittedly slender evidence are *Yrh*'s morals impugned." Lines 8 and 12 both state the same thing: "She passionately longed for his love" (as translated by Goetze). Line 9 is yet a bit more erotic.

55 An undocumented comment by Vawter, "The Ugaritic Use of GLMT," p. 320-21, probably from Gordon's *Ugaritic Literature* (Rome, 1949).

Ugaritic Scholar	Purpose of Lines 3-7	Translation of Lines 5 and 7
Albrecht Goetze	A short introduction in which the poet explains what has occasioned the groom's decision to take himself a wife: Nikkal has been seduced by her lover and is about to bear, or has already borne, a child	5: "she bore him a son" 7: "surely the young woman [or girl] gave birth to a son"
Cyrus H. Gordon	A prophecy of an event consequent on a union not yet consummated	5: "a virgin will give birth" 7: "behold, the girl will bear a son"

It is important to note the warning that Vawter makes at this point:

In view of the tablet's damaged condition, this or any other interpretation must be founded on a fair amount of reconstruction, and therefore must remain conjectural.⁵⁶

However, since the Ugaritic word *btlt* corresponds to the Hebrew בְּתוּלָה (*bethulah*), which many would argue is the word for *virgin* in Hebrew, Gordon's reconstruction of the Ugaritic text in line 5 is particularly important for the study of עֲלֻמָּה in the Bible, since now both *btlt* and *glmt* are applied to Nikkal at the same point of time in her life. For the discussion that follows, it is worth noting Vawter's conclusion about these two possible reconstructions of lines 5 and 7:

"The latter expression [Goetze's reconstruction] is quite stereotyped, but the former [Gordon's reconstruction] would be arresting enough in whatever literature it would be found."⁵⁷

It is also worth noting his conclusion about *glmt* in line 7:

Plainly we are not dealing here with certainties [about which reconstruction to choose], but if we accept Goetze's reconstruction and read line 7 with him, "Surely the girl gave birth to a son," we have one instance to show that *glmt* implies simply a marriageable young woman, and may be applied indifferently to one who is a virgin or not.⁵⁸

The Use of the Ugaritic Data

(1) The Use of the "Poem of Nikkal" and the Cyrus Gordon Article

A short, one-page article by Gordon has acquired considerable notoriety, especially in studies on Isaiah 7:14.⁵⁹ Gordon, himself Jewish, has a twofold purpose in this article.

First, he argues that Matthew's citation of Isaiah 7:14 in 1:23 represents a *Jewish* interpretation of Isaiah 7:14:

⁵⁶ Vawter, "The Ugaritic Use of GLMT," p. 320.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 321; brackets added.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*; brackets added.

⁵⁹ Cyrus H. Gordon, " 'Almah in Isaiah 7:14," *JBR* 21 (April 1953):106.

The commonly held view that "virgin" [in Isaiah 7:14] 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 7:14.⁶⁰

The LXX translation of 'almah in Isaiah 7:14 is discussed in the section "παρθένος" (*parthénos*) later in this chapter.

Second, Gordon draws a conclusion from his reconstruction of line 5 in the "Poem of Nikkal."

The aim of this note is...to call attention to a source that has not yet been brought into the discussion [about the meaning of 'almah]. From Ugarit of around 1400 B.C. comes a text celebrating the marriage of the male and female lunar deities. It is there predicted that the goddess will bear a son. (For the translation, see my *Ugaritic Literature*, Rome, 1949, pp. 64-64.) The terminology is remarkably close to that in Isaiah 7:14. However, the Ugaritic statement that the bride will bear a son is fortunately given in parallelistic form; in 77:7 she is called by the exact etymological counterpart of Hebrew 'almah "young woman"; in 77:5 she is called by the exact etymological counterpart of Hebrew *betulah* "virgin." Therefore, the New Testament rendering of 'almah as "virgin" for Isaiah 7:14 rests on the older Jewish interpretation [the LXX translation], 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.⁶¹

Several Christian writers have made use of this Ugaritic material, especially this paragraph by Gordon, but many of the conclusions are incorrect. For example, Edward Hindson makes the following statement:

Much has been said of the Ras Shamra tablets that refer to the marriage between Nikkal and Yarih. Here the technical term for "virgin" is *btl* (cf. *bethūlah*), while the parallel expression is *glmt*. Both terms are applied to the yet unmarried Nikkal. Therefore, it appears that the two terms are used synonymously [sic] in Ras Shamra literature. Though *glmt* (cf. 'almah) is not the common word for "virgin" in Ugaritic, it is never used in Ras Shamra of a married woman and seems well suited for application to a woman who is not yet married.⁶²

There are a number of problems with this statement.

1. "The technical term for 'virgin' is *btl*." First, the word to which Hindson makes reference in the poem is *btlt*, not *btl*.⁶³ Second, according to Gordon, *btlt* is not the technical term for "virgin." He points out that in other Ugaritic literature *btlt* is regularly used of the goddess Anath, who was certainly not a virgin.⁶⁴ He further states, "Neither 'almah nor *betulah* nor *parthenos* means necessarily what 'virgin' means in English."⁶⁵ Gordon also asserts that "there is no word in the Near Eastern languages that by itself

60 Ibid.; brackets added.

61 Ibid.; brackets added.

62 Edward E. Hindson, *Isaiah's Immanuel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1979), p. 39. See also Hindson's earlier version of this material in his paper, "Isaiah's Immanuel," *Grace Journal* 10 (Fall 1969):3-15.

63 Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), chap. 16, p. 183 and chap. 19, p. 377.

64 Cyrus H. Gordon, "The Patriarchal Age." *JBR* 21 (October 1953):240.

65 Ibid., p. 241. In English "virgin" is used in a strict, unambiguous sense. *Virgo intacta* is Latin for *untouched virgin* and is the same as what "virgin" means in English. Gordon's use of "virgin" for *bethulah* in " 'Almah in Isaiah 7:14," probably

means *virgo intacta*."⁶⁶

2. "Both terms are applied to the yet unmarried Nikkal. Therefore, it appears that the two terms are used synonymously [*sic*] in Ras Shamra literature." First, this argument loses all of its force since there is a completely different reconstruction of line 5 in which *btlt* does not occur. But since Ugaritic scholars disagree on the reconstruction, and since in no other place are *btlt* and *glmt* used in parallel, no conclusions can be drawn about whether they might be synonyms. Second, even if they are synonyms, since *btlt* does not mean *virgo intacta*, the synonymous relationship would not support an argument that *glmt* means *virgo intacta*.
3. "...*glmt*...is never used in Ras Shamra of a married woman." This may be true (although there is at least some question about its second use in the King Keret legend when it occurs parallel to *att*), but it is hardly impressive when *glmt* occurs with certainly only three times in all of the extant Ugaritic literature.
4. "*glmt*...seems well suited for application to a woman who is not yet married." This may also be true, but all of a sudden Hindson's argument has changed from showing it means "virgin" to suggesting it simply describes an unmarried woman. Being unmarried does not mean a girl is a virgin, and if Goetze's reconstruction of line 5 is correct, Nikkal, though described by *glmt*, was at that point in time neither married nor a virgin.

Michael Rydelnik presents a similar argument based on Gordon's paper.

Cyrus Gordon has argued that ancient (pre-Mosaic) Ugaritic, which is cognate to Hebrew, used the word parallel to *‘almah* of a virgin goddess. Since the Ugaritic annunciation formula used a very similar construction to Isa. 7:14, Gordon concluded that *‘almah* should rightly be translated "virgin."⁶⁷

Again, whether Nikkal was a *virgo intacta* before her wedding is open to serious question because of the two possible reconstructions of line 5. But even if Gordon's reconstruction is accepted, which preserves her chastity by putting her child bearing in the future after her marriage to Yarah, his comments cited above show that he did not think either *btlt* or *glmt* meant a *virgo intacta*.

What is rather astonishing, though, is that even a scholar of the stature of E. J. Young builds a similar argument by treating Gordon's reconstruction as if there were no other and also by completely missing the comments that Gordon himself makes about the Ugaritic words *btlt* or *glmt*.⁶⁸ In addition, he emphasizes that *glmt* is applied to Nikkal only before her marriage to Yarah.⁶⁹ However, since there is another possible reconstruction of line 5, there is no way of knowing whether Nikkal had been seduced by Yarah before the marriage took place. Then she would be an unmarried woman, yes, but not a virgin.

Another Christian writer, Michael Brown, seems to have made the opposite mistake. After pointing out that a number of Christian writers used Gordon's short, one-page article to support the view that *‘almah* means "virgin," he goes on to state the following:

reflects this looser sense of "virgin." M. Tsevat, "בתולה", *TDOT*, II:340, points out that neither the Greek *parthénos* nor the Latin *virgo* originally or exclusively meant *virgo intacta*.

66 Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, chap. 19, p. 378. Whether either *btlt* or *glmt* (or their Hebrew counterparts) mean *virgo intacta* is discussed at more length later in this chapter. Also, whether any of the Semitic languages have a word that means *virgo intacta* is also discussed at some length. However, the point made here is that these issues are far more complicated than the simple statement by Hindson would suggest.

67 Michael Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope: Is the Hebrew Bible Really Messianic?* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), p. 152.

68 Edward J. Young, "The Immanuel Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14-16," *WTJ* 15 (May 1953):120-22.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 123.

A more careful analysis of the Ugaritic tablets, however, indicated that this reading [of line 5] was clearly in error, and scholars since then have transcribed the lines as *hl glm tld bn...*⁷⁰

First, the plural for "lines" is curious since *hl glm tld bn* is one line. Second, the line to which Brown probably was referring is line 5, while he cited line 7. Line 7 has never been in dispute: Gordon, Gaster, Ginsberg, and Goetze all take *hl glm tld bn* to be correct. But even if Brown's remarks be channeled to line 5, no analysis subsequent to Gordon's paper--published in 1953--negated his reconstruction of line 5. Two facts should be noted. First, the alternate reconstruction by Goetze was published in 1941, before, not after, Gordon's paper, and second, Gordon still maintained his reconstruction of line 5 in his *Ugaritic Textbook*, published in 1965. These are two competing reconstructions; one did not replace the other.

If anything, it would appear that Gordon's view has taken the lead in several of the standard reference works. Notice the following statements about *btlt* and *glm t* being used in parallel, which could only refer to the "Poem of Nikkal."

- O. J. Baab, *IDB*, 1962: "At Ugarit, the word *glm t* is placed in parallelism with the word *btlt*, "virgin," precisely in a story of annunciation."⁷¹
- Shalom Paul, *EncJudaica*, 1971: "In Genesis 24:16, 43, Rebekah is first called a *betulâh* and then an *‘almah*. Exactly the same interchange of the two words appears in a Ugaritic text."⁷²
- Harry Orlinsky, *IDB SV*, 1976: "The term [*btlt*] is applied in the Ugaritic texts to the goddess Anath (paralleled by *glm t*=Heb. *‘almah* , on which see §3 below), in contexts which are quite explicit sexually."⁷³
- Allan MacRae, *TWOT*, 1980: "In Ugaritic the word [*‘almâ*] is used in poetic parallel with the cognate of *b^etûlâ*."⁷⁴

(2) The Use of "The Legend of King Keret"

This Ugaritic text receives much less attention than the "Poem of Nikkal," but it does receive some. It would seem that the only argument that can be constructed based on the Legend of King Keret is that in that text *glm t* is never used of a married woman. But again, since it is used only of the king's bride-to-be, and only twice, the argument is rather weak. Young, in fact, makes a more general statement: "*Glmt* is never used in Ras Shamra of a married woman."⁷⁵ Since *glm t* is used only one other time in the whole of the extant Ugaritic literature, namely in the "Poem of Nikkal," this argument is also weak.

70 Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, 5 vols., (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), vol. 3: *Messianic Prophecy Objections*, pp. 206-207, n. 62; brackets added.

71 O. J. Baab, "Virgin," *IDB*, IV:788. Note that the "annunciation" to which Baab refers is the announcement that Nikkal will soon conceive and bear a son.

72 Shalom M. Paul, "Virgin, Virginité," *EncJudaica*, XVI:160.

73 Harry M. Orlinsky, "Virgin," *IDB SV*, p. 939; brackets added. Unfortunately, Orlinsky has no further comment on this in §3 of this article. However, he could hardly be referring to any of the poems about Baal and Anath, because the words, *btlt* and *glm t*, are used in parallel only in Gordon's reconstruction of line 5 in the "Poem of Nikkal." Nevertheless, the point remains that Orlinsky accepts that a parallel use exists, thus making the words roughly synonymous.

74 MacRae, "עלם," II:672; brackets added. For this statement MacRae cites the glossary entry for *glm t* in Gordon's *Ugaritic Textbook*.

75 Young, "The Immanuel Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14-16," p. 121.

Assessment of the Ugaritic Data

With regard to the meaning and use of **עַלְמָה** in the Bible, the points derived from the Ugaritic data are as follows.

- The cognate word in Ugaritic is *glmt*.
- There are very few occurrences of *glmt*, and only three of those can be interpreted with certainty as the feminine form of *glm*; all three refer to goddesses.
- *glmt* is used twice of Hurriya, King Keret's bride-to-be, and once of Nikkal, Yarah's bride-to-be. Thus one can conclude that the word can be applied to a young, marriageable girl, but little else. Is it restricted to such a use? That is very difficult to say when there are only three uses of the word in all of the extant Ugaritic literature.
- Is *glmt* restricted to virgin girls? As far as the Legend of King Keret is concerned, Hurriya would seem to have been a virgin until her marriage to King Keret. There is no way to be sure with Nikkal, since there are two competing reconstructions of line 5 of the "Poem of Nikkal," in one of which she was seduced by Yarah before their marriage. If this is the correct reconstruction, then *glmt* can be a young, unmarried girl, whether or not a virgin. If Gordon's reconstruction in which she is not seduced is correct, with only three occurrences of *glmt* it would again be very difficult to say that *virgo intacta* is part of the meaning of the word.

The conclusion would seem to be that little certainty can be gained about the meaning and use of *glmt*, much less the Hebrew *‘almah*, from the Ugaritic data. In light of this summary, it is fitting to close this section on Ugaritic with the comments of Johannes De Moor:

Great caution should be observed in using Ugaritic for the elucidation of the text of the Hebrew Bible. Unfortunately the number of superficial comparative studies in this field is far too great, and there is a deplorable tendency to overestimate the indebtedness of the Israelites to the Canaanites.⁷⁶

Aramaic

The name *Aramaic* is taken from the Arameans, or the people of Aram.⁷⁷ They were prominent for a longer period of time than any other people but never developed an empire or even a strong kingdom. Yet their language, Aramaic, became the *lingua franca* during the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires.⁷⁸ Its use declined only gradually during the Hellenistic period but eventually all but vanished except in three areas: (1) in Arabia among the Nabateans and Palmyrenes into the Christian era; (2) in Palestine among the Jews and later among the Melkite Christians until the conquest by Islam; and (3) and in Mesopotamia among Jews, Christians, and Mandeans, in some cases up to the present day. Jewish literature in Aramaic includes the Targumim, the Palestinian Talmud and Midrashim, and the Gemara of the Babylonian Talmud, although not all in the same dialect. "Syriac" describes the Eastern Aramaic dialect spoken by the Christians who produced two translations of the Bible: the Peshitta (ca. second or third century A.D.) and the Syriac Hexapla (ca. mid-seventh century A.D.).⁷⁹ However, the Arameans themselves never gave the world any great literature or art, although others who used their language did.

76 Johannes C. De Moor, "Ugaritic," *IDB SV*, p. 930.

77 Most of this summary of Aramaic and the Arameans is based on the entries by William S. LaSor, "Aramaic," *ISBE*, I:229-33, Jonas Greenfield, "Aramaic," *IDB SV*, pp. 39-44, and Eduard Kutschler, "Aramaic," *EncyJudaica*, III:259-87.

78 See, e.g., 2 Kgs. 18:26.

79 The word *Aramaic* is mistranslated as "Syriac" in the *KJV* in Ezra 4:7 and Dan. 2:4.

Many scholars have developed a classification scheme for the Aramaic dialects, though with slight variations. The one given here is that of Jonas Greenfield.⁸⁰

Early Aramaic
 Old Aramaic (up to about 700 B.C.)
 Official (Royal) Aramaic (about 700 - 300 B.C.)
 Middle Aramaic (about 300 B.C. - A.D. 200)
 Continuation of Official Aramaic
 Western Aramaic
 Eastern Aramaic
 Late Aramaic (A.D. 200 - 900)
 Western Aramaic
 Eastern Aramaic
 Modern Aramaic
 Western Aramaic
 Eastern Aramaic

According to Chaim Rabin,

The great importance of the Aramaic language group for the study of Hebrew is due (a) to its being the best preserved member of the Northwest Semitic branch, (b) to its persistent influence on Hebrew at almost all the stages of the latter's development, (c) to the existence of several specific Jewish-Aramaic dialects at various times, beginning with biblical Aramaic and ending with today's colloquials from Iraq ("Kurdish") and Azerbaijan.⁸¹

Biblical Aramaic, previously called Chaldee, refers to the Aramaic language used occasionally in the Old Testament. These texts are

(1) two words in Gen. 31:47 used by Laban, whereas Jacob expressed the same idea in Hebrew; (2) one verse in Jer. 10:11 representing the testimony that the house of Israel was to make to the nations; (3) two portions in Ezra (4:8-6:18; 7:12-26), being principally correspondence between the enemies of the Jews and the Persian King Darius, and a letter from Artaxerxes to Ezra; (4) the central portion of Daniel (2:4b-7:28).⁸²

Now to the Aramaic cognate of עֲלָמָה. As noted in the previous section on the Hebrew root of עֲלָמָה, *BDB* lists three roots having the letters עֵלֶם. The second of these roots, whose meaning is "perhaps *to be mature* (sexually)," is where the nouns עֲלָם (‘*elem*, masculine) and עֲלָמָה (‘*almah*, feminine) are listed. In the etymology section of this root, *BDB* lists the Aramaic verb עֲלָם, apparently as the root, whose meaning is given as *to be strong*.⁸³ The Aramaic words that correspond to ‘*elem* and ‘*almah* have several variations: עֵלֶם (‘*lm*) and עֵלִים (‘*lym*) are both masculine singular;⁸⁴ the feminine also takes several forms, as noted in the following examples of the occurrences of the Aramaic cognates.

- Dohmen cites a line from the Kilamuwa Inscription that describes the conditions before King Kilamuwa

80 Greenfield, "Aramaic," *IDB SV*; it is quite similar to the slightly earlier one given by Kutscher, "Aramaic," *EncJudaica*.

81 Rabin, "Semitic Languages," XIV:1151.

82 LaSor, "Aramaic," I:229.

83 *BDB*, p. 761.

84 *Ibid.*

began his reign (9th century B.C.). The line uses the feminine singular *‘lmt*: "One gave an *‘lmt* for a sheep and a *gbr* [man] for a garment."⁸⁵ Dohmen, of course, suggests that the meaning of *‘lmt* here is similar to what he believes is the meaning of Ugaritic *glm*, namely, an "ethnically alien woman." However, John Steinmueller also cites this line from the Kilamuwa Inscription and states that Hugo Gressmann, J. Hehn, and Alfons Schultz render the word by *Jungfrau*, German for *virgin*.⁸⁶

- Dohmen also draws attention to two uses of the Old Aramaic masculine *‘lym*, once in an inscription on a 9th century B.C. statue from Tell Fekherīye and once in the 8th century Sefire inscriptions. He argues that it "comports well" with the Ugaritic masculine *glm* and states that its meaning in the Old Aramaic inscriptions is "sons or descendants," citing one inscription, "a hundred women shall suckle an infant, but he shall not have his fill."⁸⁷
- Steinmueller mentions that in the Aramaic papyri of the 5th century B.C. the plural masculine word "appears in the sense of 'lads' (Papyrus K, line 13)," and the feminine singular word is used "in the sense of 'maid' (Papyrus M b line 6)."⁸⁸
- Steinmueller also points out a double use of the feminine plural **עלמות** in the Kition Inscription from the 4th century B.C.⁸⁹ found in Cooke's work, *A Text-Book of North-Semitic Inscriptions*.⁹⁰ Cooke's comment on the line is "*virgins* who sang and danced in the temple rites; cf. **עלמות תופפות** Ps. 68:26. **עלמות** Ps. 46 (title). 1 Ch. 15 20" (italics original).
- Palmyrene was a West Aramaic dialect spoken in the early centuries A.D. In the Palmyrene Tariff of A.D. 137, also reproduced by Cooke, *A Text-Book of North-Semitic Inscriptions*, the feminine plural **עלימתא** is used for *female slaves* or *harlots*.⁹¹
- George Gray makes the point that the Targum of Jonathan uses the Aramaic cognate for the concubine who had been unfaithful in Judges 19:5, certainly not a virgin.⁹² However, this should not be surprising

85 Dohmen, "עלמה," XI:157; brackets added.

86 John E. Steinmueller, "Etymology and Biblical Usage of 'Almah," *CBQ* 2 (January 1940):29.

87 Dohmen, "עלמה," XI:156-57.

88 Steinmueller, "Etymology and Biblical Usage of 'Almah," pp. 29-30. The references Steinmueller gives are from *Aramaic Papyri Discovered at Assuan* by Sayce and Cowley (London, 1906). I did not have access to this source. However, Dohmen, "עלמה," XI:156, also mentions these papyri and suggests a later edition by Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1923) for the Elephantine papyri. The translations in this source generally are *servant* or *servants*.

89 Steinmueller, "Etymology and Biblical Usage of 'Almah," p. 30.

90 G. A. Cooke, *Text-Book of North-Semitic Inscriptions: Moabite, Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic, Nabataean, Palmyrene, Jewish* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1903), p. 68, line 9.

91 Cooke, *Text-Book of North-Semitic Inscriptions*, p. 330, lines 26 and 27. Cooke's translation of the line on p. 330 is "female slaves." However, on p. 335 he translates it "harlots." *BDB*, p. 761, lists this example as do Cuthbert Lattey, "The Term *Almah* in Is. 7:14," *CBQ* 9 (January 1947):92, Harold L. Creager, "The Immanuel Passage as Messianic Prophecy," *LQ* 7 (November 1955):341, n. 4, Steinmueller, "Etymology and Biblical Usage of 'Almah," p. 30, and George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah I-XXXIX*, in *The International Critical Commentary*, gen. ed., Charles Augustus Briggs (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), p. 127.

92 Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah I-XXXIX*, p. 127.

since the most that can be said about the targum is that the version extant today was "in use in the third century of the Christian era."⁹³ The Palmyrene Tariff was already applying the word to slaves and harlots in A.D. 137.

- Robert Dick Wilson also addresses the Targum of Jonathan and points out that the Targum uses the Aramaic *'ulemta* for the Hebrew *עַלְמָה* in Isaiah 7:14.⁹⁴ However, he states that it "cannot possibly argue in favor of the meaning 'young married woman'" and gives three reasons. (1) *עַלְמָה* in the Old Testament never has this meaning elsewhere. (2) In addition to *עַלְמָה*, *'ulemta* is also used to translate *na'ara, yalda, and bethula*, none of which mean "young married woman." (3) *'ulemta* is used of Rebecca when she met Eliezar; of Miriam when she was told to watch the infant Moses; of the 400 virgins of Jabesh Gilead (Judges 21:12); of Esther and the other virgins who were selected for the choice of Xerxes as wife.

One can see from these examples cited by various scholars that very little can be learned from the Aramaic texts about the meaning of *עַלְמָה* in Isaiah 7:14 or for that matter even in the Hebrew Bible as a whole. Moreover, neither of the Aramaic cognates are used in the biblical Aramaic sections.⁹⁵ In addition, it would appear significant that some of the major reference works, namely, *IDB, EncJudaic, ISBE, and TWOT*, do not mention Aramaic at all in their entries on "Virgin." To further evaluate the usefulness, or lack thereof, of the above examples, a statement by Steinmueller is important:

Just as in our modern languages there appears at times a gradual degradation of a word from its primitive meaning, so too in the Semitic tongues. This is apparent in our word. Thus *'elem* an adolescent or young man becomes in the late Aramaic period a young slave; afterwards every slave, and finally a slave veteran (cf. *Palmyrene Tariff*); and *'almah*, an adolescent, young girl or virgin, becomes a young slave, then a slave of any age, and finally an infamous slave or harlot (cf. *Palmyrene Tariff*).⁹⁶

Dohmen writes similarly:

From the 6th century B.C.E. onward, the nouns under discussion appear with increasing frequency in various Semitic languages, being used in a quite general and unnuanced sense for "boy, girl, slave, handmaid, etc." One text from the 4th or 3rd century B.C.E. appears to use *'lmt* in the sense of "female cultic servants."⁹⁷

Arabic

Arabia is the large peninsula between Egypt and Asia.⁹⁸ It has been called "the house of the Semites," but soon

93 Bruce M. Metzger, "Important Early Translations of the Bible," *BSac* 150 (January-March 1993):40.

94 Robert Dick Wilson, "The Meaning of *'Alma* (A.V. 'Virgin) in Isaiah VII. 14," *PTR* 24 (1926):315.

95 Only derivatives of *BDB*'s root III are used in the Aramaic texts in the Bible--*perpetuity, antiquity, forever* (*BDB*, p. 1106).

96 Steinmueller, "Etymology and Biblical Usage of *'Almah*," p. 33.

97 Dohmen, "*עַלְמָה*," XI:158.

98 Most of the material in this summary is taken from William LaSor, "Arabia," *ISBE*, I:220-26; James Boyd, "Arabic Language," *ISBE*, I:226-27; and Joshua Blau, "Arabic Language," *EncJudaica*, III:237-42.

after the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel, the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 indicates that both Hamitic (10:7) and Semitic (10:23) peoples originally settled in this area. The languages of Arabic and Ethiopic are generally grouped together as the South Semitic branch of the Semitic languages. Although both ancient and modern Arabic divides into a vast number of dialects, it is possible to divide it into two subbranches called Old South Arabic and North Arabic. However, since two groups of peoples can be identified in Arabia, namely, the sedentary peoples in the south and the nomads in the north, it is also possible that "North Arabic," the language of these nomads, should be classified as non-Arabic. One characteristic of Arabic is that its grammar changed at a slower rate than other Semitic languages. According to some scholars, Classical Arabic had its origins at least by the end of the fifth century A.D., where as others suggest that it developed from the dialect of Mecca through the influence of the Koran. Either way, it represents a stage of development approximately a thousand years after the early Old South Arabic inscriptions.

According to Dohmen, Old South Arabic inscriptions begin in the 8th century B.C., and equivalent words to *‘elem* and *‘almah* occur in both North Arabic and Old South Arabic within the semantic range of Aramaic occurrences.⁹⁹

In the etymology section of root II for **עלם**, *BDB* lists the Arabic verb that means *to be lustful*.¹⁰⁰ However, Arabic, a South Semitic language, is even less useful than Aramaic. Dohmen comments as follows:

In South Semitic, equivalents of the noun are found in North Arabic as well as Old South Arabic; these occurrences fall entirely within the semantic range of contemporary (the OSA [Old South Arabic] inscriptions begin in the 8th century B.C.E.) Aramaic occurrences. South Semitic nevertheless displays a wide range of meanings, reflected in numerous nominal and verbal derivatives.¹⁰¹

But prior to the release of volume 11 of *TDOT* (German edition, 1987-1988) Gray (1912) argued that *‘almah* is a derivative of this Arabic word meaning *to be lustful*. From this he gives the meaning of *‘almah* as follows:

עלמה means a girl, or young woman, above the age of childhood and sexual immaturity (in this being more specific than the synonymous **נערה**), a person of the age at which sexual emotion awakens and becomes potent; it asserts neither virginity nor the lack of it..¹⁰²

Then in 1958 the Koehler and Baumgartner Hebrew lexicon advocated the same view. Allan MacRae in *TWOT*, counters as follows:

The suggestion in KB [Koehler and Baumgartner] that they [Hebrew *‘elem* and *‘almah*] may be derived from an Arabic root meaning "to be vehemently affected with lust" is without foundation, particularly since Arabic literature comes from a time several centuries after the Biblical record, and the relationship, if any, is apt to be the reverse. According to KB *‘almâ* means "marriageable girl, young woman (until the birth of her first child)." The latter statement is purely conjectural, for there is no evidence on which to base it.¹⁰³

99 Dohmen, "עלמה," XI:156.

100 *BDB*, p. 761.

101 Dohmen, "עלמה," XI:156; brackets added.

102 Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah I-XXXIX*, p. 126.

103 MacRae, "עלם," II:672; brackets added. See also Steinmueller's critique of Gray's argument ("Etymology and Biblical

Summary of Usage of Cognates to עַלְמָה in the Semitic Languages

Based on the survey just given, if any conclusion is possible at all, it would seem to be that the words cognate to עַלְמָה during the era of biblical Hebrew suggest something like "young unmarried girl," who might or might not be a virgin, depending on the context. Certainly none could be a precise term for *virgo intacta*. Referring to the observation made by Steinmueller about Aramaic, a word meaning "young unmarried girl" could degenerate over the centuries into "slave girl" or "harlot," but it would seem unlikely that a word meaning *virgo intacta* could.

Before investigating the use of 'almah in the Hebrew Scriptures, attention must be given to the closely related Hebrew word, בְּתוּלָה (*bethulah*).

The Etymology of בְּתוּלָה:

The Hebrew Root

BDB gives the triconsonantal root of בְּתוּלָה (*bethulah*) as בתל.¹⁰⁴ The etymology section has only one entry, the Arabic word *btl*, which *BDB* translates *to sever* or *to separate*, although instead of suggesting that the Hebrew word is derived from this root, the entry is prefixed simply by "compare." Presumably a "virgin" is "separated" in the sense of being untouched by men.¹⁰⁵

Under this root *BDB* lists both בְּתוּלָה (*bethulah*), defined as *virgin*, and בְּתוּלִים (*bethulim*), defined as *virginity* or *tokens of virginity*.¹⁰⁶

The Etymology of בְּתוּלָה:

Cognate Languages

Here are examples of the cognate words of the Hebrew *bethulah* in other Semitic languages cited by various sources.

Arabic

With reference to *BDB*'s translation *to sever* or *to separate* for the Arabic word *btl*, Wenham notes that "usage suggests that this conclusion may not always be justified."¹⁰⁷ He gives an example from the 7th century A.D.: "In Shute tradition *batūl* is used as an epithet of Fatima, mother of Hasan and Hossein and several children." Fatima, or Fatimah, was the youngest daughter of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

Usage of 'Almah," pp. 33-34).

104 *BDB*, p. 143.

105 Gordon J. Wenham, "Betūlāh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" *VT* 22 (July 1972):344, n. 3.

106 This word is used, e.g., in Deut. 22:14, 15, 17, 20.

107 Wenham, "Betūlāh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 326.

Ugaritic

The Ugaritic word *btlt* has already been discussed earlier in this chapter in the Ugaritic section. Cyrus Gordon points out that *btlt* is frequently applied as an epithet of Anath, though she had frequent sex with Baal and was certainly not a virgin.¹⁰⁸ He further states that "Anath's epithet 'Virgin' need not be understood in the strict English sense."¹⁰⁹ According to Wenham, *btlt* instead refers to Anath's *eternal youth* and is not used in the sense of "virgin."¹¹⁰ In *ANET* Ginsberg translates *btlt* "maiden"--"the Maiden Anath."

Aramaic

The Aramaic cognate is **בתולתא** (*btwlt'*). An example of its use is found in texts excavated from Nippur, about 100 miles southeast of Baghdad. The work was done by an expedition from the University of Pennsylvania from 1889 to 1900. The results were published by James Montgomery in his *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (1913). According to Montgomery, the texts themselves should be dated no later than A.D. 600.¹¹¹ The example is from text number 13, line 9, which Montgomery translates this way: "Hark a voice in mysteries! Hark the voice of, the voice of a woman, a virgin travailing and not bearing."¹¹² Commenting on this line, he states, "The repetition in l. 11 [line 11] inclines me to the view that the virgin who 'travails and does not bear' is the wife, subject perhaps to miscarriage or feminine maladies."¹¹³ Such a comment makes the translation of *btwlt'* as "virgin" seem quite inappropriate. A wife miscarrying or in some way unable to bear children is certainly not a virgin in the sense of *virgo intacta*, which is the way the word is used in English.

Assyrian

The cognate in Assyrian is *batultu*. It does not occur in any of the extant texts as an epithet for a goddess, as in the case of Anath in Ugaritic.¹¹⁴

Wolfram von Soden, an eminent German Assyriologist (1908-1996), translated *batultu* as *Jungfrau*, the German word for *maiden, virgin*.¹¹⁵ However, *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (*CAD*) goes into more detail. It first defines the feminine singular form as "adolescent, nubile girl."¹¹⁶ The masculine form is *batūlu* and is defined simply as "young man (adolescent)."¹¹⁷ But the description goes on to state that "the term designates an age group, that of adolescent males...before marriage," and only in certain contexts "stress is placed on the virginity of the *batūlu*,"¹¹⁸ which presumably would be the same for the feminine *batultu*.

Despite this claim, J. J. Finkelstein argues that *batultu* is apparently limited to age distinction. In his paper "Sex Offenses in Sumerian Laws," he discusses the case of the rape of an unmarried and unbetrothed virgin in Middle Assyrian Law A55.

108 Gordon, "The Patriarchal Age," p. 240.

109 Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, chap. 19, p. 377.

110 Wenham, "Betūlāh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 327.

111 James A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1913), p. 105.

112 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

113 *Ibid.*, p. 181; brackets added.

114 Tsevat, "בְּתוּלָה," II:339.

115 Cited by Wenham, "Betūlāh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 327.

116 *CAD*, vol. II, B, p. 173.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

118 *Ibid.*

The girl is first described as a *batultu*, "virgin," an age distinction defining her as "pre-nubile" and only implicitly, therefore, untouched. She is then more explicitly described as not yet having been deflowered, nor taken in marriage.¹¹⁹

Another writer, B. Landsberger, also argues that *batūlu* and *batultu* refer only to a specific age and rejects CAD's suggestion that in certain contexts, particularly in neo-Babylonian marriage contracts, "batultu has the connotation virgin."¹²⁰ In his paper, Landsberger constructs a table showing how these two Assyrian words fit into the general scheme of Sumerian and Assyrian vocabulary:¹²¹

	Language	Pre-adolescents	Adolescents	Married or engaged in Temple Service
Male	Sumerian	lú-tur	guruš-tur	guruš
Male	Akkadian	sehru	batūlu	etlu
Meaning		(young) boy	teenage boy	young man
Female	Sumerian	munuz-tur	ki-sikil-tur	ki-sikil
Female	Akkadian	sehertu	batultu	(w)ardatu
Meaning		(young) girl	teenage girl	young woman

According to Wenham,

This table shows that the primary distinction between these terms is one of age...There is in fact no word for "virgin" in Sumerian or Akkadian: the concept of virginity can only be expressed negatively in these languages..."who is not deflowered."¹²²

To make these points quite clear, Wenham goes on to cite Landsberger on the Middle Assyrian Law A55, the law discussed by Finkelstein:¹²³

(If someone) took by force and dishonoured a man's (daughter), a *batultu*, (who was dwelling in her father's house), whose (body?) had not been soiled, who had not been (forcibly?) deflowered and not married (betrothed) and had no legal claim against her father's house ... if the ravisher has no wife, he shall give in silver to her father three times (?) the bride money for a *batultu*. The ravisher shall marry her and may not divorce her. If the father does not agree, he may accept in silver three times (the bride money) for a *batultu*, and give his daughter to whomever he pleases.

The additional qualifying clauses indicate that *batultu* does not by itself carry the connotation of "virgin."¹²⁴ *Virgo*

119 J. J. Finkelstein, "Sex Offenses in Sumerian Laws," *JAOS* 86 (October-December 1966):356-57. In n. 3, p. 357, after citing the definition, "adolescent, nubile girl," from CAD, vol. II, B, p. 173, he states that *batultum* "would be an appropriate designation for a girl from the time she is differentiated from the general category 'child' (*šerru*) up to the point where she becomes an *ardatum*, at which time she would have been married, or have become a prostitute, or taken up some other sacerdotal or pseudo- sacerdotal career."

120 B. Landsberger, cited by Wenham, "Betūlāh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 328, n. 3.

121 Ibid.

122 Wenham, "Betūlāh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 328.

123 Ibid., p. 329, Wenham citing the wording of the law given by Landsberger. Note the close parallels to this Assyrian law in the Old Testament.

124 Wenham, *ibid.* Wenham also states that "in earlier studies of this law Koschaker had argued that since *batultu* meant 'virgin,' most of the qualifying clauses were pleonastic and evidence that this law had been expanded by a pedantic

intacta can be specified only negatively--"who has not been soiled," "who has not been deflowered," etc.

Egyptian

The languages spoken in ancient Egypt before the Muslim spread of Arabic are not considered Semitic. However, in his entry on **בְּתוּלָה**, M. Tsevat draws the following conclusion:

Summarizing, it can be stated that *hwn.t* is not used to denote biological virginity, but rather youthful vigor and potential motherhood.¹²⁵

Summary of Usage of Cognates to **בְּתוּלָה** in the Semitic Languages

From this brief survey it would seem there is little evidence that the words cognate to **בְּתוּלָה** in these Semitic languages would be precise terms for *virgo intacta*. Wenham states that "Akkadian and Ugaritic cognates suggest that Hebrew *betûlāh* should be translated 'girl of marriageable age' rather than 'virgin'."¹²⁶

The following section gives a brief review of the use of **בְּתוּלָה** in the Hebrew Bible.

The Use of **בְּתוּלָה in the Hebrew Scriptures**

A Girl of Marriageable Age

בְּתוּלָה is attested only in the feminine; it occurs 33 times in the singular and 17 times in the plural for a total of 50 times.¹²⁷ Gordon Wenham has written a major, and quite lengthy, paper on the use of the Hebrew word **בְּתוּלָה** in the Bible.¹²⁸ He also discussed the use of the Semitic cognate words and has already been cited a number of times in this chapter. However, the bulk of his paper analyzes in depth the use of **בְּתוּלָה** in the Hebrew Scriptures. He points out that Hebrew lexicons and modern translations of the Old Testament generally translate **בְּתוּלָה** as "virgin," but his paper is a detailed argument against that view.

It is the contention of this article that *betûlāh* has no more reference to virginity than the English word "girl." Rather it denoted a "girl of marriageable age," who may or may not be a virgin, depending on the circumstances.¹²⁹

lawyer. However, the discovery of earlier Sumerian laws using similar circumlocutions to define virginity makes this unlikely."

125 Tsevat, "**בְּתוּלָה**," II:339.

126 Wenham, "Betûlāh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 347.

127 Orlinsky, "Virgin," p. 939. Orlinsky's count of 50 occurrences is in agreement with my count using *The Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance* (1890), apparently based on the Van der Hooght Hebrew Bible. Tsevat, "**בְּתוּלָה**," II:341, counts 51 occurrences.

128 Wenham, "Betûlāh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" pp. 326-48.

129 *Ibid.*, 326.

At the end of his paper, he concludes the following:

To sum up, Akkadian and Ugaritic cognates suggest that Hebrew *betûlâh* should be translated "girl of marriageable age" rather than "virgin." This is substantiated by an examination of the biblical texts mentioning *betûlôt*. Since many *betûlôt* were virgins, it is not difficult to confuse the concepts. It can be well understood that *betûlâh* came to include within its range those features which may usually be presumed in an unmarried girl, and may even, in context, be used to express this narrow meaning. But this is very far from the common assertion that *betûlâh* is a technical term for "virgin." Indeed the evidence as we have seen excludes such a restriction of its essential meaning. It is not until the Christian era that there is clear evidence that *betûlâh* had become a technical term for "virgin."¹³⁰

Arguments for this View

It is important to note several standard reference works that take this view:

- Gordon Wenham, *ISBE*, "Virgin": "*Betûlâ* denotes a girl of marriageable age, one who has recently passed puberty and is therefore at the height of her strength and beauty."¹³¹ (This one should not be surprising because the *ISBE* entry was written by Wenham!)
- Bruce Waltke, *TWOT*, "betûlâ": "A strong case can be presented that *betûlâ* is not a technical term for *virgo intacta* in the OT, a conclusion that has important bearing on the meaning of 'almâ in Isa 7:14."¹³²
- Ronald Youngblood, *ISBE*, "Immanuel": "Contrary to common opinion, *betûlâ* does not always or even necessarily mean 'virgin'..."¹³³
- Shalom Paul, *EncJudaica*, "Virgin, Virginité": "The biblical *betulah* (בְּתוּלָה) is in fact an ambiguous term which in nonlegal contexts may denote an age of life rather than a physical state."¹³⁴
- M. Tsevat, *TDOT*, " בְּתוּלָה ": "The feminine does not mean 'virgin' in any language exclusively (Aram.), mainly (Heb.), or generally (Akk. [and Ugar.?)."¹³⁵
- Harry Orlinsky, *IDB SV*, "Virgin": "It most often denotes a girl who is sexually mature, of marriageable age. The element of chastity may or may not be present (or stressed), depending on the context."¹³⁶

It is also important to recall the general statement by Cyrus Gordon noted previously. In the glossary of his *Ugaritic Textbook*, he makes the following statement for the cognate *btlt*: "There is no word in the Near Eastern

130 Ibid., p. 347. Tsevat, " בְּתוּלָה ", II:341, comes close to this conclusion. He argues that "out of the 51 times that *bethulah* occurs in the OT, 3 times it clearly means 'virgin' (Lev. 21:13f.; Dt. 22:19; Ezk. 44:22), and once it certainly does not [Joel 1:8]." Concerning Tsevat's count of 51, see footnote 127.

131 Gordon J. Wenham, "Virgin," *ISBE*, IV:989-990.

132 Bruce K. Waltke, "betûlâ," *TWOT*, I:137.

133 Ronald F. Youngblood, "Immanuel," *ISBE*, II:807.

134 Paul, "Virgin, Virginité," XVI:160. He also states, "In legal contexts, however, *betulah* denotes a virgin in the strict sense (as does *batultu* in certain Akkadian legal contexts)." However, it was noted above that Wenham, Finkelstein, and Landsberger argued from the redundancy used in Middle Assyrian Law A55 that even in legal texts *batultu* denoted only age distinction and did not mean *virgo intacta*.

135 Tsevat, " בְּתוּלָה ", II:340; brackets original.

136 Orlinsky, "Virgin," p. 939.

languages that by itself means *virgo intacta*."

Wenham uses twenty pages of his paper to examine the use of בְּתוּלָה in the legal, narrative, and poetic texts of the Hebrew Scriptures. Rather than retrace those steps here, it is sufficient to cite the more concise arguments for his view in the *ISBE* entry. There are four.¹³⁷

That the right meaning of *betûlâ* is "girl of marriageable age" rather than "virgin" is demonstrated by several considerations.

First, this is the likeliest meaning of similar words in other Semitic languages. Akk. *batultu* means "adolescent, nubile girl." In Ugaritic Baal's wife is called *btlt*. An Aramaic text speaks of a *btwlt'* in labor.

Second, in Hebrew poetry *betûlôt* [plural] often stand in parallel with "young men" (*bahûrîm*) as opposed to young children on the one hand and the elderly on the other (Dt. 32:25; Isa. 23:4; Lam. 1:18; 2:21). This suggests that the distinction of age is primary here.¹³⁸

Third, Joel 1:8 ("Lament like a *betûlâ*...for the husband of her youth") shows the inappropriateness of rendering *betûlâ* as "virgin." The *betûlâ* is a young widowed wife, not merely a fiancée as English versions misleadingly suggest by translating *ba'al* here as "bridegroom" instead of "husband," its normal meaning.

Finally, the references to *betûlâ* in the legal texts (e.g., Ex. 22:16f. [*MT* 15f.]) make just as much sense rendered "marriageable girl" as "virgin."¹³⁹ Of course, in biblical society girls married young and premarital sex was viewed with contempt, so girls were expected to be virgins when married; but that is not what *betûlâ* refers to. It indicates age and eligibility for marriage. Similarly, when cities (e.g., Jerusalem, Isa. 37:22; Babylon, 47:1) or nations (e.g., Egypt, Jer. 46:11) are apostrophized as "virgin daughter of...," the allusion is to their beauty, strength, and maybe their fecundity, not their purity.¹⁴⁰

Wenham's third argument cited above is especially important. The *NASB* renders Joel 1:8 as follows, except for the Hebrew substitutions:

Wail like a בְּתוּלָה girded with sackcloth

For the בַּעַל [*ba'al*] of her youth.

Wenham has a more detailed argument in his paper in *Vetus Testamentum*:

ba'al literally means 'lord' and is a regular word for husband. *Prima facie* then *betûlâh* should not be translated 'virgin', as this text presupposes she has been married. To preserve the translation 'virgin' modern English translations translate *ba'al* by 'bridegroom'. This meaning is however unattested

137 Wenham, "Virgin," IV:989; brackets added in second argument and brackets original in final argument.

138 As far back as the mid-nineteenth century, E. Henderson, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, 2nd ed. (London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1857), p. 63, noted the connection between בְּתוּלָה and age distinction, citing a number of texts where that concept is prominent (Deut. 32:25; 2 Chron. 36:17; Ps. 148:12; Jer. 51:22)--"in all which passages בְּתוּלָה is obviously distinctive of age, and not expressly of virginity, though it may be implied" (emphasis original).

139 In his *ISBE* entry ("Virgin"), Wenham devotes two large paragraphs to a discussion of perhaps the most difficult legal text, Deut. 22:13-21. In his paper, "Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" he devotes about six pages to it (pp. 330-336)!

140 The *Stone Edition* translates this phrase in Lam. 2:13 as "maiden daughter of Zion."

elsewhere in the Bible. It could possibly be defended on the grounds that betrothal in biblical law was nearly as binding as marriage itself. But marriage was in large measure arranged by the bride's parents and the bridegroom with the girl having little to do with it. It may therefore be wondered why the death of her fiancé, whom she hardly knew, should be used by the prophet as an example of terrible grief. The imagery is the more powerful and plausible if Joel is describing a young girl widowed shortly after her marriage. She has lost a husband and her prospects for finding another are not great.¹⁴¹

E. J. Young gives a detailed analysis of a number of texts to demonstrate that *ba'al* refers to a married man and not to one who is just betrothed.¹⁴² A number of scholars in the standard reference works make essentially the same argument as Wenham and Young regarding Joel 1:8.

- Harry Orlinsky, *IDB SV*, "Virgin": "Especially instructive is Joel 1:8...RSV has mistranslated בתולה as 'virgin' (even though she is married!) forcing בעל ('husband') to be rendered 'bridegroom.'"¹⁴³
- Bruce Waltke, *TWOT*, "betûlâ": "But in Joel 1:8, where the *betûlâ* is called upon to lament the death of her *ba'al* 'husband,' it probably does not mean 'virgin' for elsewhere *ba'al* is the regular word for 'husband' and its usual translation by 'bridegroom' in the versions is otherwise unattested."¹⁴⁴
- M. Tsevat, *TDOT*, "בתולה": "[In Joel 1:8] this interpretation [that בתולה here means 'virgin'] can be avoided only by the singular assumption that *ba'al* means not only 'husband,' but also "fiancé."¹⁴⁵

So Joel 1:8 is a text in which בתולה is applied to a woman whose husband, not her betrothed, had died. Thus, as Wenham points out, she clearly was not a virgin, and בתולה should not be translated that way. But there is an important corollary here: Joel 1:8 also indicates that בתולה can be used with reference to a married woman. But whether the girl in Joel 1:8 can still be classified as "married" after the death of her husband is perhaps open to semantic debate. She clearly had been married, but her husband has died. So she is now a widow. Nevertheless, Wenham calls her a "widowed wife" in his *ISBE* entry, and Orlinsky in his *IDB SV* entry expresses amazement that the *RSV* used "virgin" to translate בתולה "even though she is married!" Similarly, E. J. Young states that she "is clearly a married woman."¹⁴⁶

Despite this fine point, it would seem that if בתולה can be applied to a widow, then it is not limited to girls of marriageable age who have never been married. Thus it is likely that, although it is most often used of such girls, it also can be used of any young girl of marriageable age--unmarried, married, or widowed. Therefore,

141 Wenham, "Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 345.

142 E. J. Young, "The Immanuel Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14-16, Second Article," *WTJ* 16 (November 1953):33, n. 27.

143 Orlinsky, "Virgin," p. 939.

144 Waltke, "betûlâ," I:138.

145 Tsevat, "בתולה," II:341; first brackets original and second brackets added.

146 Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, I:288.

Wenham's basic meaning, a *girl of marriageable age*, fits this text and remains intact.¹⁴⁷

Rebekah: a בְּתוּלָה

The first use of בְּתוּלָה in the Bible is Genesis 24:16 where it is applied to Rebekah. It is perhaps also the most important example. First, בְּתוּלָה has a significant accompanying clause and second, עַלְמָה is also applied to Rebekah in verse 43. Wenham considers the scene when Abraham's servant, Eliezer (?), meets Rebekah at the well to be rather dramatic since it leads to somewhat of a climax.¹⁴⁸ Arriving at a well in Abraham's homeland, he begins to pray and essentially asks the Lord for a sign. Many girls came to that well to draw water, and he plans to ask one of them to let down her jar to get him a drink. He asks the Lord to show him the one the Lord has appointed for Isaac by the way she responds: "Drink, and I will water your camels also." Then the drama begins and builds to a climax.

1. Before Eliezer even finishes his prayer, Rebekah comes to the well.
2. The reader is informed that she is a second cousin of Isaac and therefore eligible to marry Isaac.
3. She is carrying a water jar, the first part of the sign requested by Eliezer.
4. The girl [נַעֲרָה] is very beautiful.
5. She is a בְּתוּלָה .
6. And finally, the climax: "and a man has not known her."

According to Wenham, if בְּתוּלָה is understood as "a girl of marriageable age," the account builds up to a real climax in verse 16a, and we wait with bated breath to learn whether this most eligible girl will give the right response to the servant's request. "But if *betûlâh* is translated 'virgin', the clause 'whom no man had known' is a pointless addition detracting from the thread of the story."¹⁴⁹

Curiously, Bruce Walke, after acknowledging that a "strong case" can be made that *bethulah* is not a technical term for *virgo intacta* (as cited above), states that Wenham's argument on Genesis 24:16 is "less than convincing" because the clause "whom no man had known" could be a restrictive or non-restrictive (descriptive) clause.¹⁵⁰

147 The word נַעֲרִיָּה in Joel 1:8 is an abstract noun from נָעַר (*boy*) and נַעֲרָה (*girl*) meaning *youth* or *early life* (*BDB*, p. 655) with the third person feminine singular pronominal suffix "her." Thus: "[of] her youth." Three other similar uses of this noun occur in Prov. 5:18 and Mal. 2:14,15 (all three, "the wife of your youth"). These three verses might seem to indicate that the period of "youth" to which reference is made was in the relatively distant past. However, there is no reason why it cannot point to the near past. It is not only Wenham who takes the girl to be young (i.e., of marriageable age). So does Richard Patterson in his commentary on Joel, and he, unlike Wenham, takes the death of the *ba'al* to occur during the betrothal period with the girl still a virgin (*Joel*, vol. VII in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelain [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985], p. 240.) Both scholars take the girl to be mourning and wearing the sackcloth during her youth.

148 Wenham, "Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" pp. 341-42.

149 *Ibid.*, p. 341.

150 Waltke, "betûlâ," I:138. Tsevat, "בְּתוּלָה," II:341, raises the same issue.

- If *bethulah* means simply "a girl of marriageable age," then the clause "whom no man had known" is *restrictive* because it places limits or a restriction on the word *bethulah*. Rebekah is a *bethulah* (a girl of marriageable age) *who is also a virgin* (no man has known her); only some *bethulot* (girls of marriageable age) are also virgins. "Rebekah is both of marriageable age and a virgin." The additional clause is needed to state this.
- If *bethulah* means "virgin," then the clause "whom no man had known" is *non-restrictive* because it does not place limits or a restriction on the word *bethulah*. Rebekah is a *bethulah* (a virgin); nothing more needs to be said (no restrictions or limits on the word *bethulah* = virgin). The additional clause is simply an "in other words" clause. "Rebekah: is a virgin, in other words, no man has known her."

Waltke thinks there is no way to decide whether the clause is restrictive or non-restrictive, and therefore the use of the clause by the writer cannot be used as an argument for the meaning of *bethulah*. In response to this argument, a restrictive clause is necessary to communicate an author's intent; a non-restrictive clause is merely a redundancy. In this case, if *bethulah* means *virgin*, it does seem rather unlikely that an author would think it necessary to add the meaning of "virgin" to the word "virgin." Most people know what "virgin" means. In addition, the clause is linked to the preceding word *bethulah* simply by a waw (ו). This connector has a wide usage, but its general meaning is *and*. If this meaning is accepted here, then the verse literally reads, "the girl is very beautiful, a *bethulah*, and no man has known her." If these points are valid, then the clause is restrictive, and "girl of marriageable age" fits nicely as the meaning of *bethulah*.

However, Waltke cites 2 Samuel 14:4-5 as a text in which a well-known word *is* followed by a non-restrictive clause:

Now when the woman of Tekoa spoke to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and prostrated herself and said, "Help, O king." The king said to her, "What is your trouble?" And she answered, Truly I am a widow, for my husband is dead."

But the parallel is not quite exact. The sentence in Genesis 24 is *written by the book's author* (Moses) who has put together a description of a girl. The sentence in 2 Samuel 14 is a *quotation from a woman*. Joab puts her up to this little deception of King David, and she is acting the part of a highly distressed widow who has just lost her husband, who has had one son murdered by his brother, and whose remaining son is now about to be put to death for murder. Under such circumstances a virtually inconsolable widow with the appearance of having mourned for many days, or as here, a superb actress, would certainly burst out with a highly emotional cry, "I'm a widow! *I've just lost my husband!!...and now I'm about to lose my only remaining son...*" That she just lost her husband is a non-restrictive clause that gives the definition of "widow," but it was not added for clarity or reinforcement (as would be the case in Gen. 24:16 if *bethulah* meant "virgin") but from extreme emotion, repeating the terrible event twice. The two cases are not parallel.

Rebekah: an עַלְמָה

The passage where Eliezer finds Rebekah for Isaac's wife is the only text where עַלְמָה and בְּתוּלָה are applied in the same context to the same girl. Except for the substitution of the Hebrew words, the following is the translation in the NASB:

Genesis 24:12-16: He said, "O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today, and show lovingkindness to my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water; now may it be that the girl [הַיְנָעֶרֶ] to whom I say, 'Please let down your jar so that I may drink,' and who answers, 'Drink, and I will water your camels also'--*may she be the one* whom You have appointed for Your servant Isaac; and by this I will know that You have shown lovingkindness to my master." Before he had finished speaking, behold,

Rebekah who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder. The girl [הַנְּעָרָה] was very beautiful, a [בְּתוּלָה], and no man had had relations with her.

Genesis 24:42-45: "So I came today to the spring, and said, 'O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, if now You will make my journey on which I go successful; behold, I am standing by the spring, and may it be that the [עַלְמָה] who comes out to draw, and to whom I say, "Please let me drink a little water from your jar"; and she will say to me, "You drink, and I will draw for your camels also"; let her be the woman [אִשָּׁה] whom the Lord has appointed for my master's son.' Before I had finished speaking in my heart, behold, Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder."

These two statements are quite parallel. Both are descriptions of Eliezer meeting Rebekah at the well.

- In verse 16 the author (Moses) applies two words to Rebekah: נְעָרָה and בְּתוּלָה .

בְּתוּלָה is a specific term. The word נְעָרָה is a general term that *BDB* defines as *girl, damsel*.¹⁵¹ According to Wenham,

נְעָרָה has as broad a range of meaning as the modern English word 'girl'. It is used of unmarried girls still under their father's jurisdiction (Gen xxxiv 3), of servant girls (Ex ii 5; 2 Kgs v 4; Prov xxxi 15), of Ruth the widow and Ruth the bride (Ruth ii 6; iv 12). It is used of concubines (Jud xix 3 ff.), harem-women (Est ii 2 ff.) and prostitutes (Amos ii 7). The masculine *na'ar* covers any boy between 3 months old (Ex ii 6) and at least 17 years old (Gen xxxvii 2).¹⁵²

- In verses 43 and 44 Eliezer himself applies two words to Rebekah: אִשָּׁה and עַלְמָה.

עַלְמָה is a specific term. The word אִשָּׁה is a general term that *BDB* defines as *woman, wife, female*.¹⁵³ It is the standard term for *wife*, but in the sense simply of *woman* or *female* it is used without regard to age or marital status. The plural is used for "female children" (הַטָּף בְּנָשִׁים) in Numbers 31:18 and of women young enough to have not known a man (32,000 of them!) in verse 35.

Therefore, comparing the two parallel statements (vv. 12-16 and 42-45), each uses a general term and a specific term:

- As terms applied to Rebekah, in their generality נְעָרָה in the first statement and אִשָּׁה in the second statement are somewhat similar.
- As terms applied to Rebekah, in their specificity בְּתוּלָה in the first statement and עַלְמָה in the second statement are somewhat similar.

With regard to the investigation at hand, the conclusion to draw would seem to be that these two words are rough synonyms, because they can play the same role in the description of the same event.

151 *BDB*, p. 655.

152 Wenham, "Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 340-41, n. 2.

153 *BDB*, p. 61.

Judges 21:11-12

There is another text similar to Genesis 24:16. Recounting the events that lead up to these verses takes three chapters in the Book of Judges (19, 20, and half of 21), but that history is not necessary to examine the use of בְּתוּלָה. Again, except for the substitution of the Hebrew words, Judges 21:11-12 reads as follows in the NASB:

"This is the thing that you shall do: you shall utterly destroy כָּל־זָכָר [every male] וְכָל־אִשָּׁה [and every woman] who has lain with a man." And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead 400 נְעָרָה [girls¹⁵⁴] בְּתוּלָה¹⁵⁵ who [אִשָּׁר] had not known a man by lying with him; and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.

The word "who" in verse 11 is not in the Hebrew; the phrase is simply, "every woman known by lying with a male." The word "who" in verse 12 is the translation of אִשָּׁר, which is a *particle of relation* often meaning *who* or *which*.¹⁵⁶ To describing the 400, a simple sequence of words is used with no connecting prefixes: "400 girls, *bethulah*, who had not known a man..." It would certainly seem that in this description the most general term, נְעָרָה ("girls") is first limited to *bethulot*, and then *bethulot* is limited to those *bethulot* "who had not known a man." In his analysis of this verse, Wenham states, "Again *betûlâh* is qualified by a clause that is pleonastic, if *betûlâh* means 'virgin'."¹⁵⁷ Rather than a clause that has no purpose, if בְּתוּלָה means simply a girl of marriageable age, then all makes sense. The 400 "girls" found in Jabesh-gilead were of marriageable age and were also virgins--which is just what they needed to be to serve as wives for the Benjaminites.

It should also be noted that in verse 11 the same method of limitation ("knowing" or "not knowing" a man) is placed on the word אִשָּׁה ("woman"). Just as every אִשָּׁה (woman) who was killed needed to be further limited or qualified as *not* being virgins by using the clause "known by lying with a male," so the 400 בְּתוּלָה (girls of marriageable age) who were spared needed to be further limited or qualified as *being* virgins using the clause "who had not known a man."

Assessment of the Data on בְּתוּלָה

The following conclusions would seem to be warranted:

- The cognate words in Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Akkadian are not technical terms for "virgin."
- According to the usage in the Hebrew Scriptures, בְּתוּלָה is not a technical term for "virgin."

154 The singular noun, נְעָרָה, is used here as a collective singular noun denoting a group of girls. See GKC § 123b.

155 בְּתוּלָה here is also a collective singular noun.

156 *BDB*, pp. 81-84.

157 Wenham, "Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 341.

- The word בְּתוּלָה is used in the sense of *age distinction* and means *a girl of marriageable age*.
- Although בְּתוּלָה is most often used of unmarried girls of marriageable age, it also can be used of young girls who are married, were married, or are widows.

Based on the application of both בְּתוּלָה and עַלְמָה to Rebekah in Genesis 24, the words would seem to be somewhat synonymous. It remains to be seen if עַלְמָה can be applied to a young married girl.

However, one extremely important conclusion can be asserted here regarding these two words with a fair amount of assurance. As part of the interpretation of Isaiah 7:14, one argument has often been raised: If Isaiah had intended to call the girl a virgin, he would have used בְּתוּלָה.¹⁵⁸ However, if בְּתוּלָה is not a technical term for virgin, this argument cannot be advanced.¹⁵⁹ It remains to be determined, if possible, why Isaiah used the word עַלְמָה.

Post-Biblical Hebrew

Before ending this section, a few comments should be given about the change בְּתוּלָה seems to have undergone in post-biblical Hebrew.

Wenham raises the question of why the ancient, but post-biblical, versions translate בְּתוּלָה as they do:¹⁶⁰

- Septuagint: *parthénos* (Greek)
- Targums and Peshitta: *betûltā'* (Aramaic)
- Vulgate: *virgo* (Latin)

He also points out that the discussions in Josephus and the Mishnah indicate that they also used בְּתוּלָה in the sense of *virgo intacta*.¹⁶¹

Concerning *parthénos* and *virgo*, Tsevat states that "neither Gk. *parthénos* nor Lat. *virgo* originally or exclusively meant *virgo intacta*...in early linguistic stages the concept of virginity...can frequently be expressed only negatively."¹⁶² He goes on to point out that both the Hebrew *bethulah* and the Aramaic *betûltā'* "very

158 Henderson addressed this argument, and in fact his point was that בְּתוּלָה is related to age distinction, which therefore countered the argument (*The Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, p. 63). But the argument is still being raised. John Joseph Owens, "The Meaning of 'Almah in the Old Testament," *Review and Expositor* 50 (January 1953):60 advances this argument. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, I:288, n. 37, cites Paul Schilling, *Isaiah Speaks* (1958-59), who also makes this argument. Michael Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, III:203, n. 45, says that this argument is a "standard anti-missionary position" when Christian missionaries cite Isa. 7:14 in discussing the New Testament doctrine of the virgin birth of the Messiah.

159 Waltke, "betûlâ," p. 138, reaches the same conclusion.

160 Wenham, "Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 346-47. See the full citation.

161 Josephus: *Antiquities* 4:8:23; Mishnah: *Ketuboth* 1:1 ff. (Wenham, "Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 346, n. 3.)

162 Tsevat, "בְּתוּלָה," II:340.

gradually...assumed the meaning 'virgo intacta.'"¹⁶³ When the meaning of these four words was narrowed to the restricted sense of *virgo intacta* is difficult to determine.¹⁶⁴ However, according to Wenham, as pointed out earlier in this chapter, "it is not until the Christian era that there is clear evidence that *betûlâh* had become a technical term for 'virgin'."¹⁶⁵ He also points out that even after the Aramaic *betûltâ*' possibly came to have the more restricted meaning of *virgo intacta*, the passage cited above from the incantation texts from Nippur (ca. A.D. 600) indicates that even at that late date it was not always used in that restricted sense.¹⁶⁶ In addition Wenham mentions that Latin *virgo* does seem to have acquired the technical meaning of *virgo intacta* in the Vulgate (A.D. 390-404), based on Jerome's remarks on Isaiah 7:14 in his commentary on Isaiah.¹⁶⁷ Regarding *parthénos*, since this word is the translation of **עַלְמָה** in Isaiah 7:14 in the LXX, more discussion of this Greek word is given in the section "*παρθένος*," the last section in this chapter.

Preliminary Data for **עַלְמָה**

The details of how **עַלְמָה** is used in the Hebrew Scriptures are discussed in the next section. Here some preliminary remarks are given by way of summary, leaving the argumentation for some of these statements to the section to follow.

The Word **בְּתוּלָה** Is Not a Technical Term for "Virgin"

The case for this view was argued above in the section "The Use of **בְּתוּלָה** in the Hebrew Scriptures." The list of reference works that support this interpretation was also given in that section but is repeated here as part of the summary.

- Gordon Wenham, *ISBE*, "Virgin": "*Betûlâ* denotes a girl of marriageable age, one who has recently passed puberty and is therefore at the height of her strength and beauty."¹⁶⁸
- Bruce Waltke, *TWOT*, "betûlâ": "A strong case can be presented that *betûlâ* is not a technical term for *virgo intacta* in the OT, a conclusion that has important bearing on the meaning of *‘almâ* in Isa 7:14."¹⁶⁹
- Ronald Youngblood, *ISBE*, "Immanuel": "Contrary to common opinion, *betûlâ* does not always or even necessarily mean 'virgin'..."¹⁷⁰

163 Ibid.

164 For example, both Wenham and Tsevat refrain from being specific.

165 Wenham, "Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 347. See Wenham's full citation quoted in the beginning of this section, "The Use of **בְּתוּלָה** in the Hebrew Scriptures," subsection "A Girl of Marriageable Age."

166 Ibid., p. 346. See also the previous discussion with citations of James Montgomery in the section "The Etymology of **בְּתוּלָה**: Cognate Languages," subsection "Aramaic."

167 Ibid.

168 Gordon J. Wenham, "Virgin," IV:989-990.

169 Waltke, "betûlâ," I:137.

170 Youngblood, "Immanuel," II:807.

- Shalom Paul, *EncJudaica*, "Virgin, Virginité": "The biblical *betulah* (בְּתוּלָה) is in fact an ambiguous term which in nonlegal contexts may denote an age of life rather than a physical state."¹⁷¹
- M. Tsevat, *TDOT*, " בְּתוּלָה ": "The feminine does not mean 'virgin' in any language exclusively (Aram.), mainly (Heb.), or generally (Akk. [and Ugar.?)."¹⁷²
- Harry Orlinsky, *IDB SV*, "Virgin": "It most often denotes a girl who is sexually mature, of marriageable age. The element of chastity may or may not be present (or stressed), depending on the context."¹⁷³

There Is No Word that Means *Virgo Intacta* in the Semitic Languages

Cyrus Gordon has already been cited as making this assessment, but he is also included here in this more complete list.

- J. A. Alexander: "It is said, indeed, that if this [virginity] had been intended [in Isa. 7:14], the word בְּתוּלָה would have been employed; but even that word is not invariably used in its strict sense (see Deut. xxii. 19; Joel i. 8), so that there would still have been room for the same cavils, and perhaps for the assertion that the idea of a virgin could not be expressed except by a periphrasis."¹⁷⁴
- Cyrus Gordon: *Ugaritic Textbook*: "There is no word in the Near Eastern languages that by itself means *virgo intacta*."¹⁷⁵
- Shalom Paul, *EncJudaica*: "The only way that the term 'virgin' can be unambiguously expressed is in the negative: thus, Sumerian and Akkadian, 'undeflowered,' and Akkadian, 'not experienced,' 'unopened,' and 'who has not known a male.' The description of Rebekah (Gen. 24:16), who is first called *betulah*, 'young woman,' and then 'whom no man had known' (cf. Judg. 21:12), is similar."¹⁷⁶
- M Tsevat, *TDOT*: "In early linguistic stages the concept of virginity, with all the meaning that belongs to it in early linguistic associations, can frequently be expressed only negatively."¹⁷⁷

171 Paul, "Virgin, Virginité," XVI:160. Paul also states, "In legal contexts, however, *betulah* denotes a virgin in the strict sense (as does *batultu* in certain Akkadian legal contexts)." However, it was noted above that Wenham, Finkelstein, and Landsberger argued from the redundancy used in Middle Assyrian Law A55 that even in legal texts *batultu* denoted only age distinction and did not mean *virgo intacta*.

172 Tsevat, " בְּתוּלָה ," II:340; brackets original.

173 Orlinsky, "Virgin," p. 939.

174 Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, 2 vols (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1870), I:168; brackets added. It should be noted that Alexander was a Christian scholar of the highest order and of unimpeachable orthodoxy. It should also be noted that Alexander wrote this no later than 1860, the year he died. That date was long before the discovery of the Ugaritic material in 1929 and the additional evidence that literature provided based on the use of its cognate term, *btlt*. Yet he foresaw the possibility that בְּתוּלָה was not a technical term for virgin and that virginity could only be specified using restrictive terms or clauses.

175 Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, chap. 19, p. 378.

176 Paul, "Virgin, Virginité," XVI:160.

177 Tsevat, " בְּתוּלָה ," II:340.

- Ronald Youngblood, *ISBE*: "It is not self-evident that Heb. 'almâ means 'virgin' since most of the ancient Semitic languages had no word for *virgo intacta*, a concept that could be expressed only by means of circumlocution."¹⁷⁸

The Words בְּתוּלָה and עַלְמָה Are Roughly Synonymous

So far, not much has been said on this issue. It is discussed in more depth in the next section.

Shalom Paul makes this suggestion of synonymity explicitly:

The word *betulah* interchanges with the somewhat synonymous age term 'almah (עַלְמָה), which also describes a young woman. Thus in Genesis 24:16, 43, Rebekah is first called a *betulah* and then an 'almah.¹⁷⁹

However, a number of issues already discussed also suggest that these terms are roughly synonymous.

First, Shalom Paul himself mentions Rebekah and the two statements in Genesis 24:16 and 43. The argument as developed above in the section "Rebekah: an עַלְמָה" does seem rather strong, namely, that Moses used these two terms in the same sense to describe Rebekah.

Second, the "Poem of Nikkal" comes up again on this issue. The problem discussed at some length in the above section, "The 'Poem of Nikkal,'" was not so much the meaning of the Ugaritic cognate *btlt* in line 5 but whether that word was used in that line at all. If Cyrus Gordon's reconstruction of line 5 is correct, there is a parallelism between two terms--*btlt* and *glmt*. Those who accept this reconstruction do consider the terms *btlt* in line 5 and *glmt* in line 7 to be roughly similar in meaning. Gordon certainly seems to have this opinion in his rather notorious paper " 'Almah in Isaiah 7:14."¹⁸⁰ Also, Theodor Gaster, who follows Gordon's reconstruction, translates both terms "girl."¹⁸¹

Third, there are also entries in at least two standard reference works that separately give similar meanings to *bethulah* and 'almah.

- Harry Orlinsky, "Virgin," *IDB SV*: "It [*bethulah*] most often denotes a girl who is sexually mature, of marriageable age." Also: "This word ['almah]...means simply "young woman, girl, maiden."¹⁸²
- M. Tsevat, "בְּתוּלָה," *TDOT*: "It is best to conjecture that there was an original common Semitic word *batūl(t)*, and that it meant a young girl at the age of puberty and the age just after puberty." Also, his translation of Isaiah 7:14: "Behold a (the) young woman (--> עַלְמָה 'almāh) is pregnant (will become

178 Youngblood, "Immanuel," II:807.

179 Paul, "Virgin, Virginitly," XVI:160.

180 Gordon, " 'Almah in Isaiah 7:14," p. 106.

181 Gaster, "On A Proto-Hebrew Poem from Ras Shamra," p. 83. In his glossary, Gordon defined *btlt* as *girl*, *virgin*, and *glmt* as *girl* (*Ugaritic Textbook*, chap. 19, pp. 377, 464).

182 Orlinsky, "Virgin," pp. 939-40; brackets added.

pregnant); she will bear a son and call him Immanuel."¹⁸³

Based on the previous review of the Semitic languages and also the much more important data derived from the use of בְּתוּלָה in the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, it is the working hypothesis of this book that the Hebrew בְּתוּלָה means a *girl of marriageable age*. In addition, based on the previous review of the Semitic languages and their cognates to עַלְמָה, if any conclusion is possible at all, it would seem that they suggest a meaning something like "young unmarried girl," who might or might not be a virgin, depending on the context. Certainly neither of these two terms can be a technical term for *virgo intacta*. In the next section, the much more important data derived from the use of עַלְמָה in the Hebrew Scriptures is examined to determine whether it is, in fact, roughly synonymous to בְּתוּלָה and in what way the two words might differ. Joel 1:8 indicated that בְּתוּלָה can be applied to a girl of marriageable age who is married. It remains to be seen if the biblical use of עַלְמָה does limit it to young *unmarried* girls. If so, this would be the primary difference between these two rough synonyms. Investigating the data of the Hebrew Scriptures themselves is the second most important investigation for determining the meaning of a Hebrew word. The most important investigation is the way the word is used in the text of interest and its immediate context. That is the subject of the next chapter.

The Use of עַלְמָה in the Hebrew Scriptures

The feminine noun, עַלְמָה (‘*almah*), is used nine times in the Hebrew Scriptures, four times in the singular and five in the plural. The corresponding masculine noun, עֶלֶם (‘*elem*), is used only twice, both singular. The abstraction of the noun, עֲלוּמִים (‘*ālūmîm*), occurs four times, masculine plural in form.

John Walton has written an article in which he raises an important point. There is not much in his article that I agree with, but this point is well-taken. He notes that very few authors who examine the nine passages in which עַלְמָה is used discuss the two occurrences of the masculine form and the four occurrences of the abstract noun, even though they play a major role in determining the basic meaning of the feminine עַלְמָה.¹⁸⁴ Therefore, in the treatment here, these other two words are examined first.

The Masculine Form עֶלֶם

1 Samuel 17:56

1 Samuel chapter 17 deals with the battle, if one can call it that, between David and Goliath. Verses 55-58 read as follows in the *NASB*:

Now when Saul saw David going out against the Philistine, he said to Abner the commander of the army,

183 Tsevat, "בְּתוּלָה," II:340, 343.

184 John H. Walton, "Isa 7:14: What's In a Name?" *JETS* 30 (September 1987):292. Instead of "very few," Walton's word is "none."

"Abner, whose son is this young man [הַנְּעָר]?" And Abner said, "By your life, O king, I do not know."

The king said, "You inquire whose son the youth [הַעֵלָם] is." So when David returned from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul with the Philistine's head in his hand. Saul said to him, "Whose son are you, young man [הַנְּעָר]?" And David answered, "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite."

In this passage, Saul twice uses the word נְעָר and the word עֵלָם once. The masculine נְעָר (*na'ar*) is used about 239 times and the feminine נְעָרָה (*na'arâh*) 38 times.¹⁸⁵ Both are general terms. *BDB* defines the masculine as *boy, lad, youth*,¹⁸⁶ and Fuhs as *child, youth, young man*.¹⁸⁷ It can be used together with יָלֵד (*yeledh*) for the three-month-old baby Moses (Exod. 2:6) as well as for the mature Absalom (2 Sam 14:21). However, according to Milton Fisher, "reference to a youngster of ages between yearning and (especially) marriageable manhood is primary."¹⁸⁸

What does this passage contribute to the meaning and use of 'elem? Two points are to be noted.

First, Saul refers to David three times in the same way. Twice he uses *na'ar* and once 'elem. Thus, the two words are being used in parallel--in the same way--to refer to a young man, David. So in this context they are used synonymously, although in the broader scheme of the Hebrew Scriptures, *na'ar* has a much broader range of meaning than its use here as "young man." It remains to be seen whether the usage of 'elem is also broader.

Second, here Saul's intended meaning of 'elem is "young man" and "young man" only. In this context it is clearly not possible that 'elem can contain any reference to David's chastity. Imagine Saul telling Abner, "You inquire whose son that young virgin is." Orlinsky describes the situation this way: "David's chastity would hardly be cited as a factor in his defeat of Goliath."¹⁸⁹

1 Samuel 20:22

The only other text in which 'elem is used is 1 Samuel 20:22. Here Jonathan, Saul's son and David's friend, comes up with a way he can signal David whether or not it is safe for him to come out of hiding. Verses 20-22 read as follows in the *NASB*:

I will shoot three arrows to the side, as though I shot at a target. And behold, I will send the lad [אֶת־

185 H. F. Fuhs, "נְעָר," *TDOT*, IX:479.

186 *BDB*, p. 654.

187 Fuhs, "נְעָר," IX:480.

188 Milton C. Fisher, "נְעָר," *TWOT*, II:586. The range of meanings of the feminine נְעָרָה is also summarized by Fisher on p. 586. See also Fuhs, "נְעָר," IX:483-84.

189 Orlinsky, "Virgin," p. 940.

[הַנֶּעֶר], *saying*, 'Go, find the arrows.' If I specifically say to the lad [לְנֶעֶר], 'Behold, the arrows are on this side of you, get them,' then come; for there is safety for you and no harm, as the LORD lives. But if I say to the youth [לְעֵלָם], 'Behold, the arrows are beyond you,' go, for the LORD has sent you away.

For the purpose of this investigation, this passage is virtually identical to I Samuel 17:56: to refer to Jonathan's servant, נֶעֶר (*na'ar*) is used twice, here translated "lad," and עֵלָם (*'elem*) is used once, here translated "youth." The two words are again used in the same way--viz., in parallel--and the use of *'elem* can include no reference to the servant's chastity for essentially the same two reasons that it could include no reference to the chastity of David.

Conclusion Regarding עֵלָם

It would be a pure guess to venture an opinion on only two uses of the masculine עֵלָם as to whether it is less broad a term than נֶעֶר. However, the uses of the feminine עֲלֻמָּה may shed some light on the limits of עֵלָם. What can be said at this point is that neither of these two uses can possibly include the notion of "virgin" in any sense.

The Abstract Noun עֲלֻמִּים

Abstract nouns have several functions in Hebrew, but the use at issue here is the condition or quality inherent in the noun upon which the abstraction is based.¹⁹⁰ If the basic meaning of *'elem* is "young man" and the basic meaning of *'almah* is "young woman," then the abstraction would refer to a man or woman's *youth* or *youthful vigor*, which is the basic meaning given to עֲלֻמִּים (*'ālûmîm*) by *BDB*.¹⁹¹ On the other hand, if the basic meaning of *'elem* and *'almah* is "virgin," the abstraction would be *virginity*.

The four verses where this abstract noun is used are the following:

Job 20:11: His bones are full of his youthful vigor, but it lies down with him in the dust.

Job 33:25: Let his flesh become fresher than in youth, let him return to the days of his youthful vigor;

Psalm 89:46 (Eng., 45): You have shortened the days of his youth; you have covered him with shame.

Isaiah 54:4: Fear not, for you will not be put to shame; and do not feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced; but you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.

The first three verses are straightforward. In each the abstract noun *'ālûmîm* refers to a man, and its meaning would seem to have nothing to do with virginity. The fourth verse is a bit different. All six verbs are second person

190 See *GKC*, § 124b.

191 *BDB*, p. 761.

feminine singular, and the pronominal suffix on the abstract noun, here translated "youth," and also on "widowhood" is feminine singular. Obviously, this verse addresses a woman. According to Walton, 'ālmîm in Isaiah 54:4 "is used to describe a rejected barren wife."¹⁹² If that is a completely accurate description of this verse and the use of this noun in it, the word could hardly refer to the widow's virginity.

However, Walton seems to oversimplify what the verse really describes. The phrase, "shame of your youth," does not necessarily apply to the woman after she has become a widow. According to Franz Delitzsch, the woman represents Israel, and the shame of her youth refers to the Egyptian bondage. Delitzsch states that during that bondage "the national community of Israel was still but like a virgin."¹⁹³ He goes on to write that Israel

entered into a betrothal when redeemed by Jehovah, and became His youthful wife through a covenant of love...when the law was given at Sinai (Jer. ii. 2; Ezek. xvi. 60); so glorious indeed, that she would never again remember the shame of her widowhood, i.e. of the Babylonian captivity, in which she, the wife whom Jehovah had taken to Himself, was like a widow whose husband had died. It is no real widowhood, however, but only an apparent one (Jer. li. 5), for the husband of Jerusalem was living still.¹⁹⁴

So Israel was unmarried and thus a virgin during the Egyptian bondage. However, that is not the intent of the clause: it would make no sense to say, "you will forget the shame of your virginity." Rather, "you will forget the shame of your youth" is the meaning of the clause.¹⁹⁵

It would seem clear, then, that the intent of the author of each of these verses was to refer to someone's youth or youthful vigor, not to someone's virginity. Therefore, the usage of עֵלָם, the masculine counterpart of the feminine noun עֵלְמָה, and of עֵלּוּמִים, the abstraction of these two nouns, provide no evidence that עֵלְמָה means "virgin." or even has "virgin" as its main feature. However, the more important texts to examine are those that actually use עֵלְמָה.

The Feminine Form עֵלְמָה:

The feminine noun occurs only nine times in the MT: four times in the singular (עֵלְמָה, 'almah) and five in the plural (עֵלְמוֹת, 'alamoth).¹⁹⁶ According to Dohmen, there is a real difference between the use of the singular and the plural.¹⁹⁷ Whether this is the case will come out in the discussions of the plural uses below.

Since the use of 'almah in Isaiah 7:14 is discussed in the next chapter, only the remaining uses are discussed

192 Walton, "Isa 7:14: What's In a Name?" p. 292.

193 Franz Delitzsch, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, 2 vols., vol. 7 in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols., C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975; original publication date 1877), II:344. Delitzsch put the word 'almah in parentheses after the word "virgin." He apparently thinks that 'almah can have the meaning of "virgin" in some contexts. See his discussion on Isa. 7:14, I:216-20.

194 Delitzsch *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, II:344. This last sentence leads into Delitzsch's exposition of verse 54:5.

195 Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope: Is the Hebrew Bible Really Messianic?* p. 152, n. 13, in arguing against Walton goes too far when he suggests that "you will forget the shame of your virginity" is the intent of the clause in Isa. 54:4.

196 See footnote 11.

197 Dohmen, "עֵלְמָה," XI:160.

here. The passages in which the singular form is used are considered first.

Genesis 24:43

This text has already been discussed, but of the eight uses of **עַלְמָה** outside of Isaiah 7:14 this one is probably the most important. The conclusion reached can be summarized as follows.

- In verses 16 the author (Moses) applies two words to Rebekah: **נַעֲרָה** and **בְּתוּלָה**.
- In verses 43 and 44 Eliezer himself applies two words to Rebekah: **אִשָּׁה** and **עַלְמָה**.

Therefore, comparing the two parallel statements (vv. 12-16 and 42-45), each uses a general term and a specific term:

- As terms applied to Rebekah, in their generality **נַעֲרָה** in the first statement and **אִשָּׁה** in the second statement are somewhat similar.
- As terms applied to Rebekah, in the specificity **בְּתוּלָה** in the first statement and **עַלְמָה** in the second statement are somewhat similar.

For the purpose of easy reference in the remainder of this chapter, the tentative conclusions at this point are listed here in this format:

Tentative Working Hypotheses

בְּתוּלָה (<i>bethulah</i>): primary focus: related to <i>age distinction</i> "A girl of marriageable age"
עַלְמָה (<i>almah</i>): primary focus: related to <i>age distinction</i> "A young unmarried girl"

Both would seem to be used for *age distinction* and both refer to *young girls*. It would also seem that *virginity* is not part and parcel of the *basic, explicit* meaning of either word. **בְּתוּלָה** can be used (perhaps rarely) of a young married girl, and the following investigation of the remaining seven uses of **עַלְמָה** should indicate whether it is, in fact, restricted to young *unmarried* girls. When either term is used of a young never-married girl, *implicitly* virginity is lurking in the background, for as John Oswalt points out, it was "axiomatic" that such a girl in Hebrew society would be a virgin.¹⁹⁸

Exodus 2:8

The context of Exodus 2:8 deals with the three-month-old Moses being placed among the reeds on the bank of the Nile with his sister Miriam watching to see what would become of him. The NASB translates verses 5-8 as follows:

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the Nile, with her maidens walking alongside the Nile; and she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid, and she brought it to her. When she

198 John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), p. 210.

opened *it*, she saw the child, and behold, *the* boy was crying. And she had pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women that she may nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go *ahead*." So the girl [עַלְמָה] went and called the child's mother.

Miriam's age is not given. However, she was young enough to still be living with her parents but old enough to watch over Moses by herself on the Nile River. She was also old enough to conceive of the plan to go up to Pharaoh's daughter and offer to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby, to state her suggestion in such a way that the princess agreed to it, and then to bring Moses' and her own mother! Based on these facts, Richard Niessen concluded that Miriam was probably in her mid-teens.¹⁹⁹ Miriam was a young unmarried girl.

This passage therefore fits the working hypothesis developed so far, and the use of the word here reinforces that meaning. As an age indicator, עַלְמָה refers to a young, unmarried girl. However, marriage, per se, does not need to be in the context to use this descriptor to indicate or highlight a girl's age.

Proverbs 30:19

This is a difficult verse and Cuthbert Lattey describes the exegesis of it "a distasteful task."²⁰⁰ Verses 18-20 read as follows in the *NASB*:

There are three things which are too wonderful for me, four which I do not understand:²⁰¹ the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the middle of the sea, and the way of a man with a maid [עַלְמָה]. This is the way of an adulterous woman: she eats and wipes her mouth, and says, "I have done no wrong."²⁰²

According to Niessen, this text is cited more than any of the others as the "coup de grace" to any idea of virginity in עַלְמָה.²⁰³ The book, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, contains a series of lectures delivered by James Orr in 1907. It also contains an appendix giving synopses of a number of papers on the same subject written by various scholars. One of them is the Jewish scholar, Joseph Jacobs. He comments on Proverbs 30:19 as follows:

199 Niessen, "The Virginity of the עַלְמָה in Isaiah 7:14," p. 137.

200 Lattey, "The Term *Almah* in Is. 7:14," p. 91.

201 This is an often used literary device used in the Old Testament, probably for emphasis--stating a number and then increasing it by one. For example, it is used eight times in Amos chapters 1 and 2; see also Job 5:19; Prov. 6:16; 30:15, 21; Eccl. 11:2; Micah 5:4 (*MT*).

202 Dohmen, "עַלְמָה," XI:162, mentions that עַלְמָה here can be taken as derived from a different root meaning "darkness," making the fourth clause the "way of a man in the dark." He rightly rejects this as making little sense in the context of wonderful things, but curiously he also thinks that a simple relationship between the sexes would also be out of place in this context. What he wants to develop here, as elsewhere, is that the עַלְמָה is an "alien woman." In addition, both Niessen, "The Virginity of the עַלְמָה in Isaiah 7:14," pp. 138-39, and Steinmueller, "Etymology and Biblical Usage of 'Almah," p. 38, point out that there is a textual problem with the word עַלְמָה in verse 19. The *LXX* translation indicates that there may have been a different Hebrew text that had the word "youth," making the phrase "way(s) of a man in youth." This issue is discussed in the section "The Meaning and Use of *παρθένος*" later in this chapter. However, there are no entries in the critical apparatus of *Biblia Hebraica* for this verse. Therefore, the *MT* reading is accepted here.

203 Niessen, "The Virginity of the עַלְמָה in Isaiah 7:14," p. 138.

The word, *‘almah* used in that passage [Isa. 7:14-16] is derived from a root meaning to be mature, and simply implies that the young woman in question is of a marriageable age. The fact that it is used in Proverbs xxx. 19, of "the way of a man with a maid," is sufficient to prove that there is no idea of virginity attached to the word. This is now recognized by all scholars, Christian as well as Jewish.²⁰⁴

One would be hard pressed to find any exegetical conclusion with which "all scholars, Christian as well as Jewish," would agree. Also, as already pointed out in this chapter, in Israelite culture one would normally assume any unmarried girl was a virgin, unless there was direct and explicit evidence to the contrary. Therefore, to confirm Jacobs' argument that "there is no idea of virginity attached to the word," the first question might seem to be whether there is exegetical evidence in this text that the girl addressed as an *‘almah* is not a virgin. But this will not do. The text is making a general statement about a man and an *‘almah*, not a specific man and a specific *‘almah*. Jacobs agrees that when *‘almah* is applied to a girl, it means that she is of "marriageable age." Therefore, in a general statement like this, one must presume she is a virgin.

Jacobs states that in this text there is no way virginity can be attached to the word *‘almah*. That is just not true. Although a bit crass, and almost certainly not the intent of the author of this proverb, the following statement makes perfect sense: "I do not understand...the way of a man with a virgin"--that is, those ways by which he attempts to make her not a virgin. This interpretation can be dismissed, but it does show that "virgin" could definitely make a coherent statement. In the discussion that follows, the purpose is to determine whether *‘almah* here can mean simply a *young unmarried girl*. If so, then although it might have no direct relevance to the intent of this clause, it would simply be presumed that a girl so identified is a virgin, even though that is not the basic meaning of the word *‘almah* itself.

This is a difficult text even apart from the investigation of the meaning of *‘almah*, and a number of interpretations have been suggested. The interpretation by Charles Bridges can be summarily dismissed:

The kingdom of nature is full of wonder, and these wonders full of instruction. Where the philosopher cannot give a reason, the humble disciple may learn a lesson. The depths of nature are the figure of the depths of sin--of the unsearchable deceitful heart.²⁰⁵

Another interpretation considers verse 20 to be the conclusion to verses 18-19.²⁰⁶ In this view, the way of the man and his girlfriend are compared to the way of an adulterous woman, making their relationship a sinful and sexual relationship outside of marriage. However, there are two problems with this view. First, verses 18-19 form what is called a numerical proverb, and verse 18 anticipates a sequence of only four items; verse 20 would add a fifth. Second, there is no "wonder" or nothing "wonderful" about the "way of an adulterous woman."

The first word in verse 20 is *וְכֵן*, an adverb that *BDB* defines as *so, thus*.²⁰⁷ However, it is widely used, and Roland Murphy suggests that it is better translated "such" rather than "so," making it the introduction to a new theme independent of verses 18-19 and therefore tending to point forward to a proverb distinct from the

204 Joseph Jacobs, "The Virgin Birth from the Standpoint of Jewish Science and of Folklore," in James Orr, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), p. 288; brackets added.

205 Charles Bridges, *A Commentary on Proverbs* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968; original publication date, 1846), pp. 606-7.

206 E.g., Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament*, II:46, and E. J. Young, "The Immanuel Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14-16, Second Article," p. 27.

207 *BDB*, p. 485.

numerical proverb.²⁰⁸ In fact, the *KJV* does translate verse 20 that way: "Such is the way of an adulterous woman; she eateth, and wipeth her mouth, and saith, I have done no wickedness." Niessen comments,

Therefore, it appears that the proverb about the adulterous woman is an independent cognate proverb and its η points forward into itself, as in Proverbs 11:19, rather than backward to verses 18-19, which are actually a separate proverb.²⁰⁹

The key to correctly interpreting verses 18-19 would seem to be determining the common feature about the four "ways." What is common to the first three clauses must also apply to the fourth. Since the fourth "way" is the most enigmatic of the four, it would seem best to begin by examining the first three. What is there about the "way" of the eagle, serpent, and ship that would create awe in the originator of this proverb? Again, there have been several theories.

- *The mystery of movement.* However, the movement in the first three cases is physical movement over a distance. It is difficult to see how there is any movement across the terrain between a man and his young girlfriend.
- *Tracelessness or tracklessness.* This is the view of Delitzsch and Lattey.²¹⁰ It is true that one cannot trace the trail or path that had been followed by an eagle, serpent, or ship. In some sense that might even be a "wonder." But in these three examples there was a physical path that had been followed by a moving object, even if it could not be traced. On the other hand, there is no analogous trail or path of a man and his *‘almah*. The only way Delitzsch and Lattey can make this interpretation even partially work is to postulate a "traceless path" of illicit intercourse by pulling verse 20 into the picture. This interpretation falls prey to the same point made previously about the adulterous woman of verse 20: there is nothing "wonderful" about illicit intercourse between a man and an unmarried girl, who of course is a virgin.
- *A course not recoverable.* Murphy suggests this interpretation.²¹¹ In the case of the flight of an eagle, the movement of a serpent on a rock, and a ship traveling over the sea, there is no way to "recover" the path to where each of these is currently seen. In the case of the man and the girl, "there is marvel and astonishment at the *course* of the attachment that has made the two one, the mystery of how this was accomplished" and also about "the whole mystery of their relationship: how it came to be and what brought them together finally." But the analogy seems to be weak here. As with the previous interpretation, the first three cases are about a physical trail or path forged by a moving object. The way two people fall in love over time is hardly the same kind of path.
- *Fascination.* This is the view taken by Niessen.²¹² He describes the "ways" of these four examples as "ways that capture the attention and inspire the imagination because of the mysteriousness of their actions...[I]n each of these cases the 'way' refers to the three objects in a particular kind of action that is awe-inspiring." Applying this view to the man and his *‘almah*, Niessen continues,

Considering the morality of ancient Hebrew ethical standards, a scene of fornication would be revolting rather than awe-inspiring and would hardly fit the parallels of the first three "ways."

208 Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), p. 236.

209 Niessen, "The Virginity of the η in Isaiah 7:14," p. 139.

210 Lattey, "The Term *Almah* in Is. 7:14," p. 91; Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Proverbs of Solomon*, 2 vols., vol. 6 in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols., C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973; original publication date, 1875), II:297-98.

211 Murphy, *Proverbs*, p. 235.

212 Niessen, "The Virginity of the η in Isaiah 7:14," p. 140.

Obviously what is being described here is the courtship and infatuation of youthful love between a young man and his young girl friend. While the passage does not specifically make a point about the girl's virginity, it may be presumed.²¹³

I consider this last interpretation to be the best view of the passage. Again, there is no specific evidence that the basic meaning of *‘almah* is "virgin." The meaning, "young unmarried girl," fits the context nicely, with her virginity "presumed., if the question were to arise at all."

Song of Songs 1:3

This book has three different names: Song of Songs, Song of Solomon, and Canticles.²¹⁴ Unfortunately, the number of its interpretations far exceeds the number of its names. These different interpretations, of course, are quite unrelated to the use and meaning of *עֲלְמָה*. The opening sentence in Delitzsch's commentary reads, "The *Song* is the most obscure book of the Old Testament."²¹⁵ I suggest that a large part of the reason for this is that those who do not like the obvious subject of the book invariably resort to some sort of allegorical interpretation, making the possible results almost limitless. Keith Schoville classifies the various approaches to the Song of Songs under four broad categories:²¹⁶ the Song as an allegory, the Song as a drama, the Song as cultic liturgy, and the Song as literal--a beautiful love story (poem) between a real couple--Solomon and the Shulamite girl.²¹⁷

The allegorical approach has been the predominant view in both Judaism and Christianity during most of the known history of its interpretation (roughly the last two millennia). It was the leading view among the rabbis during the first century A.D. and was taken over in Christianity by Hippolytus and more importantly by Origen in the third century A.D. The view within Judaism was that "Solomon" represented the Lord God and the "girl" the nation of Israel. In Christian circles, "Solomon" was generally taken as a figure for Jesus and the "girl" the Christian church. The main problem with the allegorical method of interpretation is that its application and result are not bound by the intent of the human author, which is the only meaning of a biblical text that has divine authority.

No doubt the popularity of the allegorical view throughout the centuries is that the details of the love scenes, which are somewhat erotic when taken literally, can be turned into something else. With regard to the two main allegorizations, there are many passages in the Bible that deal with the love of God for his people Israel and the love of Jesus for those who have accepted him as Savior. None of these passages include anything like the explicit details in the Song of Songs. Those details obviously apply to the love between a man and a woman--and as Mother Superior said to Maria in the "The Sound of Music," "The love of a man and a woman is holy too."

213 Ibid.

214 The Hebrew title comes from the first two words of the book: *שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים*, "Song of Songs." Translated into Latin, this is *Canticum Cantorum*. *Canticles* is a rough transliteration of *Canticum* into English letters. The third title comes from the next two words in verse 1. They translate as *which (is) Solomon's*, from which the title *Song of Solomon* comes.

215 Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 1 vol., vol. 6 in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols., C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973; original publication date, 1877), I:1.

216 Keith N. Schoville, "Song of Songs," *EncJudaica*, XV:147-50. For the most part, the following four summaries are based on Schoville's article; use was also made of F. Brent Knutson, "Canticles," *ISBE*, I:606-09.

217 There are actually two versions of the literal interpretation. In one the two lovers are Solomon and the Shulamite girl. The other view, called "the shepherd hypothesis," is that the girl loves a shepherd boy back home and dreams and speaks of him, while Solomon is trying to woo her for himself. With Gleason Archer, I prefer the first version: "By dint of arbitrarily assigning the sentiments of warm affection to the shepherd and the more stiff and formal speeches to the king, a distinction may be made out, even though it results in very unnatural parceling up of the dialogue" (Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 493). However, the analysis of the use of *עֲלְמָה* would not be radically changed.

Before entering into a discussion of the use of עֲלָמוֹת (‘*alamoth*, plural of ‘*almah*) in Song 1:3, Niessen's citation of Hengstenberg on this verse is most enlightening and puts the allegorical approach to this book and this passage in its true perspective:

Hengstenberg loses touch with reality as he allegorizes: " 'Alamoth in the two passages in the Song of Solomon [1:3 and 6:8] designate the nations which have not yet attained to union with the heavenly Solomon, but are destined for this union."²¹⁸

The ‘*alamoth* are not nations; they are girls. With that established, it is now possible to proceed with the analysis of this verse. In the *NASB*, verses 2-4 read as follows. They are spoken by the Shulamite girl:

“May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine.
“Your oils have a pleasing fragrance,
Your name is *like* purified oil;
Therefore the maidens [עֲלָמוֹת] love you.
“Draw me after you *and* let us run *together*!
The king has brought me into his chambers.”

The verb translated "love" in verse 3, אָהַבּוּ, is a third person feminine plural Qal perfect of אָהַב, *to love*. Apart from a waw-conversive, perfects are normally translated as an English past tense. So the ‘*alamoth* have loved Solomon. Both Young and Niessen suggest that this is not so much an objective statement of fact but a subjective impression of the girl who is speaking, the girl Solomon chose.²¹⁹ Delitzsch, citing Gesenius, agrees with a past-time sense for the verb, but applies it as follows: the עֲלָמוֹת "have acquired love to thee (= love thee)."²²⁰ In other words, after praising Solomon's kisses and his love, she says with a coy smile, "That's why all the girls love you!" This is not an unusual response even today from a girl in love!

What can be said about these other girls who love Solomon that will help zero in on the meaning intended by the use of the word ‘*alamoth*? It seems clear that they must be *young unmarried girls*, each of whom love Solomon and wish he had chosen her to become his wife. Thus, its use here reinforces the correctness of the basic meaning of ‘*alamoth* implied in the previous texts. Of course, it still remains true that given the culture in Israel one would, if asked, presume these girls were virgins. However, that presumption, which is culturally attached to the words ‘*almah* and ‘*alamoth*, is not part of their basic meaning. This text shows that those words can be used by a speaker or author without any conscious thought of "virgin." Would the Shulamite girl, after praising Solomon's kisses and love, say, "That's why all the virgins love you!" That clearly would *not* be what she was thinking when she made this statement. No girl in her place would be thinking of *that*.

218 Niessen, "The Virginity of the עֲלָמָה in Isaiah 7:14," p. 140; brackets added. The citation is from Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament*, II:46.

219 Young, "The Immanuel Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14-16, Second Article," p. 23, and Niessen, "The Virginity of the עֲלָמָה in Isaiah 7:14," p. 140.

220 Delitzsch, *Commentary on The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, I:22.

Song of Songs 6:8

In the second place where **עַלְמוֹת** is used in the Song of Songs, it is Solomon who is speaking and extolling the virtues of the Shulamite girl; this is followed by the "queens and concubines" praising her (NASB):

“There are sixty queens and eighty concubines,
And maidens [**עַלְמוֹת**] without number;
But my dove, my perfect one, is unique:
She is her mother’s only *daughter*;
She is the pure *child* of the one who bore her.
The maidens [**בָּנוֹת**] saw her and called her blessed,
The queens and the concubines *also*, and they praised her, *saying*,
‘Who is this that grows like the dawn,
As beautiful as the full moon,
As pure as the sun,
As awesome as an army with banners?’”

Niessen suggests that the most likely interpretation of the "sixty queens and eighty concubines, and maidens without number" is that "three categories of women are mentioned here for the sake of completeness."²²¹ The "completeness" he suggests describes the three possible positions on the marital scale:

1. The queens who were married women in the fullest sense
2. The concubines, a bit lower on the marital scale and whose status was somewhat similar to common-law wives today
3. Young girls who were not married at all

This last group, the unmarried girls, were in the service of the queens and destined to be eventually chosen as wives by the king. Again, the use of **עַלְמוֹת** seems to mean *young unmarried girls*, but in this case their position in Solomon's court rather strongly implies two additional features of these girls: beauty and virginity.

Who are the "maidens" who call the Shulamite "blessed" in the last part of verse 9? The word translated "maiden" in that clause is **בָּנוֹת**, the plural of the feminine noun **בַּת** (*bāth*), meaning *daughter*. So who are these "daughters"? Are they sisters of the Shulamite? The third line of verse 9 might imply this, and the Hebrew of the first two lines does not necessarily make Solomon's loved one an only daughter.²²² Be that as it may, the close proximity of the queens and concubines in the last line of verse 9 would seem to make the sister option unlikely. The noun **בַּת** is used in a variety of ways and is not limited to a literal daughter.²²³ *BDB* lists this verse together with verse 2:2, Genesis 30:13, and Proverbs 31:29 as examples of the plural used in a more generalized way meaning *young women* or *women* (since daughters are women!). Genesis 30:13 seems to imply that **בָּנוֹת** can legitimately be used of married women, while verse 2:2 in Song of Songs indicates that it can also be applied to young unmarried women (NASB):

Like a lily among the thorns,

221 Niessen, "The Virginity of the **עַלְמוֹת** in Isaiah 7:14," p. 141.

222 See Delitzsch, *Commentary on The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, I:112.

223 *BDB*, p. 123.

So is my darling among the maidens [הַבָּנוֹת].

It does not seem likely that Solomon means, "so is my darling among the married women." Rather, of all the young unmarried women available to Solomon, she was like a lily among the thorns.

This usage being acceptable for the plural בָּנוֹת together with the mention of queens and concubines in the last line of verse 6:9 would indicate that these are the same three groups of women as in verse 8.

Psalm 68:26 (MT)

J. J. Stewart Perowne gives the following summary of Psalm 68:

The subject of this grand hymn is the entry of God into his sanctuary on Zion. This is described under figures borrowed from the triumph of an earthly conqueror, who, after having vanquished his enemies, and taken possession of their country, marches in solemn procession at the head of his troops to occupy the city which he has selected as his capital and the seat of empire. God is represented, first as advancing at the head of the Israelites through the desert; then as leading them victoriously into Canaan; and finally as fixing his royal abode on Zion, whence he reigns in the majesty of universal dominion, acknowledged and feared by all the nations of the earth. Such is, briefly, an outline of the Psalm.²²⁴

However, the methods of interpreting this difficult psalm are rather numerous. Perowne in his introduction to it follows this summary with a thorough, well-written summary of the various views. He then discusses the different views on the age of the psalm and the occasion for which it was composed. These issues play a role in the interpretation of עֲלֵמוֹת in verse 26.

- *The age.* Views range from the time of David to the Maccabean period. However, Gary Smith points out that since the discovery of the Ugaritic material, W. F. Albright and others now consider it likely that Psalm 68 did, in fact, originate during the days of David or perhaps Solomon.²²⁵
- *The Authorship.* The inseparable preposition ל can have a number of meanings, but according to Derek Kidner, for לְדָוִד (*le-David*) "there can be little doubt that in this context and in analogous ones it has the genitive sense, and is a genitive of authorship."²²⁶ Similarly, Nahum Sarna writes, "Whatever its original meaning, there cannot be any doubt that *le-David* was very early interpreted in the sense of authorship."²²⁷ Nevertheless, among relatively recent critical scholars, F. E. K nig is almost alone in allowing the possibility of Davidic authorship for Psalm 68.²²⁸ Conservative scholars in general accept

224 J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, 2 vols. (Andover, MA: Warren F. Draper, 1876), I:472.

225 Gary V. Smith, "Paul's Use of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8," *JETS*, 18 (Summer 1975):184. Albright's article is "A Catalogue of Early Hebrew Lyric Poems (Psalm LXVII)," *HUCA* 23 (1950-1951):1-39. As an aside, this article by Smith gives the best interpretation of Paul's use of Psalm 68:18 (MT 19) in Eph. 4:8. Paul does not use midrashic exegesis or a *peshet* type of interpretation, nor does he reveal the *sensus plenior* of verse 18. Also, Smith's view does not require a *descensus ad infernos* in verse Eph. 4:9.

226 Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), p. 33. *le-David* is used in the superscription of seventy-three psalms.

227 Nahum M. Sarna, "Psalms, Book of," *EncJudaica*, XIII:1313. In this same entry, Sarna has an excellent analysis of all the technical terms used in the superscriptions. This includes the term עֲלֵ-עֲלֵמוֹת in Psalm 46, discussed next.

228 H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), p. 490.

Davidic authorship for those psalms so labeled.²²⁹

- *The Occasion.* Again Perowne's summary of the many views on this issue is most helpful. However, if David's era is taken as the origin of the psalm, the number of views is dramatically reduced. The three prominent views of those that remain are the following: (1) the procession when the Ark was taken "from the house of Obed-edom into the City of David²³⁰ with gladness" (2 Sam. 6:12); (2) David's victory over the Syrians and Edomites (2 Sam. 8); and (3) David's victory over the Syrians and Ammonites (2 Sam. 10-12). Although both Delitzsch and Leupold prefer the war against the Ammonites,²³¹ there seems to be solid support for the procession of the Ark into the City of David.²³² Whether the description specifically describes bringing the Ark to the City of David or is an idealized description, both Perowne and Smith agree that the focal point of this psalm is *the entrance of God into his sanctuary in Zion.*²³³

Perowne suggests the following division of the psalm based on the common principle of pairs of verses:²³⁴

I. An introduction which, with true lyric animation, sets before us the victorious march of God, the deliverances he has accomplished for his people, and the loud exultation to which they are called in consequence (ver. 1-6).

II. Then follows a glance at the former history -- the journey of Israel through the wilderness, under the immediate guidance and care of God (ver. 7-10).

III. The triumphant occupation of the land of Canaan, and the flight of the hostile kings (ver. 11-14).

IV. The choice of Zion as the abode of God, and his solemn entry into it (ver. 15-18).

V. The Psalmist, contemplating the glorious results of this abode of God in Zion, calls upon all Israel to praise him, chiefly because he will punish all the enemies of his people (ver. 19-23).

VI. The next strophe reverts to a description of the triumphal procession (ver. 24-27).

VII. The hope is expressed that all the nations of the world shall acknowledge and submit themselves to Jehovah who dwelleth in Zion (ver. 28-31).

VIII. The Psalm closes with a summons to all the kingdoms of the earth to praise God (ver. 32-35).

Having reviewed these points about Psalm 68, the key verses, 25-27 (*MT*), are translated as follows in the *NASB*:

They have seen Your procession, O God,
The procession of my God, my King, into the sanctuary.

229 See the thorough defense of this view by Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, pp. 440-45.

230 The "City of David" was part of Jerusalem, which was a Jebusite city. David first conquered the "stronghold of Zion," which he renamed the "City of David." The remainder of Jerusalem was then captured, and David set up his royal residence there (2 Sam. 5:6-10; 1 Chron. 11:4-9).

231 Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols, vol. 5 in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols, C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973; original publication date, 1871), II:245-46, and Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms*, p. 490.

232 E.g., Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 238; Steinmueller, "Etymology and Biblical Usage of 'Almah," p. 36.

233 Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, I:472; Smith, "Paul's Use of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8," p. 185. Curiously, Smith also claims that the plural noun הַלְיָכוֹת in verse 25 (*MT*) does not mean *procession*. However, *BDB*, p. 237, lists Ps. 68:25 under the meaning of *going, marching, progress of God into his sanctuary*. *BDB* goes on to state, "either to solemn processions of worshipers (e.g. De[litzsch]) or, perh.[aps] better, to the theophanic progress of God himself (e.g. Che[yne])."

234 Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, I:478.

The singers went on, the musicians after *them*,
In the midst of the maidens [עַלְמוֹת] beating tambourines.
Bless God in the congregations,
Even the LORD, *you who are* of the fountain of Israel.

Several subjects need to be discussed in order to arrive at a tentative conclusion about the use of עַלְמוֹת in verse 26.

(1) Who Used Tambourines?

Outside of Psalm 68:26, who uses tambourines to rejoice and to celebrate? There are two passages where tambourines are used by "women" (נָשִׁים , plural of אִשָּׁה) for military victory celebrations: Exodus 15:20 and 1 Samuel 18:6. In Judges 11:34 a "daughter" (בַּת) also celebrates a military victory with a tambourine. Where military victories are not explicitly mentioned, "all the house of Israel" celebrates with tambourines in 2 Samuel 6:5 and "all Israel" in 1 Chronicles 13:8. Finally, "בְּתוֹלָהּ Israel" celebrates with tambourines in Jeremiah 31:4. It would seem that in these examples anyone can join in a celebration playing tambourines. Is there any significance to using עַלְמוֹת in Psalm 68:26?

(2) Do Verses 25-27 Describe an Organized Procession?

E. J. Young points out an observation by K. Hj. Fahlgren that Psalm 68:26 is the only passage in which עַלְמוֹת appears in direct connection with the worship of God in a liturgy, viz., a formal religious service.²³⁵ Fahlgren argues that these verses in Psalm 68 describe a festival day in a religious service of the Temple. His suggestion about a service in the Temple cannot be correct if Davidic authorship is accepted,²³⁶ but he is almost certainly correct that verses 25-27 describe an organized accompaniment to a procession and not a spontaneous celebration. As noted above, these verses could be a description of the procession bringing the Ark from the house of Obed-edom to the City of David, or they could be a description of an idealized procession of the Ark. This issue is addressed more fully as the discussion continues.

What is important to note at this point is that the description does not appear to fit a random group of rejoicing citizens of Israel. There is order here: the "singers" went first and the "musicians" second; both nouns are masculine. The עַלְמוֹת too were well organized. The substantive תְּוֹךְ (*midst*) with the inseparable preposition ב (*in, with, by*) is in construct with עַלְמוֹת and translated by the NASB "in the midst of" עַלְמוֹת. It refers back to the singers and musicians: *they* are in the midst of the עַלְמוֹת. Delitzsch suggests that the עַלְמוֹת are on either side of them.²³⁷ Kidner cites Weiser that the עַלְמוֹת are surrounding the singers and musicians.²³⁸ Either way, these three groups in the procession are organized into a specific arrangement. This is an ordered procession.

235 Young, "The Immanuel Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14-16, Second Article," p. 24.

236 The word translated "temple" in v. 30 is הֵיכָל. Although it is used of Solomon's Temple (1 Kgs. 6:1,2; et al.), it is also used of the sanctuary at Shiloh (1 Sam. 1:9; 3:3). Therefore, its use of Psalm 68 does not preclude Davidic authorship. See also Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, I:108, 109 and 475.

237 Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, II:265.

238 Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 243.

(3) Bringing the Ark into Jerusalem Was an Organized Procession

In Exodus 15:20 and 1 Samuel 18:6 the events were spontaneous events, not planned or organized. The general term נָשִׁים ("women") was used, and in the first reference the women danced and played tambourines. However, in the second reference the women danced, played tambourines, and sang joyful songs. It would seem that in these unorganized events, the term נָשִׁים was used because all the women--married and unmarried, young and old--participated in the spontaneous response.

The record of bringing the Ark to the City of David is recorded in 2 Samuel 6. The procession for first part of the journey started at the house of Abinadab, but because the Lord struck down Uzzah on the way, the Ark was stored for three months in the house of Obed-edom. The second part of the journey, then, was from the house of Obed-edom to the City of David. During the first part of the journey, "David and all the house of Israel" celebrated with songs, instruments, and tambourines (v. 5; also 1 Chron. 13:8). This seems to describe a spontaneous celebration and would naturally include נָשִׁים ("women"), although they are not explicitly mentioned in the text. For the second part of the journey, less detail is given. The text states only that "David and all the house of Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouting and the sound of trumpet" (v. 15).

However, 1 Chronicles 15 gives a much more detailed description of that part of the procession from the house of Obed-edom to the City of David. The procession and the accompanying singing and music was highly organized. David realized that the anger of the Lord and the death of Uzzah was primarily the result of not assigning the Levites to carry the ark (see Num. 1:50-53; 4:1-15; cf. Exod. 37:3-5). He did not make that mistake again (vv. 13-15). David also instructed the Levites to appoint among their brothers both singers and musicians (v. 16). The singers were specifically named, and specifically named musicians were assigned to the harps, to the lyres, and to the cymbals (vv. 19-21). Several specifically named priests were to blow trumpets "before the ark of God" (v. 24; cf. 2 Sam. 6:15). The Chronicler summarizes as follows:

25 So *it was* David, with the elders of Israel and the captains over thousands, who went to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD from the house of Obed-edom with joy. 26 Because God was helping the Levites who were carrying the ark of the covenant of the LORD, they sacrificed seven bulls and seven rams. 27 Now David was clothed with a robe of fine linen with all the Levites who were carrying the ark, and the singers and Chenaniah the leader of the singing *with* the singers. David also wore an ephod of linen. 28 Thus all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the LORD with shouting, and with sound of the horn, with trumpets, with loud-sounding cymbals, with harps and lyres.

There was nothing random or spontaneous about the singing and the music. This was a well-organized procession. However, no tambourines or women are mentioned.

(4) Does Psalm 68:25-27 Describe the Procession of the Ark to the City of David?

Several observations lead to a tentative answer to this question.

1. No mention of עֲלָמוֹת playing tambourines is found in either description of bringing the Ark into the City of David--2 Samuel 6; 1 or Chronicles 15.²³⁹
2. David organized the music to be played in three sequential contexts. (1) He orchestrated the music for

239 The word עֲלָמוֹת is used in 1 Chron. 15:20 but in a different way. Its use there is discussed in the section dealing with that verse.

the journey of the Ark from the house of Obed-edom to the City of David. (2) He appointed Levites and organized the music to be played before the Ark of the Lord while it was in the tent in Jerusalem that he had pitched for it (1 Chron. 6:31-32; 16:1-6, 42). (3) Though David was not allowed by God to build the Temple, it is clear that he was responsible for the organization of the guilds of the Temple singers and musicians and for the institution of the liturgy (1 Chron. 25:1-5; 2 Chron. 7:6; 8:14, 15; 23:18; 29:30; 35:15; Neh. 12:22-24).

3. As noted previously, I accept the view of Perowne and Smith that the focal point of Psalm 68 is *the entrance of God into his sanctuary in Zion* (see, e.g., vv. 16-19). The Ark is not mentioned in the psalm, and the emphasis is on God himself. In Psalm 68, what immediately preceded God entering his sanctuary was a "procession" that included singers, musicians, and **עֲלְמוֹת** (vv. 25-26).²⁴⁰ Historically, what immediately preceded God entering his sanctuary was a "procession" of the Ark from the house of Obed-edom to Zion, which also included singers and musicians but did not include the **עֲלְמוֹת** playing tambourines. Nevertheless, if David wrote this psalm, which I also accept, it would seem likely that the description of this procession in the psalm was at least based in part on the historical procession recounted in 2 Samuel 6 and 1 Chronicles 15. It would also seem likely that the music described in verse 26 of the psalm was based on the music David had ordered and organized for the procession of the Ark from the house of Obed-edom to Zion in 1 Chronicles 15. But if so, why are the **עֲלְמוֹת** mentioned in the psalm but not in 1 Chronicles 15?

Psalm 68 covers much more than the procession from the house of Obed-edom to Zion. It traces the "goings" or "processions" of God (or perhaps better, the theophanic progress of God, as *BDB* suggested²⁴¹) from Sinai to Zion (see Perowne's outline given above). However, the final journey of the Ark from Obed-edom's house to Zion was the last part of this long procession, or multiple processions, of God himself from Sinai to Zion, the abode where Yahweh would dwell forever (e.g., v. 17). Therefore, the occasion that prompted David to write Psalm 68 was likely this final procession of the Ark to the City of David. But in the psalm itself that procession is generalized, or enlarged, to the entire journey of many processions or goings of the God of Israel that brought him from Sinai to Zion, his eternal dwelling place, and even to the future when all nations will submit themselves to Yahweh who dwells in Zion (vv. 29-32).²⁴² Psalm 68, then, is not so much the celebration of a particular event--the final procession of the Ark to Zion--but the expression of the more general idea of God's processions from Sinai to Zion.²⁴³

There is precedent for such a generalization. In their entry on the the Book of Psalms, Nicholas Ridderbos and Peter Craigie write,

Many of the Psalms are characterized by a distinctive style...The style is such that the Psalms lack concrete and specific points of reference, but are thereby more easily used in various contexts of worship. Many Psalms and songs which were initially composed for a specific occasion are nevertheless written in such a style that they could continue in use beyond the confines of that original occasion.²⁴⁴

Thus David likely wrote Psalm 68 on the occasion of bringing the Ark to the City of David. However, since the journey to Zion really began at Sinai, David generalized or broadened the scope of his song to include the complete journey of the Lord from Sinai to Zion, his final dwelling place. In its description of the last part of this

240 Of the four main Jewish versions, the *Jerusalem Bible* and *Jewish Bible 1985* both translate the plural noun **הַלְיָבוֹת** in v. 25 as "processions"; the *Jewish Bible 1917* translates it "goings," and the *Stone Edition* "ways."

241 *BDB*, p. 237.

242 Smith, "Paul's Use of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8," p. 186, writes, "The final section [of Ps. 68] foresees the eschatological period in which God is in His temple in Jerusalem and has universal dominion over all kings and kingdoms."

243 This view is very similar to that taken by J. D. Michaelis as cited by Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, I:474.

244 Nicholas H. Ridderbos and Petter C. Craigie, "Psalms," *ISBE*, III:1033.

journey, 1 Chronicles 15 is basically a history book. However, in writing this psalm, David is not writing a history book. Not only is the breadth of the psalm generalized, but the descriptions are also generalized or idealized. For example, verse 4:

But let the righteous be glad; let them exult before God;
Yes, let them rejoice with gladness.

According to Perowne, "Here, Israel as a nation regarded *in its ideal character*, and as placed in contrast with its heathen oppressors, 'the wicked.'"²⁴⁵ Another kind of idealization employed is personification, as in verse 17:

Why do you look with envy, O mountains with *many* peaks,
At the mountain which God has desired for His abode?"

On the basis of this analysis, then, I would suggest that David in verses 25-27 also generalized or idealized his description of the journey of God (or the Ark) from the house of Obed-edom to Zion.

(5) Why Are the **עַלְמוֹת** Mentioned in Psalm 68 but not Mentioned in 1 Chronicles 15?

Since David broadened or expanded Psalm 68 from the actual, though limited, procession described in 1 Chronicles 15 into the goings of God from Sinai to Zion, he apparently also decided to add tambourines played by **עַלְמוֹת** into the generalized "procession" of verses 25-26. But much more needs to be said.

In a formal, structured procession, the players of these tambourines would not be just anyone, or even any women. 1 Chronicles 15 shows that David would be very specific in whom he selects. According to the psalm, David envisioned that the group he would assign to play tambourines in a procession would be females. But that is not very specific. In 1 Chronicles 15, the group from which he selected singers and musicians was not simply "males" but the much more restricted set, viz., Levites. Thus in the psalm he does not use the term **נְשִׁים**, "women" in general, as was used in Exodus 15:20 and 1 Samuel 18:6, but rather the term **עַלְמוֹת**. Evidently, he considered this a restricted term: as the Levites were a subgroup among men, so **עַלְמוֹת** were a subgroup among women. What was this subgroup? There is nothing to prohibit the meaning already indicated in all the previous examples of this word in Scripture, both singular and plural. If this is a valid deduction, then what would characterize these selected players of the tambourines would be that they were all *young unmarried girls*. As he picked certain Levites for singers and musicians, he would pick certain **עַלְמוֹת** to play the tambourines. But in a psalm giving a generalized, ideal picture, he would likely just say **עַלְמוֹת**. Of course, in the actual historical account describing the selection of the singers and musicians, 1 Chronicles 15, the names of those Levites selected would be given. Similarly, if there had been an actual historical account of a procession for which David included **עַלְמוֹת**, the names of those **עַלְמוֹת** selected would also be given. But in a somewhat idealized picture developed in the psalm, he simply lists singers, musicians, and **עַלְמוֹת** playing tambourines. Again, as Ridderbos and Craigie stated in the above citation, this type of psalm would generally "lack concrete and specific points of reference."

Two more questions remain. First, if **עַלְמוֹת** means young unmarried girls, why would David have selected only

245 Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, I:479 (emphasis added). Perowne's comment is not a complete sentence, but his meaning is clear: Israel is here regarded in its ideal character.

these girls? The answer would seem to be that married women would not be likely candidates for official status due to domestic responsibilities.²⁴⁶ They could participate in random, spontaneous celebrations as in Exodus 15:20 and 1 Samuel 18:6. But for organized, somewhat "professional" positions that possibly even involved practice, married women would not make a practical pool from which to select.²⁴⁷

Second, could David have meant "young virgins" when he used **עַלְמוֹת**? This is highly unlikely. First, the previous examples of the use of **עַלְמָה** and **עַלְמוֹת** in Scripture have indicated that the basic meaning of the words is simply young unmarried girls. Second, although Israelite society implied that young unmarried girls *were* virgins, there is no reason to think that David had *that* in mind or that the concept of virginity played any role when he was selecting representatives from a specific group of females for this specific purpose. This context--and David's purpose--does not call for a statement about virginity.

It therefore would seem that the working hypothesis of this chapter remains intact: the basic meaning of **עַלְמָה** is *young unmarried girl*. That meaning fits very nicely in this context; *virgin* does not.

Psalm 46:1 (MT) and 1 Chronicles 15:20

These last two occurrences of the plural **עַלְמוֹת** need to be addressed together.²⁴⁸ The two verses are both in musical contexts, but somewhat different from Psalm 68:26. In Psalm 46, **עַלְמוֹת** is used in the psalm heading. Both the *Jerusalem Bible* and the *NASB* transliterate **עַלְמוֹת** instead of translate it:

To the chief Musician for the son of Qorah, A Song to ‘Alamot.

For the choir director. *A Psalm* of the sons of Korah, set to Alamoth. A Song.

The second verse, 1 Chronicles 15:20, is part of the text studied above describing David's organization of the music for the procession of the Ark from the house of Obed-edom to Zion. Again, both the *Jerusalem Bible* and the *NASB* transliterate **עַלְמוֹת** (verses 19-21):

So the singers, Heman, Asaf, and Etan, were appointed to sound with cymbals of brass; and Zekharya, and ‘Azi’el, and Shemiramot, and Yehi’el, and ‘Unni, and Eli’av, and Ma‘aseyahu, and Benayahu, with lutes to ‘Alamot; and Mattiyahu, and Eliflehu, and Miqneyahu, and ‘Oved-edom, and Ye‘i’el, and

246 Niessen, "The Virginity of the **עַלְמָה** in Isaiah 7:14," p. 138, makes essentially the same point: "It can also be presumed that older women would be married and thus largely restricted to the home because of their domestic responsibilities. Only teenagers would be sufficiently free to participate in these processions."

247 Niessen, *ibid.*, states that "according to Semitic custom, single women generally participated in bridal processions and other festive occasions." Unfortunately, he cites no sources.

248 Robert Dick Wilson, "The Meaning of ‘Alma (A.V. 'Virgin') in Isaiah VII. 14," p. 308, n 1, points out that it is not certain that **עַלְמוֹת** in these two verses is in fact the plural of *‘almah*. Niessen, "The Virginity of the **עַלְמָה** in Isaiah 7:14," p. 136, n. 28, also mentions that the pointing of **עַלְמוֹת** can be emended to **עַלְמוֹת** with the resulting meaning of *darkness* (cf. footnote 202 on Prov. 30:19). The psalm heading would then be "concerning darkness," indicating the subject of Psalm 46. However, the scholars I consulted were satisfied to interpret these verses with their Masoretic pointing.

‘Azazyahu, with lyres to the Sheminit to lead.

So the singers, Heman, Asaph and Ethan *were appointed* to sound aloud cymbals of bronze; and Zechariah, Aziel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Unni, Eliab, Maaseiah and Benaiah, with harps *tuned* to alamothe; and Mattithiah, Eliphelihu, Mikneiah, Obed-edom, Jeiel and Azaziah, to lead with lyres tuned to the sheminith.

In both Psalm 46:1 and 1 Chronicles 15:20, עֲלֵמֹת (‘al) upon.²⁴⁹ The Masoretes connected these two words together with a *Maqqēph*, thus indicating that the two words are closely associated: עֲלֵמֹת (‘al ‘alamoth). In attempting to determine the meaning in these two uses of ‘alamoth, it is helpful to investigate another term used here in verse 21, שְׁמִינִית (*sheminith*). It is also used in the headings of Psalms 6 and 12, and in all three occurrences *sheminith* is prefixed with the definite article and connected with a *Maqqēph* to the preposition עַל (‘al): עַל־הַשְּׁמִינִית (‘al ha-sheminith).

- עֲלֵמֹת (‘al ‘alamoth): Psalm 46:1 (MT), 1 Chronicles 15:20
- עַל־הַשְּׁמִינִית (‘al ha-sheminith): Psalm 6:1 (MT), Psalm 12:1 (MT), 1 Chronicles 15:21

The word *sheminith* itself is an adjective that means *eighth* (Exod. 22:29; et al.). What is difficult is interpreting ‘al ha-sheminith as used in the musical context of those three verses. Several meanings have been suggested for both these three uses of עַל־הַשְּׁמִינִית and for the two uses of עֲלֵמֹת.

- BDB on עֲלֵמֹת : to (the voice of) *young women*, either lit., or of soprano or falsetto of boys.²⁵⁰
- BDB on עַל־הַשְּׁמִינִית states that they are usually translated *according to the eighth key* or *on the octave*, but adds "but wholly dubious."²⁵¹
- Ridderbos and Craigie, "Psalms," *ISBE*: "Pss. 6 and 12 contain the expression SHEMINITH, which probably means 'octave' and may refer to the manner in which the Psalm was to be sung."²⁵²
- Nahum Sarna, "Psalms, Book of," *EncJudaica*: ‘al ha-sheminith: "Meaning literally, 'on the eighth,' ‘al ha-sheminith may refer to an eight-stringed instrument in Psalm 6, 12....It cannot mean an octave as the division into eight modes was unknown. The reference to 1 Chronicles 15:21, 'with lyres on the *sheminith*' in parallel with verse 20, 'with harps on ‘alamot '...has suggested a quality of the voice, perhaps a low bass."²⁵³

249 As with most prepositions, עַל has a number of possible meanings; see BDB, p. 752.

250 Ibid., p. 761.

251 Ibid., p. 1033.

252 Ridderbos and Craigie, "Psalms," III:1031.

253 Sarna, "Psalms, Book of," XIII:1320

- Nahum Sarna, "Psalms, Book of," *EncJudaica*: 'al 'alamot: "Its connection with public worship is attested by 1 Chronicles 15:20. It could refer to a musical instrument such as a small flute or pipe...or express a quality of the voice, i.e., 'youthful' (cf. 'almah, 'a maiden'), perhaps high pitched or soprano."²⁵⁴
- Franz Delitzsch on Psalm 6: "It ['al ha-sheminith] is also found by Ps. xii, and besides in 1 Chron. xv. 21. From this latter passage it is at least clear that it is not the name of an instrument. An instrument with eight strings could not have been called an *octave* instead of an *octachord*. In that passage they played upon nabras²⁵⁵ על-עלְמוֹת, and with citherns על-הַשְּׁמִינִית. If עלְמוֹת denotes maidens = maidens' voices i.e., *soprano*, then, as it seems, הַשְּׁמִינִית is a designation of the bass..."²⁵⁶
- Derek Kidner: "**According to The Sheminith** (Pss. 6 and 12) is a companion term in 1 Chronicles 15:21 to **According to Alamoth** (Ps. 46; 1 Ch. 15:20). The passage in Chronicles, describing the bringing of the Ark to Jerusalem, tells of eight Levites who were 'to play harps according to Alamoth', and six who were 'to lead with lyres according to the Sheminith'. Alamoth...means 'girls'; Sheminith...means 'eighth'. Although the latter is very enigmatic to us (the eighth string? the eighth and crowning ritual act?), the majority option is that Alamoth means the treble range, and Sheminith therefore the tenor or bass. But we have no evidence that pitch was reckoned in octaves, a division of intervals which is traditionally ascribed to Pythagoras."²⁵⁷

Obviously, a number of these various suggestions conflict with each other. The logic to determine the correct interpretation, or at least the most likely interpretation, could consist of the following sequence of deductions.

1. The beginning point must be 1 Chronicles 15:20-21, where both terms are used "in parallel," as Sarna pointed out.
2. The next step is to agree with the conclusion of Delitzsch that neither term refers to a musical instrument. Two specific instruments are explicitly mentioned, viz., harps²⁵⁸ and lyres.²⁵⁹ עלְמוֹת and הַשְּׁמִינִית cannot refer to *additional* instruments. How can a musician play a harp על (according to²⁶⁰) a flute or a lyre על (according to) a pipe?
3. Concerning the use of עלְמוֹת, it should be taken in the same sense as in its other occurrences unless there is strong and convincing evidence that it means something else.
4. Among the meanings listed for על by BDB are "to" and "according to." Both the *Jerusalem Bible* and the *NASB* translate it in verse 20 as "to," with the *NASB* adding in italics the word "tuned," making the result "tuned to." The phrase then becomes, "with harps [tuned] to עלְמוֹת."

254 Ibid., XIII:1321.

255 The Hebrew word translated "harps" by the *NASB* in v. 20.

256 Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, I:131; italics original and brackets original.

257 Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, pp. 40-41; boldface original.

258 נָבֶל : BDB, p. 614, *harp* or *lute*.

259 כִּנּוֹר : ibid., p. 490, *lyre*.

260 One of the possible meanings of על (BDB, p. 752).

5. Assuming, then, that **עֲלָמוֹת** means young girls, what can it mean that harps are tuned to young girls? As Sarna, Delitzsch, and Kidner allow, the expression may make reference to the *voices* of young girls--high voices or soprano voices. There would, in fact, be nothing strange about using "young girls" to mean "voices of young girls"--it would be an example of synecdoche, a figure of speech not uncommon in Scripture.²⁶¹ Thus the text means that the harps should be tuned to play songs in higher notes, at a level that would today be called treble notes. Since "young girls" is consistent with the meaning of **עֲלָמוֹת** in other texts, this would be the most likely explanation of its use in both Psalm 46:1 and 1 Chronicles 15:20.²⁶²
6. The phrase in verse 21 with *sheminith* is more difficult. What can it mean that lyres are tuned to the "eighth"? Due to the parallel with **עֲלָמוֹת** in verse 20, Sarna, Delitzsch, and Kidner suggest as their most likely explanation that **הַשְּׁמִינִית** makes reference to low voices or bass voices. In other words, the lyres should be tuned to play songs in lower notes, at a level that would today be called bass notes.
7. However, the phrase with **עֲלָמוֹת** makes reference to young girls to identify the level of the notes the harps should play. Where is the parallel with **הַשְּׁמִינִית**? The phrase makes reference to "the eighth." How does that identify the level of the notes the lyres should play? The answer is that no one today knows. The meaning of many of the technical musical terms, especially in the psalms, has been lost. On the other hand, it could mean something like eight steps downward. Sarna states categorically that "the division into eight modes was unknown." But Kidner more prudently states simply that "we have no evidence that pitch was reckoned in octaves." When two different instruments play simultaneously, the notes played must be in consonance. The design of the instruments themselves is also something of which there is today no thorough knowledge. It would seem at least possible that their design was such that when changing pitch eight steps, at least with the lyres and harps then used, consonance would be retained. Though speculation, this theory does have the advantage of making a consistent interpretation where both **עֲלָמוֹת** and **שְׁמִינִית** retain their basic meaning even in these musical contexts.
8. I have argued in this chapter that the basic meaning of **עֲלָמָה** is *young unmarried girl*. Even assuming the analysis just given is correct, how does "unmarried" fit into this musical context of Psalm 46:1 and 1 Chronicles 15:20? The answer, at least to this question, is quite simple. It has been argued in the section on Psalm 68:26 that it was unmarried girls that were needed for the semiprofessional duty in organized, liturgical music. Of course, a young girl's voice does not change when she marries, but the authors who used the expression **עַל-עֲלָמוֹת** would have done so simply because the word **עֲלָמָה** was already in use for describing such organized music. In the minds of the authors, those instruments had to be tuned to have the same quality of sound as the girls who were part of the orchestration.

Conclusions Regarding the Use of **בְּתוּלָה**

and **עֲלָמָה** in the Hebrew Scriptures

261 See Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 250-51.

262 It should perhaps be noted that the marginal reading of the NASB for 1 Chron. 15:20 is "harps of maiden-like tone" and for Psalm 46:1 "for soprano voices."

I suggest the data surveyed in the eight uses of *עַלְמָה*, not including Isaiah 7:14, and the data on *בְּתוּלָה*, justify the following conclusions.

- The words *בְּתוּלָה* and *עַלְמָה* are likely roughly synonymous.
- Neither *בְּתוּלָה* nor *עַלְמָה* have *virgo intacta* as their basic meaning or include *virgo intacta* in their basic meaning.
- The primary focus of both *בְּתוּלָה* and *עַלְמָה* is *age distinction*.
- The basic meaning of *בְּתוּלָה* is *a girl of marriageable age*.
- Although *בְּתוּלָה* most often is used of young girls who have never been married, it likely can be used of any young girl of marriageable age--unmarried, married, or widowed.
- The two uses of the masculine *עַלְמ* can hardly allow for any general conclusion. However, it can be said that neither of these uses can include the notion of "virgin."
- Several texts imply the basic meaning of *עַלְמָה* is *a young unmarried girl*.
- That meaning fits, or can be used in, all the remaining texts where *עַלְמָה* or its plural is used.
- No text in which *עַלְמָה* or its plural is used implies a *married* girl, *married* woman, or widow. Its use in the Hebrew Scriptures is limited to young unmarried girls who have never been married.²⁶³
- In Israelite society, an *עַלְמָה*, if the question arose, would be presumed a virgin, unless there was definite evidence to the contrary.
- Biblical Hebrew, like the other Semitic languages, does not have a word that means *virgo intacta*. That condition can only be specified negatively (e.g., "who has not known a man").

Several additional observations are in order.

First, one issue should be clearly stated. It is likely that in all eight uses of *עַלְמָה* and its plural, the young girls have been virgins. It would not be a valid argument to use this observation to claim that therefore "virgin" is part

263 John Joseph Owens, "The Meaning of 'Almah in the Old Testament," p. 58, states, "The 'almah was a young woman of marriageable age and within this word virginity is neither included nor excluded. She may have been married or not." These three claims by Owens are not supported with any analysis of the usage of the word. He simply reviews how various lexicons define it. Nevertheless, the first two claims are consistent with the study of 'almah in this chapter. However, the evidence presented here contradicts his third claim. As this chapter has shown, an unmarried girl fits well into all eight texts in which 'almah or its plural is used, and no passage requires or implies a married girl.

and parcel of its basic meaning.²⁶⁴ This is a fallacious semantic argument. As John Walton points out, in English a "fiancée" is often also a virgin (although in U.S. society this is regrettably a dying pattern), but that does not mean that "virgin" is part and parcel of the meaning of the word *fiancée*. "Someone could show me a thousand passages where 'fiancée' was used to refer to a virgin, but that would not change the meaning."²⁶⁵

Second, eight occurrences (or even nine) is not a large number on which to base firm conclusions. So with regard to the working hypothesis developed in this chapter that **עַלְמָה** means *a young unmarried girl*, the assessment by Gordon Wenham should be kept in mind.

The rarity of its usage makes determining its meaning very difficult...It would certainly help the discussion [of Isaiah 7:14] if the meaning of *‘almâ* were clearer. Unfortunately, the evidence is too meager to be decisive.²⁶⁶

Nevertheless, its uses in the Hebrew Scriptures present considerably more evidence for *young unmarried girl* than the leading competitor, *virgin*.

The Meaning and Use of **παρθένος**

The last subject investigated in this chapter is the Greek word *παρθένος*, which was used in the LXX to translate **עַלְמָה** in Genesis 24:43 and Isaiah 7:14. It is surprising indeed to find two words, long assumed by commentators to have well-known, fixed meanings, are actually ambiguous. Both the Hebrew word **בְּתוּלָה** (*bethulah*) and the Greek word *παρθένος* (*parthénos*) were thought to mean *virgo intacta*.

Non-Biblical Use

According to Liddell and Scott, the standard lexicon of Classical Greek, *παρθένος* can mean *maiden, girl, or virgin*; LS also cites a use in Homer's *Iliad* with reference to an unmarried woman who is not a virgin.²⁶⁷ According to Gerhard Delling, this use by Homer "obviously" has the meaning "mature young woman."²⁶⁸ The etymology of *παρθένος* is uncertain, but after listing a number of occurrences in Greek literature, Delling states,

In the sense of "maiden" the emphasis, acc. to context, is either on the sex [instances cited] or age [instances cited] or both [instances cited] or on status (opp. of widow...). The ref. in these instances is in fact usually to virgins, but there is no more stress on this than when we speak of a "girl" or "young woman" (which is in innumerable instances the best rendering).²⁶⁹

Concerning Greek religious texts, he has this to say:

264 MacRae, "עַלְמָה," II:672, seems to use this argument.

265 Walton, "Isa 7:14: What's In a Name?" p. 292.

266 Wenham, "Virgin," IV:990; brackets added.

267 LS, p. 1339.

268 Gerhard Delling, "παρθένος," TDNT, V:827.

269 Ibid.; brackets added.

The multiplicity of content is not clarified when the term *παρθένος* is used in the religious sphere. To some degree it cannot really be said which of the various nuances is really predominant here. This is, of course, connected with the fact that female deities had to take over the manifold characteristics of the goddesses whom they replaced. In the last resort the epithet *παρθένος* could not be ascribed to them unless it carried a varied meaning.²⁷⁰

As an example of this varied meaning, Delling goes on to explain,

In the sphere of Gk. [Greek] religion *παρθένος* may simply denote the bloom of youth, the pt. [point] of transition from girl to woman. When used in the narrower sense, the word lays particular stress on virginity by nature, which certainly includes unapproachability, but does not stress physical chastity.²⁷¹

A case in point is the goddess Athena, sometimes spelled Athene. She had to take on a series of maternal characteristics but was also the epitome of the unapproachable and self-contained maiden.²⁷² *Παρθένος* was the title of Athena--the Virgin Goddess.²⁷³ The related Greek word, *παρθενών*, which in the plural means *maidens' apartments* in a house," in the singular means *Parthenon*--the Temple of Athena.²⁷⁴ Orlinsky points out that *παρθένος* was sometimes used honorifically for the sacred prostitutes of Greek shrines.²⁷⁵ At least at this point in time *παρθένος* did not mean *virgo intacta*.

Biblical Use (the LXX)

The Hebrew *בְּתוּלָה* is used 50 times in the Old Testament, and the LXX renders it by *παρθένος* 44 times.²⁷⁶

Commenting on the relationship between *παρθένος* and *בְּתוּלָה* in the LXX, Delling again writes,

In the LXX *παρθένος* has much the same meaning as *בְּתוּלָה* for which it is used in the great majority of instances.... In many verses it simply means "girl," esp. [especially] when the plur. [plural] is set alongside *νεανίσκοι* ["young men"] etc., cf. Dt. 32:25; Ez. 9:6; Lam 1:4...though the chastity of the *παρθένος* is usually included as self-evident even in more general use, cf. Jer. 2:32 (par.[allel] *νύμφη* ["bride"]).²⁷⁷

270 Ibid., V:827-28.

271 Ibid., V:829; brackets added.

272 Ibid., V:828-29.

273 LS, p. 1339.

274 Ibid.

275 Orlinsky, "Virgin," p. 940.

276 The number 44 comes from my count using the Hatch and Redpath *Concordance to the Septuagint* (1897), which is based on (1) the Codex Alexandrinus A, (2) the Codex Vaticanus B, (3) the Codex Sinaiticus S, and (4) the Sixtine Edition of 1587 R¹. Wilson, "The Meaning of 'Alma (A.V. 'Virgin') in Isaiah VII. 14," p. 314, states the number to be 47, while at the same time agreeing with the count of 50 for the total number of occurrences. See footnote 127 in this chapter.

277 Delling, "*παρθένος*," V:832; brackets added. Delling continues, "In some instances virginity is specially emphasized, e.g., Lv. 21:13f...." However, this is not so cut-and-dried. Were *betûlâh* and its translation *parthénos* used in ver. 14 in the strict sense of "virgin"? Wenham discusses Lev. 21 quite thoroughly ("Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" pp. 337-38). Concerning verse 14 he states, "The context unfortunately does not make clear what indicates a *betûlâh* over and

Thus he seems to consider *παρθένος* as essentially a synonym of *בְּתוּלָה*, and the meaning he gives for *παρθένος* as used in the LXX is quite close to the meaning suggested for *בְּתוּלָה* in this chapter, viz., "girl of marriageable age." Wenham reaches the same conclusion: "*parthénos* originally had much the same range of meaning as *betûlâh*."²⁷⁸

In addition to TDNT on *παρθένος*, several other standard reference works agree:

- Harry Orlinsky, *IDB SV*, "Virgin": "This word, in classical Greek--like *בתולה* in the ancient Near East and the Bible--meant primarily 'young woman, maiden, girl,' one sexually mature. Whether the *παρθένος* was a virgin or not was a secondary matter, to be determined, if possible, by the context."²⁷⁹
- M. Tsevat, *TDOT*, "*בְּתוּלָה*": "Neither Gk. *parthénos* nor Lat. *virgo*, originally or exclusively meant 'virgo intacta,' and thus...in early linguistic stages the concept of virginity...can frequently be expressed only negatively..."
- Ronald Youngblood, *ISBE*, "Immanuel": "Contrary to common opinion, *betûlâ* does not always or even necessarily mean 'virgin'--nor does Gk. *parthénos*..."²⁸⁰
- Gordon Wenham, *ISBE*, "Virgin": "The LXX usually translates Heb. *betûlâ* by Gk. *parthénos*, and twice (including Isa. 7:14, quoted by Mt. 1:23) it uses this term to translate Hebrew 'almâ. Like *betûlâ*, Gk. *parthénos* originally meant a 'girl of marriageable age,' but in later Greek it came to denote a chaste girl, i.e., a virgin. It has this latter sense throughout the NT."²⁸¹

Returning to Delling, he apparently also agrees that virginity, though perhaps not included in the basic meaning of *παρθένος* as used by the LXX translators, is nevertheless often "included as self-evident." I have similarly argued in this chapter that while *בְּתוּלָה* might not include virginity as its basic, core meaning, virginity would be assumed for a young unmarried girl due to the moral standards of Israelite society, unless there was evidence to the contrary.

By contrast, *παρθένος* is used to translate *עַלְמָה* only two times. Dohmen comments as follows:

The LXX is inconsistent in translating 'almâ. Twice (Gen. 24:43; Isa. 7:14) it uses *párthenos* [sic], elsewhere *neánis* ["young woman"]. Elsewhere the LXX uses the former primarily to represent --->

above the fact that in this case she is a virgin. Some indication of her age would be a helpful positive guide to the sort of woman the high priest should marry. There is nothing in vv. 7 and 14 to exclude older spinsters for instance. If *betûlâh* means 'teenage girl' and not 'virgin', the more detailed description of the high priest's bride is explicable. Her youthfulness would perhaps be an added guarantee that any children she bore would be of priestly stock, if that is what v. 15 means. However, this passage does not add up to proof that *betûlâh* does not mean 'virgin', for it is clear that one of the qualifications for priests' brides was virginity. But unless *betûlîm* denotes a condition distinguishable from virginity, the specifications for the high priest's wife seem somewhat redundant."

278 Wenham, "Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 347.

279 Orlinsky, "Virgin," p. 940.

280 Youngblood, "Immanuel," II:807.

281 Wenham, "Virgin," IV:990.

בתולה *betûlâ*, the latter to represent *na'arâ* ["girl"]²⁸² (---> נַר *na'ar*).²⁸³

Here is the list of the nine occurrences of עֲלָמָה in the *MT* and how they are translated in the *LXX*:

עֲלָמָה	Text	LXX Translation
Singular	Genesis 24:43	παρθένος
	Exodus 2:8	νεᾶνις
	Proverbs 30:19	ὁδοὺς ἀνδρὸς ἐν νεότητι
	Isaiah 7:14	παρθένος
Plural	Song 1:3	νεάνιδες
	Song 6:8 (<i>LXX</i> , 6:7)	νεάνιδες
	Psalms 68:26 (<i>LXX</i> , 67:25)	νεανίδων
	46:1 (<i>LXX</i> , 45 heading)	ὑπὲρ τῶν κρυφίων
	1 Chronicles 15:20	ἐπὶ ἀλαιμῶθ

There are three texts in the above table that can be dismissed as irrelevant to the question of how the *LXX* translates עֲלָמָה and עֲלָמוֹת .

(1) The *LXX* translation of the fourth phrase of Proverbs 30:19 is ὁδοὺς ἀνδρὸς ἐν νεότητι, which means "ways of a man in youth." This is a far cry from "way of a man with an עֲלָמָה," meaning *girl* or *maiden*. However, as briefly noted earlier in this chapter,²⁸⁴ there is a textual issue here. According to Steinmueller, this translation in the *LXX* indicates that the translators worked with a Hebrew prototype slightly different than the *MT*.²⁸⁵ Instead of עֲלָמָה as in the *MT*, this earlier manuscript would have בְּעֲלָמִיּוֹ , meaning *youth*. This reading is supported by the Syriac, Vulgate, et al. Steinmueller even suggests that in an unpointed text, a copy error from יו to ה would be easy to make. However, there are no entries in the critical apparatus of *Biblia Hebraica* for this verse. Therefore, the *MT* reading is accepted here. It should be noted, though, that if the *LXX* does reflect the correct

282 *BDB*, p. 655.

283 Dohmen, "עֲלָמָה," XI:160; brackets added.

284 See footnote 202.

285 Steinmueller, "Etymology and Biblical Usage of 'Almah," p. 38.

text, then Proverbs 30:19 has no bearing on the question of how **עֲלְמָה** is used in the Hebrew Scriptures.

(2) In the heading of Psalm 46 (LXX, Ps. 45), the LXX translation of **עַל-עֲלְמוֹת** is ὑπὲρ τῶν κρυφίων. κρυφίων is a genitive plural of the adjective κρύφιος, which means *secret, hidden*. Thus, **עַל-עֲלְמוֹת** is taken to mean something like "about secret [things]." The Hebrew text used for the LXX translation was, of course, unpointed.²⁸⁶ According to Niessen, this translation likely resulted from reading **עֲלְמוֹת** (instead of **עֲלְמוֹת**),²⁸⁷ associating it with the root **עֲלַמ** meaning *to conceal*.²⁸⁸ Thus this text also has no bearing on how the LXX translates **עֲלְמָה**.

(3) In 1 Chronicles 15:20, the LXX does not translate **עֲלְמוֹת**; it simply transliterates it. Thus **עַל-עֲלְמוֹת** becomes ἐπὶ ἀλαιμῶθ in the LXX, which in turn becomes "on alaimōth" in English (ἐπὶ translated into *on* and ἀλαιμῶθ transliterated into *alaimōth*).

Of the six remaining texts, **עֲלְמָה** is translated twice with *παρθένος* and four times with *νεάνις* (*neánis*) or its plural. Thus, as Dohmen observed in the above citation, the LXX is somewhat inconsistent. *Neánis* is a general term that can mean *a young woman, girl, maiden*, but it was also used of a married woman in Euripides' *Andromache*, line 192.²⁸⁹ This general Greek word is used to translate the general Hebrew word, *na'arâ*, 19 times.²⁹⁰ So of these two Greek words, *παρθένος* would be the better translation of **עֲלְמָה**.

So what does the LXX reveal about the meaning of *'almah*? Based on Delling's comments, *παρθένος* is itself somewhat general, meaning essentially *girl*, although virginity is generally presumed. This is quite similar to the meaning of *bethulah* as developed in this chapter--"girl of marriageable age," again with the cultural presumption of virginity. This would certainly explain why *παρθένος* is usually the translation of *bethulah*. However, if the Hebrew words *bethulah* and *'almah* are roughly synonymous, as the study of these words in this chapter would indicate, *παρθένος* would be a reasonably good translation of *'almah* as well. Neither Hebrew word is as broad in meaning as either the Greek *νεάνις* or the Hebrew *na'arâ*.

Concerning the use of *παρθένος* to translate *'almah* specifically in Isaiah 7:14, it is evident from the previous discussion of *παρθένος* that its use for this verse cannot be advanced as an argument that *'almah* means *virgo intacta*. That was not the meaning of *παρθένος*. Delling draws the following conclusion:

286 The vowel points were added to the text by the Masoretes roughly between A.D. 500 and 950. The Septuagint (LXX) was translated in Alexandria 250-150 B.C.

287 Niessen, "The Virginity of the **עֲלְמָה** in Isaiah 7:14," p. 136.

288 See *BDB*, p. 761, and the section "The Etymology of **עֲלְמָה**: The Hebrew Root" at the beginning of this chapter.

289 *LS*, p. 1164.

290 Fuhs, "נַעַר," IX:485.

This review...makes it plain that on purely lexical grounds it is impossible to say whether the translator is expressing true virginity when he uses *παρθένος* at Isaiah 7:14²⁹¹

Therefore, there is nothing in the translation *παρθένος* for *‘almah* in Isaiah 7:14 or in Genesis 24:43 to argue against the view taken in this chapter--that *‘almah* means "young unmarried girl."

It is the case, however, that *παρθένος*, like *בְּתוּלָה*,²⁹² eventually took on the more narrowed use of *virgo intacta*. Delling states, "The word [*παρθένος*] then went through an obvious process of narrowing down...and *παρθένος* came to be used for the 'virgin.'"²⁹³ When this occurred is difficult to say, but it was certainly after the LXX translation, and as Wenham pointed out in the citation in the previous bulleted list, by the time the New Testament was written, its meaning was "virgin."

The Later Jewish Translators

A brief comment should also be made about three other Greek translations of the Old Testament or Tanakh.²⁹⁴

- *Aquila's Version*: Aquila is said to have become a proselyte to Judaism, and his translation of the Tanakh into Greek was issued about A.D. 130. He tried to use one standard Greek equivalent for each Hebrew word, though this did not always lend itself to making good sense in Greek. Aquila's translation has survived only in quotations and fragments.
- *Symmachus' Version*: Symmachus translated the Tanakh into good idiomatic Greek while still maintaining high standards of accuracy. The date was perhaps around A.D. 170. According to Jerome, he was an Ebionite, although Epiphanius states that he was a Samaritan who converted to Judaism.
- *Theodotion's Version*: This translation was the latest of the three, probably around A.D. 180 or 190. He possibly was an Ephesian convert to Judaism.²⁹⁵ It was not an original translation but a revision of an earlier Greek version. Whether this was the LXX or some other version is much debated.

All three of these versions use *neánias* to translate *‘almah* in Isaiah 7:14.²⁹⁶ Some Christian writers saw this as an attempt to counter the translation *parthénos* in the LXX,²⁹⁷ while other early Christian literature contains references to *neánias* as itself meaning "virgin."²⁹⁸ There is no way to answer the question of motive on the part

291 Delling, "*παρθένος*," V:833.

292 Wenham, "Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age," p. 347: "It is not until the Christian era that there is clear evidence that *betûlâh* had become a technical term for 'virgin.'" See Wenham's full citation quoted in the section, "The Use of *בְּתוּלָה* in the Hebrew Scriptures," subsection "A Girl of Marriageable Age."

293 Delling, "*παρθένος*," V:827; brackets added.

294 This summary is taken primarily from Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, pp. 48-49.

295 Sven K. Soderlund, "Septuagint," *ISBE*, IV:404.

296 Dohmen, "*עֲלְמָה*," XI:160.

297 Wenham, "Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 347; Dohmen, "*עֲלְמָה*," XI:160, and Delling, "*παρθένος*," V:833, both make the same suggestion.

298 Dohmen, "*עֲלְמָה*," XI:160.

of these three translators. However, the issue is moot. As Wenham states, "it is doubtful whether *parthénos* necessarily denoted 'virgin' to the Septuagint translators."²⁹⁹ The whole analysis of *parthénos* in this section suggests that Wenham is correct in that conclusion. *Bethulah* and *‘almah* appear to be rough synonyms in biblical Hebrew meaning "girl of marriageable age" and "young unmarried girl," respectively, and the early meaning of *parthénos*, as discussed in this section, would certainly seem to be a good translation of either Hebrew word. The Greek data would therefore support rather than contradict the conclusions previously offered in the section "Conclusion Regarding the Use of עַלְמָה in the Hebrew Scriptures."

299 Wenham, "Betûlâh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" p. 347.