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

Michael Fieger

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 עללממהה 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 עללממהה 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 Vesta- linnen, 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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2. Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew within the Faculty of Theology of Chur, Switzerland. Editor of the Vulgate Tusculum deutsch. Director of the Vulgate Institute. m.fieger [at] bluewin.ch. GND Nr: 120145340; © https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8220-3383.

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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 נָנַעָלָה — 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[a]. By looking at the Hebrew Verse the main focus is on the Masoretic tradition, because 1QIsa[a] is linguistically that close to the Masoretic Text that it can therefore be neglected for the present study.

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 נָנַעָלָה 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. Isaiah 7:14 in different text traditions

**Masoretic text (MT)**
(Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia)

למה יהיה בן אלהים לכם? ויהי תנינהו והנה לאלת

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign;
Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,
and shall call his name Immanuel.

**Septuagint (LXX)**

διὰ τοῦτο δώσει κύριος αὐτὸς υμῖν σημεῖον· ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἕξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν, καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Εμμανουηλ.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.
Look, the virgin will be with child and bear a son,
and you shall name him Emmanouel.

**Vulgata sacra**

Propter hoc dabit Dominus ipse vobis signum
ece virgo concipiet et pariet filium
et vocabitis nomen eius Emmanuhel.

**Vulgata Tusculum deutsch**

Deshalb wird euch der Herr selbst ein Zeichen geben:
seht, die junge Frau 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 נועלים 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: בנה and נועל.4 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.

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 7:14.5

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?

שער נשבע עליתimationsה 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MT</th>
<th>LXX</th>
<th>Vulgate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genesis 24:43</td>
<td>יְהַבֶּהָ אֲנָבָלָנָה נַעַבַּע עליתimationsה</td>
<td>Ecce sto iuxta fontem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>יְהָעַתְּנָה נָעִיתimationsה לַשָּׁבָה</td>
<td>aquae et virgo quae egreditur ad hauriendam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>אַמַּרְיֶרֶץ אלָיֶת הַשִּׁקְרִיטרָא</td>
<td>aquam audierit a me da</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>פָלְסִיםֵימַעְלִים מְכָלְהָה</td>
<td>mihi paullum aquae ad bibendum ex hydria tua.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 2:8</td>
<td>הָעַתוֹתָנוֹת בּוֹרֶּפֶרֶטָלוֹת כָּלָי</td>
<td>respondit vade perrexit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>נַעַהַתְּנָה נִשְׁקָרְרָא רַחִיָּה</td>
<td>pueria et vocavit matrem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>עַמַּרְיֶרֶץ אָלִים שְׁקָרִיטרָא</td>
<td>eius</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The different translations of Jerome:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MT</th>
<th>LXX</th>
<th>Vulgate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proverbs 30:19</td>
<td>יִתְאוֹן אַלְּפֵי בָּקָרָה / וְאָרֶץ הַנְּכָרָה</td>
<td>viam aquilae in caelo viam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>סְבֶלִי לְשׁוֹנָהוֹת הַנְּכָרָה</td>
<td>colubri super petram viam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>בִּרְכָּתָם לְלָעָל תְּּוָאֵרִיִּים</td>
<td>vamis in medio mari et</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>וְאֵצֶל מִלְּחָמָה בְּתָם</td>
<td>viam viri in adulescentula.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Table 2: הנוּלֶנְבָּה 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\textsuperscript{6} shows a similar finding. Here he formulates more clearly with: dicitur enim et adulescentula et abscondita, id est ἄπόκρυφος.

In the MT there are also three passages with the word alma in the plural (אַלְמָלֵה): 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:

\textsuperscript{6. In Esaiam III, vii 14.}
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. Undheim7 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-

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.