



Isaiah 7:14

Debunking Jewish Objections to the Virgin Birth

by Tim Kelley

^{NKJ} **Matthew 1:22-23** So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ²³"Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

Matthew's statement, based on the prophecy made in Isaiah 7:14, is – according to most messianic believers – one of the clearest proofs that Yeshua (Jesus) is the promised Messiah – the Savior of Israel. According to the Matthew's account, Mary and her betrothed husband Joseph had yet to consummate their marriage when she determined that she was pregnant.

^{NKJ} **Matthew 1:18** Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.

Virgin births are not too common in the scripture. The Tnakh records six cases where a woman who was previously barren eventually gave birth, but by natural conception. But there is no record of a woman giving birth as a virgin. If ever a virgin did indeed give birth, it would certainly mean that something monumental had happened and that the newborn child was somehow conceived "supernaturally". So if there was a historical "Jesus" (as there was¹), and you wanted to discredit the notion that He was the subject of the Isaiah prophecy, you could present at least two scenarios -

- You could claim that Mary was not a virgin at the time of Yeshua's birth as did Yeshua's opposition², but in doing so, you would be validating the New Testament
- You could claim that Matthew miss-understood the prophecy when he implied that the prophecy was fulfilled with birth of Yeshua.

While searching the web for information about this topic, I saw that even though many secular (i.e. atheist) web sites address the first scenario, there was not a single Jewish website that did so, at least not on the first 10 pages of search results. On the other hand, when googling "does Isaiah 7:14 apply to Jesus", there were numerous Jewish web sites that are willing to provide an answer, one being on the very first page.

Since it's evident that most Jewish theologians (rabbis) believe Matthew was wrong about his assessment of Isaiah 7:14, then we who DO believe the prophecy applied to Yeshua must be able to answer their objections if we hope to be able to make a case in support of Him.

The rabbis' arguments against Matthew mostly center on the use of the word "almah" in the Isaiah passage.

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 7:14** "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin (*almah*) shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

They claim that the word does not mean "virgin" and since it does not, Matthew miss-applied the prophecy when he applied it to Yeshua. They say –

1. "almah" does not mean "virgin", but instead, it means "young woman" or "maiden"
2. If God wanted to say "virgin" in the passage, He would have used the word "betulah"

¹ <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/jesus/nonchristianaccounts.html>

² John 8:41

3. And since the first two claims are (in their minds) “true, then the prophecy has nothing to do with the Messiah and was fulfilled in Isaiah’s second son.

Let’s take a look at these three claims to see if they are true or not. Though much has been written about these claims, in this study I’m relying on the research of a messianic Jewish author and teacher named Daniel Gruber and recorded in his booklet entitled “God, the Rabbis, and the Virgin Birth”.³

Claim #1 - “Almah” does not mean “virgin”, but instead, it means “young woman” or “maiden”

Since translating a word from one language to another (in this case Hebrew to English) is not science, it oftentimes requires a certain amount of contextual understanding. One translator may see one thing in the text, while another sees something different. But in no case should a translation be made based on the translators' personal beliefs. Yet most “Christian” Bibles translate Isaiah 7:14 one way while most “Jewish” Bibles translate it another way. How, then, can we know the correct translation of the words. The only way - and the best way – is to find how the word is used elsewhere in the Bible, and if possible, elsewhere in the same book or by the same writer. Secondly, you would want to see how the word is used in contemporary writings and by related works. In our case, we will use the Septuagint (LXX) as well as other Jewish sources including the Talmud.

The word “almah” (אַלְמָה – Strong’s 5959) means “a girl who is at marriageable age” and is often translated “virgin” or “maiden”. It comes from the root word “alam” (אָלַם – Strong’s 5956) which means “to conceal” or to “be hidden”. The first place this word is used in scripture is in Leviticus where it talks about the “sin” offering –

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 4:13** Now if the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally, and the thing is hidden (*alam*) from the eyes of the assembly . . .

In this case, the thing that is “hidden from the eyes” is something that is not discernible. In some cases, “hiding the eyes” is an intentional act where the person does not want to see something, like in the case of knowing that a person is involved in idolatry –

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 20:4** 'And if the people of the land should in any way hide (*alam*) their eyes from the man, when he gives *some* of his descendants to Molech, and they do not kill him,

But in either case, the idea is that the eyes are covered so as not to be able to see. Thus an *almah* would be a female (based on the suffix “ah”) who is covered. To understand what I mean by a “female who is covered”, let’s take a look at the opposite - a female who is uncovered.

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 18:9** 'The nakedness of your sister, the daughter of your father, or the daughter of your mother, *whether* born at home or elsewhere, their nakedness you shall not uncover.

According to this verse, a female who is uncovered is one who has had sexual relations, thus a covered woman is one who has not. She is a virgin. According to Gruber, “almah” has more to do with the fact that the girl is at the age that she could be married than the fact that she is a virgin⁴, however, in Hebrew thought a young lady who becomes betrothed is assumed to be a virgin, for if it’s found that she’s not, she could be stoned⁵.

The first place we see *almah* in scripture is in the case of Eliezer being sent to find a bride for Isaac. Eliezer came to a well where he hoped to find the girl God had chosen as Isaac’s wife, and when it was

³ “God, the Rabbis, and the Virgin Birth”; Daniel Gruber; Elijah Publishing, Hanover, NH; (no copyright date)

⁴ Ibid., pg. 8

⁵ Deut. 22:13-21

clear he had found her, he recounted the story to Laban, Rebecca's brother - even repeating the point where he was petitioning God. In the prayer he said –

^{NKJ} **Genesis 24:43** "behold, I stand by the well of water; and it shall come to pass that when the virgin (*almah*) comes out to draw *water*, and I say to her, "Please give me a little water from your pitcher to drink . . ."

How do we know that *almah* means *virgin* in this passage? Because we know that Rebecca was a virgin –

^{ESV} **Genesis 24:16** The young woman was very attractive in appearance, a maiden whom no man had known. She went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up⁶.

So even though Eliezer later stated that Rebecca was an *almah* (a female who is at the age to be married), it's understood that she was also a virgin.

The next *almah* in scripture is Miriam, Moses' sister. Moses had just been fetched out of the water by Pharaoh's daughter. Needing someone to care for the baby, Miriam offered her mother. Pharaoh's daughter then turned to Miriam and said –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 2:8** . . . "Go." So the maiden (*almah*) went and called the child's mother.

Though the text never says one way or the other, the context lends to the fact that Miriam was not much older than Moses and was still living at home. Thus we can conclude that she was indeed a virgin as well.

The next place *almah* is used is in Psalm 68:25, a picture of God entering His sanctuary in Jerusalem.

^{NKJ} **Psalm 68:25** The singers went before, the players on instruments *followed after*; among *them were* the maidens (*alamot*) playing tumbrels.

Though the context does not tell us whether or not the "maidens" were virgins or not, it seems that that would be the case for such a sanctified setting. It's interesting to note that both the English Standard Version and the Young's Literal Translation translate *almah* as virgin in this verse.

In Proverbs 30, the way of a man with an *almah* is contrasted with the way of an adulterous woman.

^{NKJ} **Proverbs 30:19-20** The way of an eagle in the air, The way of a serpent on a rock, The way of a ship in the midst of the sea, And the way of a man with a virgin.²⁰ This *is* the way of an adulterous woman: She eats and wipes her mouth, And says, "I have done no wickedness."

In this case, things that are right (eagle in the air, serpent on a rock, ship in the sea, a man with a virgin) is contrasted with a sinful way (the adulterous woman). Thus it's clear to see that in this case, the *almah* is a virgin.

The Song of Solomon also uses *almah* in two passages.

^{NKJ} **Song of Solomon 1:3** Because of the fragrance of your good ointments, Your name *is* ointment poured forth; Therefore the virgins (*alamot*) love you.

In this first passage, the Shulamite woman is remarking on how the young maidens love the king (and would have loved to be married to him). The second passage –

^{NKJ} **Song of Solomon 6:8** There are sixty queens And eighty concubines, And virgins (*alamot*) without number.

⁶ I used the English Standard Version in this example because it provided a better translation of "bethulah" than did the New King James Version

Here it appears that Solomon is saying that there were a number of women who he could have married, but he chose the Shulamite woman instead. Thus the young maidens, the *alomot* would have been virgins.

So it appears that in every case where *almah* is used previous to Isaiah 7:14, it is clear or strongly implied that the *almah* is a virgin. But we don't have to rely solely on the Hebrew text to determine the true meaning of *almah*; the Septuagint lends understanding as well.

The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Tanakh that was written by 70 Jewish priests at about 250 BCE. It was written because many of the Jews now lived outside the land and no longer knew the Hebrew language. Thus a translation of scripture was written just for them.

The Septuagint translates *almah* as *virgin* in Isaiah 7:14 -

^{LXE} **Isaiah 7:14** Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; behold, a virgin (*parthenos*) shall conceive in the womb, and shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Emmanuel.

- just as it does in the Genesis 24:43 passage in regards to Rebecca. In both cases the Greek word that's used is "parthenos", the same Greek word used in Matthew. A quick glance at the Strong's definition of "parthenos" (Strong's 3933) shows that it clearly and unequivocally means "virgin".

So to answer the first rabbinical claim – "*almah* means 'young woman' or 'maiden' – we can say "yes, it does, but in the Hebraic context of the scripture, the *almah* is also a virgin.

Let's now take a look at the second claim -

Claim #2 - If God wanted to say "virgin" in the passage, He would have used the word "betulah".

What is a *betulah*? According to Brown-Driver-Briggs⁷, *betulah* (בְּתוּלָה – Strong's 1330) also means "virgin". It comes from the Arabic word "vatal"⁸ (בתל) that means "separate".

The rabbinic claim that God would have chosen to use *betulah* if He had wanted to clearly state that the woman in the Isaiah passage was a virgin, would indicate that in the rabbinic mind that *betulah* always means virgin. But is that the case? Let's begin by looking at a few passages where it does mean virgin.

^{NKJ} **Genesis 24:16** Now the young woman *was* very beautiful to behold, a virgin (*betulah*); no man had known her. And she went down to the well, filled her pitcher, and came up.

This again is the Rebecca passage, and it's also the first place *betulah* is used in scripture. In this story, Rebecca is referred to as both an *almah* and a *betulah*. But notice, in the above passage where *betulah* is used, the writer adds "no man had known her" to verify in the reader's mind that this particular *betulah* was also a virgin.

This next passage is quite clear – the *betulah* is a virgin.

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 22:13-15** ¹³ " If any man takes a wife, and goes in to her, and detests her, ¹⁴ "and charges her with shameful conduct, and brings a bad name on her, and says, 'I took this woman, and when I came to her I found she *was* not a virgin (*betulah*),' ¹⁵ "then the father and mother of the young woman shall take and bring out *the evidence* of the young woman's virginity (*betulim*) to the elders of the city at the gate.

Because the *betulim* is the evidence of the girl's virginity, it's clear that in this case, the *betulah* is a virgin. This passage seems to imply that the *betulah* is a virgin as well, or does it?

⁷ Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon; Francis Brown; Hendrickson Publisher Marketing, LLC, Peabody, MA, 2012, pg. 143b

⁸ Not used in scripture

^{NKJ} **Exodus 22:16** " If a man entices a virgin (*betulah*) who is not betrothed, and lies with her, he shall surely pay the bride-price for her *to be* his wife.

In this case, the girl is living in her father's house, but it doesn't necessarily mean she's a virgin. She could also be a young divorcee or widow.⁹

Because of the uncertainty as to whether *betulah* refers to a virgin or simply a maiden, the JPS Tnakh (1917) published by the Jewish Publication Society translates *betulah* as *maid* or *maiden* in the following verses:

Job 31:1	Jeremiah 2:32
Zech. 9:17	Jeremiah 51:22
2 Chron. 37:17	Lamentations 5:11
Psalms 148:12	Ezekiel 9:6

In most cases, it did the same in the 1985 revision of the Tnakh.

The fact is the rabbis are not sure whether or not a *betulah* is always a virgin. According to Gruber "The Talmud itself speaks of *betulah* in ambiguous terms, distinguishing between a *betulah* and a *betulah shleymah*, i.e. a perfect virgin. (cv. Yeb. 60b) In other words, *betulah shleymah* means one who is physically a virgin, but *betulah* does not, except by inference."

Gruber goes on to say "In fact, there is an explicit statement in the Talmud that *betulah* only designates a young woman, nothing more. "R. Nahman b Isaac explained: It is the opinion of the following Tanna. For it was taught: A *betulah*; the only meaning of *betulah* is young woman (na'arah); and so it is said in Scripture, 'and the young woman (na'arah) was fair to look upon, a *betulah*' "

What Rabbi Isaac was stating is that since Genesis 24:16 uses *betulah*, but follows it with the clarifying statement "no man had known her", there is therefore a doubt as to whether *betulah* already indicates that the woman is a virgin. Genesis 24:16 is not the only passage that presents a problem to the rabbis; so does Judges 21:12 –

^{NKJ} **Judges 21:12** So they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead four hundred young virgins (*betulah*) who had not known a man intimately; and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.

Here again, the writer put a clarifier behind *betulah* to make sure his audience knew he was speaking of virgins . . . and the Talmud acknowledges it.

There are also places in the Tnakh where a **betulah** refers to an adulterous Israel as well as places in the Talmud where a woman who is not a virgin is referred to as a *betulah*.¹⁰ The bottom line is that the Jewish rabbis just don't know for sure. Thus the claim that if God wanted to say "virgin" in the passage, He would have used the word "*betulah*", is simply not true. In fact, the opposite is true . . . *almah* is the correct word to use since it always applies to a girl who would also be a virgin. *Almah* never applies to a woman who is clearly not a virgin. So God had it right after all.

Let's now address the rabbis 3rd claim.

Claim #3 - The prophecy has nothing to do with the Messiah and was fulfilled in Isaiah's second son.

Though before the 1st century the rabbis (as evidenced by the LXX) had no problem with the notion that the Isaiah prophecy was speaking of a Messianic savior who would be born of a virgin, things changed

⁹ Lev. 22:13; Numbers 30:3

¹⁰ Ibid. 3, pgs. 14-19

after the coming of Yeshua and the events surrounding His birth. Since then, many rabbis attempt to discredit the “supernatural” aspect of the prophecy by saying that the prophecy simply applies to Isaiah’s second son. In order to understand their argument, let’s discuss the context of the prophecy –

When Isaiah was called to be a prophet, the dynasty of King David had been split for over 200 years with the northern Israelite tribes claiming the name “Israel” or “Ephraim” with their capital in Samaria, and the southern tribes claiming the name “Judah” with their capital in Jerusalem. Soon after Isaiah was called, Israel (the northern tribes) - led by king Pekah, teamed up with Rezen, the king of Syria (the land to their northeast) for the purpose of making war with Ahaz, the king of Judah. Pekah and Rezen’s plan was to set up a new king in Judah. Ahaz had gotten word of the plans his northern neighbors had made and was quite concerned. Therefore, God sent Isaiah, along with his son Shear-Jashub to Judah to assure King Ahaz that the Ephraim/Syrian alliance will not succeed and that Judah will not fall into their hands. Isaiah told Ahaz –

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 7:7** 'thus says the Lord GOD:
"It shall not stand, Nor shall it come to pass."

To substantiate His word, God offered to perform a huge sign for Ahaz, but he refused. Ahaz had no regard for the God of Israel, and in fact had already determined to solicit the help of the Assyrians to defend Judah from the alliance. He had no need for a sign.

Never-the-less, Isaiah said that God would perform a sign anyway, and the sign would be enormous –

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 7:14-17** ¹⁴ "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. ¹⁵

"Curds and honey He shall eat, that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶ "For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings. ¹⁷ "The LORD will bring the king of Assyria upon you and your people and your father's house -- days that have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah."

A Sign for Ahaz?

Part of the confusion surround this prophecy is that it seems to have been given to Ahaz. But was it really?

Remember that Ahaz was offered a sign to confirm what God had already stated would happen in vs. 7, but Ahaz refused it. So instead of a sign, God provided proof in the form of the prophecy of 8:1-4 that - when fulfilled about 3 years later - would show that He had indeed done what He had stated in 7:7.

So to whom was the “virgin birth” prophecy given?

Keep in mind that this passage (chap. 7-12) is a series of prophecies pertaining to Israel, Judah, Assyria, and the Messiah. Most of them were framed in the “last days”. Being such, is it not possible that the “virgin birth” prophecy is for a future time as well?

Note that the prophecy was not given to Ahaz, but to the “house of David”. The term “house of David” can apply to David’s kingly line, but can also apply to all Judah. For instance, in 2 Samuel 3:1 it’s clear that all Judah - not just David’s sons - were at war with Israel. In Zech. 12:10, the “house of David” is charged with the murder of Yeshua, but at that time, the kingly line of David could no longer be clearly identified. Thus it’s clearly speaking of Judah.

What about vs. 16? This presents a dilemma because scripturally, it was not fulfilled in Ahaz’s day by a child brought forth from a virgin, and if the child was indeed Isaiah’s second son (who was clearly not born of a virgin), it would have been a non-event. The only plausible answer is that it was fulfilled by Yeshua. In his day and before He was 3 years old, Judah saw her last “king” (Herod) and the northern kingdom was no more, - scattered to the four winds. The land of Israel - both Israel and Judah - become “desolate” shortly thereafter. It’s interesting to note that Matthew claims Yeshua is the fulfillment of the prophecy - not a partial fulfillment. The prophecy was in no way fulfilled in Isaiah’s day.

The sign was truly enormous – deeper than the deep and taller than the heavens – a child born of a woman with no evidence of a man being involved. It defied nature! But that was not the end of Isaiah's prophecy. He continued to prophecy details of Judah and Israel's role in world history until the end of chapter 12, mixing with it prophecies about a coming Messiah and His role in the latter days.

Within the midst of the prophecy, Isaiah was given another prophecy - one that would definitely be fulfilled in the very near future because it concerned Isaiah himself. The prophecy was given to show Ahaz that God had indeed performed what He said he would do concerning Israel and Syria, so He had Isaiah write it on a separate scroll and give the scroll to faithful witnesses so that Ahaz could not later deny it. According to the prophecy, Isaiah himself was going to have another son, and he was to -

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 8:3-4** "Call his name Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz; ⁴ "for before the child shall have knowledge to cry 'My father' and 'My mother,' the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be taken away before the king of Assyria."

The timing of world history now rested on the birth of this son, so Isaiah immediately went to a woman who is only identified as "the prophetess", and they conceived a son. When you trace Ahaz's life through the books of Kings and Chronicles and couple it with Assyrian history, it appears that Assyria did indeed rescue Judah from Israel and Syria within a couple of years of the birth of the son. Because the prophecy was recorded by witnesses and fulfilled before his eyes, Ahaz would have had no recourse but to acknowledge the hand of God.

According to the rabbis, this second prophecy is a continuation of the first – that the child that was to be born of the *almah* was Isaiah's second son and had nothing to do with a messianic figure. In order to explain the use of the word "*almah*" - which they contend simply means "a maiden" - they claim that Isaiah's first son - Shear-Jashub – was born by his first wife who apparently died before the prophecy was given. They also claim that "the prophetess" - the mother of Isaiah's second son – was a maiden at the time the prophecy was given, but of course, ceased to be a maiden when she later married and conceived.

If the rabbis are correct, then Isaiah's second son - Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz – would also have the name "Immanuel" – "*God with us*".

But there are many problems with this scenario, for instance, did "the prophetess" birthing a baby constitute a sign? Was it a monumental thing for a woman to have a baby? Was Isaiah's wife having a baby enough of a sign that King Ahaz would put his trust totally in the God of Israel? I don't think so.

Was the fact that the prophetess was once a young lady be a sign to King Ahaz?

Was Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz the same person as Immanuel? God never called him that. We see no connection elsewhere in the scripture that would indicate that he was also called Immanuel. In fact, what we do see are a number of reasons why Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz could not be the same as Immanuel. In order to clearly understand these reasons, we must first understand a little more of the context of this passage.

Isaiah chapter 7 is a mix of history and prophecy that does not end at the chapter break, but instead, continues through the end of chapter 12. As mentioned earlier, chapter 7 begins by presenting an actual dilemma being faced by Ahaz - the king of Judah, but quickly turns into a prophecy for the end times.

Chapter 8 continues with God's answer to Ahaz's dilemma as well as introduces Isaiah's second son.

Chapter 9 continues with the mix of prophecy and history by introducing the "Son" who will sit on the throne of his father David and bring peace to the land, then showing what will happen to Ephraim and Manasseh when the Assyrians overthrow Samaria.

Chapter 10 discusses God's revenge on Assyria for their brutality in removing Ahaz's enemies and discusses the return of the tribes in the last days, which answers the question of why Isaiah's first son - Shear-Jashub – "a remnant will return" was sent to King Ahaz in the first place.

Chapter 11 continues the prophecy with the Branch that will grow from the root of Jesse who will draw Israel back from the lands to which she had been scattered as a result of the Assyrian invasion.

Chapter 12 concludes the prophecy with the proclamation that "in that day" all men will turn to God instead of to foreign kings as Ahaz was tempted to do.

So as can see, chapter 7 thru 12 is one big prophecy given to show King Ahaz what was to become of his people. Since Immanuel is the prophetic character that begins the prophecy, we can assume that he has a role throughout the prophecy. And if Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz is also Immanuel, he would have to fulfill that prophecy as well. So let's look at a few cases:

- Isaiah 8:7-10 tells Immanuel that the Assyrians and peoples from distant lands will invade Judah, but that never happened in Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz's lifetime.
- Speaking to Immanuel, Isaiah 8:8 says that the land is "your land". If Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz is Immanuel, then the son of Isaiah joins a very small club, the club of those to whom YHVH says the land is "your land". Those currently who are a part of the club are King David (2 Sam. 24:13), YHVH himself (Psalm 82:1), and Immanuel (Isaiah 8:8).
- The prophecy (Isaiah 9:7) speaks of the child inheriting the throne of his father King David. But there is nothing in the scripture that would connect Isaiah to the line of David. In fact, there's nothing that would even indicate that Isaiah was from the tribe of Judah. What's more, David reigned over a united Israel, but during the days of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, the kingdom was divided, and very early in his lifetime, the northern tribes ceased to be "a people".

There is even more examples that could be given, but suffice to say that Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz was not – as the rabbis claim - the fulfillment of the prophecy of Immanuel.

Therefore, we can see that the rabbis are wrong on all three claims –

1. The *almah* of Isaiah 7:14 is indeed a virgin
2. God was correct in using the word "almah" (that always implies a virgin) instead of "betulah" which only sometimes defines a virgin
3. Isaiah's second son does not fulfill the prophecy of Immanuel

So was Ahaz given a sign that would assure Him that Judah would not be defeated? No – he refused a sign, but instead put his faith in the Assyrians, thus subjecting himself and his people to a lifetime of Assyrian oppression. Instead of a sign, he saw undeniable proof thru the prophecy fulfilled by Isaiah's son that God had manipulated world leaders to bring about His purpose.

Shalom Alecheim