

VULGATE IN USE: A LEXICAL APPROACH.  
WHY TALK ABOUT THE VIRGIN IN ISAIAH 7:14?

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**ABSTRACT** The book of Isaiah has a particularly rich imagery that is a challenge to any translation. In verse Isaiah 7:14 of the *Denkschrift* of Isaiah the Hebrew word עַלְמָה refers to the meaning “young woman”, “girl”, or “servant”. Jerome chooses the word *virgo*, the virgin, although this is not equivalent to the Hebrew word, and although Latin has several other ways of rendering the Hebrew meaning. A look at the Septuagint and the Greek vocabulary, which is manifold in this case, makes this passage even more widely arguable, far beyond the realm of the text into the theological interpretation.


**KEYWORDS** Jerome, *alma*, *alamot*, *virgo*, *puella*, *adulescentula*, vestal practices, virgin

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG** Das Buch Jesaja hat eine besonders reiche Bildsprache, die für jede Übersetzung eine Herausforderung ist. In Vers Jesaja 7,14 der Denkschrift des Jesaja bezieht sich das hebräische Wort עַלְמָה auf die Bedeutung „junge Frau“, „Mädchen“ oder „Dienerin“. Hieronymus wählt in seiner Übersetzung das Wort *virgo*, die Jungfrau, obwohl das keine direkte Entsprechung des hebräischen Wortes ist, und obwohl die lateinische Sprache verschiedene andere Möglichkeiten kennt, dieser hebräischen Wortbedeutung zu entsprechen. Ein Blick in die Septuaginta und in das griechische Vokabular, das in diesem Fall vielfältig ist, macht diese Passage noch streitbarer, weit über den Bereich des Textes hinaus in die theologische Interpretation hinein.

**SCHLÜSSELBEGRIFFE** Hieronymus, *alma*, *alamot*, *virgo*, *puella*, *adulescentula*, Praxis der Vestalinnen, Jungfrau

*Introduction*

- *Why talk about Isaiah 7:14?*
- *Was not this verse discussed often enough?*
- *Have not various theses about it been established long ago?*

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Why should we talk today about the much-discussed biblical passage Isaiah 7:14? A look into the scientific discussion shows, that everybody has his own attitude on this issue, because everybody has a stuck idea of the meaning of this verse. But it is finally not only in an orchestra *c'est le ton qui fait la musique*. Therefore we undertake it to look at a single sound of this verse — the lexeme  $\eta\epsilon\lambda\eta\mu\eta$  — to make out the not unimportant subtleties, that form the melody of its interpretation.

This paper aims to broaden the discussion around this theme with the attitude of Jerome. It refers to the strongly connoted notion of *alma* in verse Isaiah 7:14 on a lexical level by comparing individual translations. Starting points are the Masoretic text (MT) and the Qumran scroll 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>. By looking at the Hebrew Verse the main focus is on the Masoretic tradition, because 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> is linguistically that close to the Masoretic Text that it can therefore be neglected for the present study.<sup>2</sup>

A final thesis will be developed in four steps. First the translations of verse Isaiah 7:14 in various textual traditions will be analysed, by looking at MT, Septuagint (LXX), Hexapla and the Vulgate of Jerome. Then the viewpoint is focused on the intertextual comparison of the word  $\eta\epsilon\lambda\eta\mu\eta$  in the MT. In a third step, the point of view of Jerome is considered and finally a conclusion is made.

To begin with: an introductory and restrictive remark on the current understanding of the word *virgin*. What's meant by *virgin* these days? There are two possible main answers: a presupposed biological connotation or a version with the predominant connotation of the Virgin Mary. By looking at the vocabulary of Jerome and its codified connotations, today's understanding of the lexeme *virgin* can be scrutinized and possible new approaches to this understanding can be gained. If today a *virgin* is mentioned — no matter in which language and in which context the text is formulated — mainly the biological connotation is presupposed. When it comes to theological texts, the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, is often included. It is therefore worth taking a closer look at different textual traditions and contrasting their respective meanings to gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

2. Eugene Ulrich, *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls* (2010). 1QIsaa Col. VI (ctd.).

## 2. Isaiah 7:14 in different text traditions

<i>Masoretic text (MT)</i> <i>(Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia)</i>	<i>King James Bible</i>
לְכֹן יִתֵּן אֲדֹנָי הוּא לָכֶם אוֹת הַגָּה הָעַלְמָה הָרָה וְיִלְדֶת בֶּן וְקָרָאת שְׁמוֹ עִמָּנוּ אֵל:	Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a <b>virgin</b> shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.
<i>Septuagint (LXX)</i>	<i>A new English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS)</i>
διὰ τοῦτο δώσει κύριος αὐτὸς ὑμῖν σημεῖον· ἰδοὺ ἡ <b>παρθένος</b> ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν, καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἐμμανουήλ	Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the <b>virgin</b> will be with child and bear a son, and you shall name him Emmanouel.
<i>Vulgata sacra</i>	<i>Vulgata Tusculum deutsch</i>
Propter hoc dabit Dominus ipse vobis signum ecce <b>virgo</b> concipiet et pariet filium et vocabitis nomen eius Emmanuhel.	Deshalb wird euch der Herr selbst ein Zeichen geben: seht, die <b>junge Frau</b> wird empfangen und einen Sohn gebären, und ihr werdet seinen Namen Emmanuel nennen.

[Table 1: Is 7:14 in different text traditions]

The MT raises two main questions:

- *What is the meaning range of the word הָעַלְמָה in Hebrew?*
- *What are the consequences for the verse Isaiah 7:14?*

First it is important to keep in mind that there exist two synonymous lexemes in Hebrew: בְּתוּלָה and נְעֻרָה.<sup>3</sup> This statement opens the frame of interpretation and makes clear how difficult it is in Hebrew to speak of a concrete meaning. Rather, the meaning of this word must also be based on a variety of meanings. In speaking about lexical meanings attention must be paid to the fact that Hebrew is an aspective language, which stands in a large contrast to the perspective perception of modern Indo-European languages and today's language understanding.

3. Wilhelm Gesenius: Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament (2013<sup>18</sup>) 186 and 828.

Concerning the LXX, there is to ask: What is the meaning of the Lexeme παρθένος in Greek? This term is mainly used to designate goddesses, which points to the importance of the woman as a figure of salvation. This has also to be kept in mind in reference to the passage Isaiah 7:14.<sup>4</sup>

A look in the Hexapla shows that the Greek texts from Aquila, Symmachos and Theodotion choose amazingly unanimous and uniform **νεᾶνις** and not παρθένος. These authors dare to re-translate and differentiate themselves from the LXX. With the word **νεᾶνις** the hidden trait of the woman falls away. This could be an indicator of the use of the language in the time of writing.

It's to be noted that Jerome chooses the word *virgo* in Latin and thus sets his own accent, which opens up an own tradition-related meaning space. In the following we focus in detail on the Hebrew text and the corresponding translation of Jerome, the words *alma* and *virgo*.

### 3. Focus on the Hebrew alma

Where is *alma* found in the Hebrew bible except from Isaiah 7:14 and what is the meaning of the word in the according contexts?

הַעֲלָמָה in the singular appears in the MT only four times: Genesis 24:43, Exodus 2:8, Isaiah 7:14, Proverbs 30:19.

All of them appear in quite extraordinary textual contexts. They describe women in a special situation in their lives, even more, they can be read as descriptions of special situations in the Hebrew history.

MT	LXX	Vulgate
<i>Genesis 24:43</i>		
הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי נֹצֵב עַל-עַיִן הַמַּיִם וְהִיא הַעֲלָמָה הַיְצֵאת לְשֵׂאב וְאִמְרַתִּי אֵלֶיהָ הַשְּׂקִינִי-נָא מִעֵט מַיִם מִכַּדָּךְ:	ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ ἐφέστηκα ἐπὶ τῆς πηγῆς τοῦ ὕδατος, καὶ αἱ θυγατέρες τῶν ἀνθρώπων τῆς πόλεως ξελεύσονται ὕδρευσασθαι ὕδωρ, καὶ ἔσται ἡ <b>παρθένος</b> , ἥ ἂν ἐγὼ εἶπω Πότισόν με μικρὸν ὕδωρ ἐκ τῆς ὑδρίας σου,	Ecce sto iuxta fontem aquae et <b>virgo</b> quae egredietur ad hauriendam aquam audierit a me da mihi pauxillum aquae ad bibendum ex hydria tua.
<i>Exodus 2:8</i>		
וַתֹּאמֶר-לָהּ בַת-פְּרֹעֹה לְכִי וּתְלִי הַעֲלָמָה וּתְקַרְא אֶת- אִם הַיְלֵד:	ἡ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτῇ ἡ θυγάτηρ Φαραῶ Πορεύου. ἐλθοῦσα δὲ ἡ <b>νεᾶνις</b> ἐκάλεσεν τὴν μητέρα τοῦ παιδίου.	respondit vade perrexit <b>puella</b> et vocavit matrem eius

4. Martin Rösel, Tradition and Innovation. English and German Studies on the Septuagint (2018) 212.

MT	LXX	Vulgate
<i>Proverbia 30:19</i>		
דָּרָךְ הַנְּשֹׂר בַּשָּׁמַיִם דָּרָךְ נִחַשׁ עָלַי צוּר דָּרָךְ-אֲנִיָּה בְּעֵלְמָה: גִּבֹר וְדָרָךְ גִּבֹר בְּעֵלְמָה:	ἵχνη ἀετοῦ πετομένου / καὶ ὁδοῦς ὄφραως ἐπὶ πέτρας / καὶ τρίβους νηὸς ποντοπορούσης / καὶ ὁδοῦς ἀνδρὸς ἐν νεότητι.	viam aquilae in caelo viam colubri super petram viam navis in medio mari et viam viri in <b>adulescentula</b> . [Table 2: הַעֲלָמָה in the MT]

The different translations of Jerome:

Genesis 24:43	<i>virgo</i>
Exodus 2:8	<i>puella</i>
Isaiah 7:14	<i>virgo</i>
Proverbs 30:19	<i>adulescentula</i>

[Table 3: Jerome and the הַעֲלָמָה in the MT]

This short list shows that Jerome probably deliberately choose the words in the context of the text and the translations that were known to him. In the case of Isaiah 7:14 he choose *virgo*.

How does he explain this choice himself? Jerome was obviously aware of the importance of his choice of words and of the problems it can cause. He justifies himself in his letter *Adversus Jovinianum Lib. I.* (32ff.):

I know that the Jews are used to oppose that the word ALMA does not mean a virgin in Hebrew, but a young woman. And in truth a virgin is properly called BETHULA, but a young woman or a girl is not called ALMA, but NAARA. What is it therefore that ALMA signifies? An *absconditam virginem* (“hidden virgin”), that is not just a virgin, but a virgin with an *epitasis* (“additional specification”); for not every virgin is hidden nor separated from a fortuitous look from men.

Nevertheless, he insists that in Isaiah 7:14 there is the talk of a virgin. Set in the context of the cultural discussions of his time, this can be read as an indication of the pre-eminence of the Virgin Mary, which he wants to see inscribed here. Jeromes commentary on the Book of Isaiah<sup>5</sup> shows a similar finding. Here he formulates more clearly with: *dicitur enim et adulescentula et abscondita, id est ἀπόκρυφος*.

In the MT there are also three passages with the word *alma* in the plural (עֲלָמוֹת): Ps 68:26 (Ps 67:26 vulg.), Song 1:3; 6:8 (Song 1:2; 6:7 vulg.). Most probably Jerome cited these three passages from the wisdom literature after the LXX. Here he remarkably never choose *virgo* in his translations:

5. In Esaiam III, vii 14.

Ps 68:26 (Ps 67:26 vulg.)	<i>puellarum</i>
Song 1:3 (Song 1:2 vulg.)	<i>adulescentulae</i>
Song 6:8 (Song 6:8 vulg.)	<i>adulescentularum</i>

[Table 4: Jerome and the עלמזות in the MT]

#### 4. Conclusion

It can be said, that Jeromes translation of Isaiah 7:14 is based most probably on the Hexapla of Origen and also on other templates of the LXX, which were most likely known to him. From there he seeks a semantic justification in meaning and continuance in the word stock of the Hebrew text. So his translation is heavily based on the Hebrew lexemes and their range of meaning.

*Alma* occurs in the Singular in the MT only four times and here with the meaning “hidden woman”. This fact is literally difficult to translate into other languages. This problem must have been known also by Jerome. Comes to it, that with *virgo*, *puella* and *adolescentula* he had a restricted Latin vocabulary selection available.

By the translation of Isaiah 7:14 the ascetic Hieronymus had certainly the Virgin Mary in mind, but this assumption cannot be proved either by the translation or by his commentaries. This topic cannot be verified further lexically and is much more a question of interpretation and of the inclusion of the cultural development of late antiquity. Comes to it that in the way that late fourth-century Christian scholars persistent appraised sacrificed pagan virgins, they opened up the understanding of this phenomenon for an inculturation of a wide variety of virgins. Undheim<sup>6</sup> demonstrates in her book how the sources in Jerome’s time abound with seemingly paradoxical virgins, such as widow virgins, married virgins, virgin mothers, infant virgins, old virgins, heretical virgins, pagan virgins, male virgins, false virgins and fallen virgins. She also points out how physical, cultural and cognitive boundaries of virginity were contested up to vestal practices and how they were drawn and redrawn in the fourth and early fifth centuries in the Latin West.

The translation and the use of words and meanings of Jerome must also be seen in this cultural context of his time. And so his understanding of the expres-

6. Sissel Undheim, *Borderline Virginities. Sacred and Secular Virgins in Late Antiquity* (2017).

sion “hidden woman” (ἀπόκρυφος) must not be misunderstood as a certain female person, whether she is a virgin or a young woman receiving a child or not, but it can just as good be read as a metaphor about the hidden motherhood or as a metaphor for a very important female figure in the history of the Israelites — in a broad contemporary understanding of his time, his choice of *virgo* can also talk of a still unrecognized woman in a prominent social or historical position.