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## IS THE CHOICE OF ΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ IN LXX ISA. 7:14 THEOLOGICALLY MOTIVATED?

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In Memory of Professor James Barr

### Abstract

This paper examines the claim that the translation of עלמה by παρθένος in LXX Isa. 7:14 bears the marks of a theologically purposeful deviation, transforming the more neutral term עלמה 'young woman' into the more specific παρθένος 'virgin'. Our main thesis is that definite borders between the meanings 'young woman' and 'virgin' are difficult to ascertain both in Hebrew and in Greek, so that determining whether the LXX translation has a special theological significance is a difficult, if not impossible, task. In the paper, we first survey the occurrences of παρθένος in LXX Isaiah. We then move to an evaluation of some contemporary explanations of the use of the term in 7:14. After this evaluation we explore the ranges of meaning and significance of the terms παρθένος, בתולה, and עלמה, including some notes on their representation in the LXX. On the basis of this analysis we offer our own suggestion on how best to approach the choice of παρθένος as a translational equivalent for עלמה.

### Introduction

The translation of עלמה by παρθένος in LXX Isa. 7:14 has been, throughout history, the most hotly debated rendering of the LXX. The adoption of the verse in Matt. 1:23 as proof for the virgin birth of Jesus has set the tone of the discussion not only in antiquity, but also in the modern treatments of LXX Isa. 7:14.<sup>1</sup> In both contexts, the argument is developed from postulating a somewhat sharp distinction between the meanings of עלמה and παρθένος. In much contemporary discussion, whether the root of the supposed deviation is thought to lie in Hellenistic myths about a coming *Heilsbringer* or in ingenious parallels between the mother of Immanuel and 'Lady Zion', the assumption is

<sup>1</sup> For the debate in antiquity, cf. A. Kamesar, 'The Virgin of Isaiah 7:14: The Philological Argument from the Second to the Fifth Century', *JTS* 41 (1990), 51–75.

that the LXX translation bears the marks of a theologically purposeful deviation, transforming the more neutral term עלמה 'young woman' into the more specific παρθένος 'virgin'. In reality, a closer reading of the evidence reveals that the situation is more complex than that; in both Hebrew and Greek terms, definite borders between the meanings 'young woman' and 'virgin' are difficult to ascertain, so that determining whether the LXX translator had any special theological aim in the rendering is not an easy task.

Our purpose in the present analysis is to explore the rendering of עלמה as παρθένος in LXX Isaiah, and to ascertain whether it can be said to be theologically motivated. We will first survey the occurrences of παρθένος in LXX Isaiah, as well as some contemporary explanations of its use in 7:14. After critiquing these explanations we offer our own proposal, on the basis of an analysis of the semantic ranges of παρθένος, בתולה, and עלמה, and their representation in the LXX.

### 1. General Observations on the Use of παρθένος in LXX Isaiah

It is well known that, in the LXX, παρθένος is a standard equivalent of בתולה. The LXX has 43 occurrences of παρθένος where בתולה is the underlying Hebrew term. The only books where a different equivalence exists are Genesis and Isaiah. In Genesis, the general LXX correspondence between παρθένος and בתולה is the norm, but the Greek term is also used as an equivalent of נערה<sup>2</sup> in 24:14, 16, 55; 34:3 (2x), and of עלמה in Gen. 24:43. This is the only other case in the LXX where παρθένος renders עלמה. The occurrences of παρθένος in LXX Genesis will be observed later in closer detail. For now, we turn to the use of the Greek term in LXX Isaiah.

In LXX Isaiah παρθένος occurs 5 times: 7:14; 23:4; 37:22; 47:1, and 62:5. Of these, Isa. 7:14 is the only case in which the term does not correspond to בתולה. In 23:4 the term is employed in a lament, in which the fallen Sidon cries that she has not reared 'young men' (νεανίσκους) or 'young women' (παρθένους). In 37:22 it appears in the phrase παρθένος θυγάτηρ Σιων. In 47:1, the term appears in the similar phrase παρθένος θυγάτηρ Βαβυλωνος. Finally, in 62:5 the term is used in connection with joining a νεανίσκος in marriage.

This survey demonstrates that in LXX Isaiah בתולה and παρθένος are normally connected as translational equivalents. It is, in part, the 'uniqueness' of the rendering at 7:14 that stimulates scholarly imagi-

<sup>2</sup> This is the *Qere*. The *Ketib* is נער.

nation. Some opt for a purely philological or linguistic approach. Seeligmann, for instance, asks whether one should not assume that the translator simply conceived *עלמה* — ‘erroneously’, he stresses — to mean *παρθένος* ‘young virgin’.<sup>3</sup> Barr refuses to call the rendering an error, and considers it a ‘semantic shift’. He argues that *עלמה* probably has the same sense that *παρθένος* originally had, namely, a young woman who has just reached maturity,<sup>4</sup> so that the translator correctly estimated the range of the term by employing *παρθένος*. That the Greek term also means ‘virgin’ is the reason why Christians would later ‘read the text in a way he did not intend’.<sup>5</sup>

However, the verse has suggested to many a special theological manoeuvre by the translator. Scholars who seek to interpret *παρθένος* in LXX Isa. 7:14 as theologically motivated can also be divided into two broad groups. It is to an analysis of the different proposals of these groups that we now turn.

## 2. Different Proposals for a Theological Use of *παρθένος*

### 2.1 *A Hellenistic Cultic Background*

In the first group are those who capitalize on the meaning of *παρθένος* as ‘virgin’, and argue that the Isaiah translator drew on traditions relating to the supernatural virginal conception of a divine, or ‘messianic’, figure. Scholars such as Kittel<sup>6</sup> and Gressmann<sup>7</sup> have developed elaborate arguments in this direction. This tradition is referred to, with reticence, by Seeligmann,<sup>8</sup> and finds its most current expression in the work of Martin Rösel.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I.L. Seeligmann, *The Septuagint Version of Isaiah: a Discussion of its Problems* (Ex Oriente Lux, Leiden 1948), 120.

<sup>4</sup> Which tallies with the observation of Delling, ‘*παρθένος*’, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 5:831, that it is likely that the meaning of *עלמה* in Isa. 7:14 is the same as in Prov. 30:19.

<sup>5</sup> J. Barr, ‘The Most Famous Word in the Septuagint’, in P.S. Alexander *et al.* (eds), *Studia Semitica: The Journal of Semitic Studies Jubilee Volume* (JSS Supplement Series 16, Oxford 2005), 59–72 (60). An earlier version of the argument is found in J. Barr, *The Typology of Literalism in Ancient Biblical Translation* (MSU 15, Göttingen 1979), 40.

<sup>6</sup> R. Kittel, *Die hellenistische Mysterienreligion und das Alte Testament* (BWAT 32, Stuttgart 1924), 17–48.

<sup>7</sup> H. Gressmann, *Der Messias* (FRLANT NF 26, Göttingen 1929), 235–42.

<sup>8</sup> Seeligmann, *Isaiah*, 120.

<sup>9</sup> M. Rösel, ‘Die Jungfrauengeburt des endzeitlichen Immanuel’, *JBTh* 6 (1991), 135–51.

Following Kittel, Rösel draws from the ceremonies celebrating the birth of Aeo, described by Epiphanius (*Panarion* 51: 22,8). These cultic celebrations took place at the shrine of the κόρη, the divine figure who was viewed as the virgin who gave birth to Aeo. According to Epiphanius, in these celebrations, the worshippers proclaimed: ταυτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ σήμερον ἡ Κόρη τουτέστιν ἡ παρθένος ἐγένεσε τὸν Αἰῶνα 'today at this hour Core — that is, the virgin — gave birth to Aeo'.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, in the tradition of the Aeo birth celebrations transmitted by Hippolytus, we find the expression ἡ παρθένος ἡ ἐν γαστρῇ ἔχουσα καὶ συλλαμβάνουσα καὶ τίκτουσα υἱόν 'The virgin that was pregnant and conceived and bore a son'.<sup>11</sup> There is attestation that this 'virginal birth' was also celebrated by the Nabateans and in Elusa.<sup>12</sup>

A strong objection against the idea that these traditions are behind the LXX Isaiah rendering is that the evidence is late, dating from the fourth century CE — thus about 450 years after the standard accepted date of the translation. Rösel responds to this objection by pointing out that, although the received reports about the Aeo birth celebrations are from a later date, the name of the celebration (κιχήλλια) is already attested in the Decree of Canopus of 239/8 BCE,<sup>13</sup> which indicates that the ceremonies took place in the Ptolemaic period. He also points to evidence that veneration of Aeo was already existent in Ptolemaic Alexandria.<sup>14</sup>

Rösel also pushes his investigation back in time and explores Egyptian traditions that go back to the second millennium BCE and developed into the notion of the 'virginal birth' of the god Horus. He argues that, in the Ptolemaic period, these traditions had developed in such a way that Horus became identified with Aeo. This connection is of fundamental importance for Rösel, because, besides being the child of a divine family, Horus was a god of welfare, responsible for fertility and provision of food.<sup>15</sup> In Rösel's view, therefore, if it can be established that in Alexandria the virgin birth of Aeo was celebrated according to Epiphanius' description, and that these celebrations were seen as somehow connected with the expectation of the birth of Horus — a sort of

<sup>10</sup> The only complete translation of the Greek text of the *Panarion* into English is F. Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (2 vols, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 36, Leiden 1994).

<sup>11</sup> As quoted by Kittel, *Mysterienreligion*, 24, and Seeligmann, *Isaiah*, 120, n.3.

<sup>12</sup> Rösel, 'Jungfrauengeburt', 146.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. For information on the Decree of Canopus, cf. H.-J. Thissen, 'Kanopusdekret', *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* 3:321.

<sup>14</sup> Rösel, *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Cf. H. Felber, 'Horus', *Brill's New Pauly* 6:521–2.

saviour-king — it follows that there is an eschatological dimension to the notion of ‘virgin birth’, which was decisive in the rendering of LXX Isa. 7:14.<sup>16</sup> This eschatological dimension is very important in Rösel’s argument, as it tallies with his observations about the larger context of the oracle in LXX Isaiah 7, as we shall see later.

Rösel also leans on Seeligmann’s observations about the incorporation of Alexandrian religious language in LXX Isa. 14:12 and 65:11, to build his case for the presence of Hellenistic religious motifs here.<sup>17</sup> Seeligmann has convincingly demonstrated that, in 14:12, the translator rendered בן-היילל שחר by ὁ ἑωσφόρος, in reference to the god who was venerated in Alexandria as the protector of the city, and that in 65:11, the translator consciously used the name of the Alexandrian city God δαίμων and of the goddess τύχη to represent the pair of Gods נג and מני of the Hebrew text.<sup>18</sup> The alleged familiarity of the translator with the cults of Alexandria is, for Rösel, evidence that an Egyptian/Hellenistic conception of the παρθένος-birth of a *Heilskönigs* was behind the choice of terms. Rösel is careful to point out that, in both 14:12 and 65:11, the translator is critical of the Hellenistic deities so that the rendering in 7:14 should not be seen as a simple identification of the virgin, who bears the Immanuel, with a Hellenistic goddess. Rather, the translator engages with his surrounding cultural and religious environment, and employs παρθένος not as a proper name or as an epithet for a concrete goddess, but as a pointer to the special meaning of the coming messianic figure.

Arguing that there was a fixed mental connection of παρθένος with the notion of supernatural generation and at the same time with the expectation of times of salvation, Rösel attempts to demonstrate that the context of the Immanuel oracle makes it clear that this is the case for LXX Isaiah.<sup>19</sup> The heightened supernatural character of the child in LXX Isa. 7:15–16 would correspond with his miraculous birth. According to these verses, the child would be incapable of choosing evil, a conception which, for Rösel, can be traced back to Jer. 31:31–4 and Ezek. 11:19 and their view of the eschatological Israel.<sup>20</sup> The LXX translator alters the messianic ideal of the Hebrew text and conceptualizes

<sup>16</sup> Rösel, ‘Jungfrauengeburt’, 147.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 149.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Seeligmann, *Isaiah*, 99.

<sup>19</sup> Rösel, ‘Jungfrauengeburt’, 148.

<sup>20</sup> He further connects this description of the virgin son and the name of the child ‘Angel of Great Counsel’ announced in the LXX rendering of Isa. 9:6(5). The idea is that the messiah will always practice right conduct before God, and so will give eternal peace.

the messiah as a supernatural, sinless being, to whom a supernatural origin must be attributed. Here the Greek attribution of a special intermediation with the divine by virgin priestesses or prophetesses merges with the ideal of a holy life, separated from the impure world, which became prominent in later strands of ancient Judaism (he is thinking of texts such as Dan. 9:3 and 10:2). For Rösel, this is the background of the notion that the birth of the messianic figure must be excluded from the sinful world, and explains, for example, why the messiah rises from the sea in 4 Ezra 13:1–58, and the son of man comes from the clouds in Dan. 7:13–14. The virgin birth of LXX Isa. 7:14 seeks to express that the coming *Heilsbringer* is above the sinful stratum of human existence, and this is what guarantees the possibility of the inauguration of the eschatological era of salvation.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.2 *The παρθένος as 'Mother Zion'*

The second group of scholars downplays the meaning 'virgin' for παρθένος, and starts by observing the relationship between בתולה and παρθένος in LXX Isaiah and the larger context of chapter 7 as a whole, taking into account other deviating renderings found in the chapter, as well as indications drawn from other parts of the LXX. From this observation they argue that the translator associates παρθένος and 'Lady Zion', so that the theological reference in LXX Isa. 7:14 is not to a supposed virgin birth of the messiah, but to a collective birth of the children of mother Zion. This group is represented by Arie van der Kooij<sup>22</sup> and Johann Lust.<sup>23</sup>

We have seen that scholars in this group share with those of the first group the same starting point, namely, the 'uniqueness' of the rendering of עלמה as παρθένος. But the idea that the rendering envisions a supernatural birth of the messiah is rejected on the grounds that this is primarily a New Testament notion removed from the thought world of Judaism in the second century BCE.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Lust affirms that be-

<sup>21</sup> Rösel, 'Jungfrauengeburt', 150.

<sup>22</sup> A. van der Kooij, 'Die Septuaginta Jesajas als Document Jüdischer Exegese. Einige Notize zu LXX-Jes 7', in D. Barthélemy (ed.), *Übersetzung und Deutung. Studien zu dem Alten Testament und seiner Umwelt: Alexander Reimard Hulst gewidmet* (Nijkerk 1977), 91–102.

<sup>23</sup> J. Lust, 'A Septuagint Christ Preceding Jesus Christ? Messianism in the Septuagint Exemplified in Isa 7,10-17', in K. Hauspie (ed.), *Messianism and the Septuagint: Collected Essays* (BETL 178, Leuven 2004), 211–26.

<sup>24</sup> van der Kooij, 'Septuaginta', 96–7, argues that the later preference of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion for νεᾶνις is not simply a matter of anti-Christian polemics but it is primarily a proper revision of the unusual LXX rendering.

cause the Septuagint is a Jewish product of the second or first century *before* Christ, ‘the suspicion is bound to arise that preference should be given to an alternative interpretation’.<sup>25</sup>

The path followed in the contextual analysis of both van der Kooij and Lust is similar. It starts with the recognition that the rendering of עַלְמָה as παρθένος is unique. It then proceeds to an investigation of the uses of the Greek term in LXX Isaiah, rejecting the meaning ‘virgin’ (drawing this conclusion, primarily from 23:4 and 62:5),<sup>26</sup> and observing that, in two of the four passages in which παρθένος is employed to render the Hebrew בְּתוּלָה, its use clearly refers to a ‘collective entity’ rather than to an individual person: Zion in 37:22 and Babylon in 47:1. Lust observes that ‘outside Isaiah the term is repeatedly employed as a title for Lady Zion, for Judah or for Israel’.<sup>27</sup> He has in mind texts like 2 Kgs 19:21; Jer. 18:13; 38(31):4, 21; and Lam. 1:15; 2:13. There is, then, the observation of the similarity of the contexts of Isaiah 7 and 37. In Lust’s words, ‘In both instances God promises assistance to his people and a “remnant” returns’ (cf. 7:3, 15). For scholars following this line of reasoning, the conclusion is simple: ‘It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that the translator identified the παρθένος in both instances with Lady Zion’.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, on the basis of their proposed contextual analysis, van der Kooij and Lust conclude that there is a connection between Isaiah 7 and 37 in the mind of the translator, who perceives in עַלְמָה the same figure that in 37:22 is referred to as παρθένος θυγάτηρ Σιών ‘virgin daughter Zion’, that is, the mother of ‘the remnant’ that constitutes the new ‘people of God’. The υἱός of 7:14 is thus conceived as the collective designation of the children of mother Zion.<sup>29</sup> This conclusion is supplemented by observations on the general context of Chapter 7 and Immanuel’s apparent function in it.

### 3. Evaluation of the Proposals

While both groups of scholars have provided stimulating analyses of the problem, the lack of consensus indicates that there is still work to be done. First, we observe that there are significant problems in the

<sup>25</sup> Lust, ‘Christ’, 221.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 222. Cf. fn 6 on the same page.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 221–2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 222.

<sup>29</sup> Van der Kooij, ‘Septuaginta’, 98. Cf. R.L. Troxel, ‘Isaiah 7,14–16 through the Eyes of the Septuagint’, *ETL* 79 (2003), 1–22 (16).



attempt to identify the rendering with notions of a supernatural messianic birth. Besides the obvious problem of the late attestation of the supposed celebrations of the virgin birth of Aeo — and the very early and culturally distant attestation of the Egyptian traditions — the ‘fixed mental connection’ of παρθένος with either supernatural generation or an expectation of times of salvation is by no means as obvious as Rösel suggests. The very notion of a messiah who has an otherworldly conception in order to be untarnished by a sinful world is, as van der Kooij has aptly noted, late. It is also quite variegated, and in this regard Rösel’s references to the rise of the messianic figure in 4 Ezra 13 ‘out of the sea’ and to the son of man and his coming from the clouds in Daniel 7 miss the mark.<sup>30</sup>

The appeal to a ‘fixed mental connection’ between the notions of παρθένος birth and the birth of a divine or messianic figure is also problematic because it fails to take into account the fact that there was a concept of παρθένος birth that was quite widespread in the Greek-speaking world, but which referred to an all too human and negatively perceived social phenomenon: the birth of children by young, unmarried mothers.<sup>31</sup>

In that regard, one is taken to the complex social reality of the παρθενίαι of Sparta. These children of unknown fathers, born in the context of warfare, were esteemed and portrayed in a variety of ways in

<sup>30</sup> The perception of the ‘Son of Man’ in early Judaism is an extremely complex issue, and ascertaining the origins of the concept is difficult. Cf. J.A. Emerton, ‘The Origin of the Son of Man Imagery’, *JTS* 9 (1958), 225–42. For assessments of the contemporary state of research, cf. F.H. Borsch, ‘Further Reflections on “The Son of Man”: The Origins and Development of the Title’, in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN 1992), 130–44, and J.J. Collins, ‘The Son of Man in First Century Judaism’, *NTS* 38 (1992), 448–66. As for the man from the sea in 4 Ezra 13, the idea is also late, and probably dependent on Danielic traditions. Cf. M.E. Stone, ‘The Question of the Messiah in 4 Ezra’, in J. Neusner et al. (eds), *Judaisms and their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (Cambridge 1987), 209–24. Compare with the views of G.K. Beale, ‘The Problem of the Man from the Sea in IV Ezra 13 and its Relation to the Messianic Concept in John’s Apocalypse’, *NT* 25 (1983), 182–8, and A.P. Hayman, ‘The “Man from the Sea” in 4 Ezra 13’, *JJS* 49 (1998), 1–16.

<sup>31</sup> There is abundant evidence in Greek literature of children being born to a παρθένος. Besides the (in)famous παρθενίαι of Sparta, Sissa lists a number of Homeric heroes, such as Parthenopaeus, son of Atalanta; Asclepius, son of Coronis; Evadne, daughter of Pitane, and Jamus, son of Evadne; Ion, son of Creusa; and Telephus, son of Augeus. These examples evince to many scholars a notion of παρθενία that refers not so much to the lack of sexual experience but to the experience of sexuality outside wedlock. Cf. G. Sissa, *Greek Virginity* trans. A. Goldhammer (Revealing Antiquity 3, Cambridge, MA 1990), 78.

ancient sources.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the social designation of this group derives from the fact they do not belong to recognizable familial structures, and their fathers are not known. They are born beyond the pale of accepted marriage forms and are thus deprived of the same standing as 'properly' born citizens.

This negative connotation of 'παρθένης birth' is also reflected in the traditions about the *παρθέσιον*, a mountain on the border between Argolis and Arcadia, reserved for these clandestine, so-called 'virgin births'. After reviewing several references to this place in Greek literature,<sup>33</sup> Sissa aptly summarizes the social conceptions surrounding it: 'Mountain of the illegitimate, a wilderness to which was attached every imaginable connotation of the marginal and savage, the Virginal Mountain was the natural setting for individuals without political roots'.<sup>34</sup>

Christianity might have given a new meaning to the expression 'born of a virgin', but in ancient Greek to be known as *παρθενίας*, as the child of a *παρθένης*, was tantamount to being a social outcast. The epithet 'son of a virgin' involved, in fact, a strong irony, and those who bore it had to carry the ignominy and the stigma of being conceived clandestinely, against socially accepted paradigms.<sup>35</sup> The existence of such a negative connotation highlights the inadequacy of an approach that makes too much of a remotely plausible shade of meaning. Thus, if the range of meaning and significance of *παρθένης* is taken into account, the connection between the 'παρθένης birth' of LXX Isa. 7:14 and Hellenistic myths about a coming saviour is not at all obvious.

In fact, the observation of the uses of the Greek term in LXX Isaiah makes it clear that a variety of meanings covered by the conceptual frame of the term is envisaged by the translator, so that perceiving a

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 80–2. Cf. also, P. Vidal-Naquet, 'Esclavage et gynéocratie dans la tradition, le mythe, l'utopie', *Le Chasseur Noir* (Paris 1983), 278–81.

<sup>33</sup> She refers specifically to Pausanias VIII, 54.6; Callimachus' *Hymn to Delos* 70; Hyginus' *Fabulae* 99; Aelian's *Varia historia* XIII.1; and Servius' *Ad Virgili Bucolica* X.57.

<sup>34</sup> Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 83. Along similar lines, Plutarch *Solon* 23, states that Solon promulgated a law in Athens, according to which a father who discovered that his *παρθένης* daughter was seduced or, more specifically, impregnated, would have the power to cut her off from the family. In such cases, the harsh punishment inflicted on the *παρθένης* mother meant that she 'ceased to exist as a free woman' (Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 87). As in the cultures of the ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible, virginity in ancient Greece was an asset the loss of which wreaked great havoc in the structure of society. In fact, the seduction of a *παρθένης* was 'the only grounds upon which Solon would countenance treating a free born Athenian citizen like a slave — numbered among the gravest threats to the kinship structure'. Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 87.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 90–1.

special theological connotation at 7:14 is problematic.<sup>36</sup> Troxel has highlighted the importance of observing the translator's usage.<sup>37</sup> Unlike Troxel, however, I am not arguing *against* the possibility that the translator used παρθένος as 'virgin' in 7:14. I am just highlighting the difficulty in ascertaining whether this is so.

Observing the use of the term by the translator in LXX Isaiah as a whole should also make us careful when dealing with the collective view of the birth of Immanuel. In this case, one is reminded of the basic fact that we are dealing with a *translation*, that is, a text trying to represent its *Vorlage*, which means that it is quite impossible to discern any specific theological notions in some cases. This is certainly true with regard to the LXX rendering of Isa. 37:22. We note that in 37:22 the expression בת ירושלים 'daughter of Jerusalem', which is parallel to בתולה בת-ציון (rendered by 'virgin [παρθένος] daughter of Zion'), is rendered simply by θυγάτηρ Ιερουσαλημ, and that in 47:1 the expression בת-כשדים 'daughter of the Chaldeans', which is parallel to בתולה בת-בבל (rendered by 'virgin [παρθένος] daughter of Babylon'), is simply rendered as θυγάτηρ Χαλδαίων.<sup>38</sup> This demonstrates that, in both verses, παρθένος simply represents the Hebrew בתולה in the *Vorlage*, and it is thus quite difficult to see any special connotation attached to the term by the translator.<sup>39</sup>

The discussions by scholars in both groups suffer from a basic failure to appreciate semantic complexities in the Greek term παρθένος and in its relationship with its Hebrew equivalents where it occurs in the LXX. With regard to its meaning, a few observations need to be borne in mind. On the one hand, an exclusive identification of παρθένος and 'virgin' simply does not do full justice to the semantic range of the term — note how I deliberately rendered בתולה and παρθένος with the different words 'virgin' and 'young woman', according to what each specific context required;<sup>40</sup> on the other hand, the recognition that

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Troxel, 'Eyes', 14–15.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>38</sup> In 23:12, בתולה is omitted from the rendering and בתולה בת-צידון 'virgin daughter of Sidon' is translated by θυγάτηρα Σιδωνος.

<sup>39</sup> Troxel, 'Eyes', 18, follows the same line of reasoning and correctly affirms that any parallels between the παρθένοι of LXX Isa. 7:14 and 37:22 is 'illusory'.

<sup>40</sup> While it is true that none of the uses of παρθένος in LXX Isaiah surveyed above specifically focuses on 'virginity' as such, there is nothing intrinsic in those texts that necessarily speaks against the meaning 'virgin', *pace* *ibid.* 14–15, and Lust, 'Christ', 222. 62:5 comes close to that, if Troxel's argument that it implies 'cohabitation' were right. But both the Hebrew and Greek could possibly be speaking about the act of contracting marriage, so that the meaning 'virgin' would definitely be appropriate, although not essential. The pair νεανίσκοι και παρθένοι is probably a standard combi-

παρθένος can have more than one meaning should guard against an exclusive association of the term with any other single notion, as the advocates of the collective view suggest.

#### 4. The Range of Meaning of παρθένος

The meaning of παρθένος corresponds largely with that of בתולה and covers a similarly broad range of meaning<sup>41</sup>. There are examples in Greek literature, going back to Homer, of a variegated use of the term. Delling points out that, depending on the context, the emphasis could be on sex, age (or both), or status. He observes that the reference '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)'.<sup>42</sup>

Just as with the Hebrew בתולה, the notions of 'youth' and 'virginity' are closely connected in the word παρθένος.<sup>43</sup> But, as we suggested above, there are examples of the use of both terms where virginity is not specifically implied (cf. 1 Macc. 1:26). The variation in nuance, together with the many uses that imply an active sexual life for the παρθένος, have made many scholars deny that the term means 'virgin' at all. Sissa points out that παρθένος 'does not unambiguously signify the perfect integrity implicit in our word *virgin*', and highlights the work of scholars who have argued that the Greek term refers primarily to girls of a marriageable age, and does not necessarily correspond to the notion of *virgo intacta*.<sup>44</sup>

In response to this argument, Sissa rightly points to unequivocal examples where παρθένος necessarily denotes virginity. The problem with the view that sexuality is not a factor in the definition of the term is the fallacy that 'the *possibility* of using it to refer to a girl who has had sexual relations and perhaps children becomes the decisive criterion in

nation at the time of the LXX translations, as can be seen in Deut. 32:35; Isa. 23:4; Zech. 9:17; Ps. 148:12; Lam. 1:18; 2:21; 1 Macc. 1:26.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Delling, *TDNT* 5:831.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 827.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 828.

<sup>44</sup> Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 76. Various works are important in this regard. Cf. C. Calame, *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece: their Morphology, Religious Role and Social Function* trans. D. Collins and J. Orion (London 1997); A. Brelich, *Paides e Parthenoi* (Rome 1969); H. Jeanmaire, *Couroi et courètes: essai sur l'éducation spartiate et sur les rites d'adolescence dans l'antiquité hellénique* (Lille 1939). According to this view, it is marriage, not sex, that changes a παρθένος into a γυνή, as illustrated in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* 148; 1219; and 1275. Cf. Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 78–9.

its definition'.<sup>45</sup> For Sissa, the very existence of tests for *παρθενία* is significant, because it indicates that *παρθενία* was not an obvious sociological state — such as being part of an age group — but an 'invisible condition' that often required mantic powers to be detected.<sup>46</sup>

That a *παρθένης* was *normally* expected to be a virgin is exemplified by the negative connotation attached to the notion of *παρθένος* births. The expression *παρθενίας* 'child of a *παρθένης*' is merely ironical. The idea simply refers to young girls who are *supposed* to be virgins, but who practised sex against socially accepted norms. As Sissa puts it, while it was possible for a *παρθένης* to have a sexual life, 'it was nevertheless forbidden'.<sup>47</sup>

In texts coming from Hellenistic Judaism, we find *παρθένης* attested with the same range of meaning as in general Greek literature. There are instances when the focus is not on virginity as such, but where virginity is likely to be a characteristic of the girls being referred to (cf. Jdt 16:5; Ep. Jer. 6:9; 1 Macc. 1:26; 2 Macc. 3:19; 5:13). There are also examples where sexual virginity is clearly the focus, as in Jdt 9:2. *γυνή παρθενίας* in Sir. 15:2 means a wife who was a virgin at the time of the marriage. Sir. 42:10 is full of *angst* that a girl *ἐν παρθενία* be found pregnant 'while still in her father's house'.

'Virginity' is undeniably a fundamental meaning of the word. There are clear examples where this meaning has been extended to inanimate objects such as unused ships (Aristophanes' *Eq.* 1302), or the primeval earth out of which Adam was formed (Josephus' *Ant.* 1:34).<sup>48</sup> In the Greek-speaking world the meaning has also been extrapolated into a notion of spiritual purity — which later influenced significant developments in Hellenistic and Christian asceticism. This connection was established early and can be seen as underlying the notion of the Pythia and her prophetic and mantic powers (cf. Plutarch's *Pythian Oracles* 22, II 105c). A cultic honouring of a divine 'virgin' is also widely attested, chiefly in the cult of Artemis and in the so-called 'astrological' mystery religions of Hellenism.<sup>49</sup> That this spiritualized view of virginity also existed in Hellenistic Judaism is evident in Philo's *De vita contemplativa*.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 83–6, surveys examples of such tests in ancient Libya, Italy, and Asia minor, and affirms that, in the light of these means of testing the *παρθένης*, virginity was primarily a sexual, rather than a merely 'sociological' matter.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Delling, *TDNT* 5:827.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 828–31.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. H. Szesnat, "Mostly Aged Virgins": Philo and the Presence of the Therapeutrides at Lake Mareotis', *Neot* 32 (1998), 191–201, and J.E. Taylor, 'Virgin Mothers: Philo on the Women Therapeutae', *JSP* 12 (2001), 37–63.

So παρθένος is a term with diverse usages and connotations, and it can be used to refer simply to a young woman, who is not a *virgo intacta*. But, while it is clear that ‘virgin’ is not the exclusive meaning of the word, it is a prominent one. My point is, however, that, in the term, notions of virginity, purity, and youth are closely intertwined, and in some cases it can be impossible to discern which precise hues of meaning are being evoked. This is also true for the Hebrew term בתולה, with which παρθένος is so often identified in the LXX. It is to a closer observation of this term that we now turn.

### 5. The Range of Meaning of בתולה

A translator trying to represent his *Vorlage* faithfully estimates the range of meaning of the terms in both the source and receptor languages, and seeks to find areas of overlap.<sup>51</sup> It is obvious that the ranges of meaning of synonymous terms in different languages do not overlap entirely. In general, it is only one meaning of a term that is reflected in its translation.<sup>52</sup> The establishment of a standard equivalence between παρθένος and בתולה would have taken place via such an overlap in their ranges of meaning.

In the Hebrew Bible, the term בתולה occurs 51 times. In many cases, the meaning ‘virgin’ is quite clear (cf. Lev. 21:13; Deut. 22:19; Ezek. 44:22), while in others it is completely ruled out (cf. Joel 1:8).<sup>53</sup> There are 12 cases in which the term appears in connection with בחור, in a parallel expression that seems to mean only ‘young people’ (Deut. 32:25; Isa. 23:4, 42:5; Jer. 51:22; Ezek. 9:6; Pss 78:63, 148:12; Lam. 1:18, 2:21; 2 Chron. 36:17). There are also, as we have seen, examples in which בתולה is the personification of a nation, city, or land, where there is no specific focus on the idea of virginity (cf. Isa. 23:12, 37:22, 47:1; Jer. 14:17, 18:13, 31:4, 21, 46:11; Lam. 2:13; Amos 5:12).<sup>54</sup> In the discussion of the meaning of בתולה it is common to focus primarily on legal texts, where the use of the term would naturally be more precise. Especially significant in this regard are Exod. 22:15–16; Lev. 21:3; 7, 13–15; Deut. 22:13–21; Ezek. 44:22.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Barr, *Typology*, 40.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. C. Rabin, ‘The Translation Process and the Character of the Septuagint’, *Textus* 6 (1967), 1–26 (7).

<sup>53</sup> Tzevat, ‘בתולה,’ *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 2:341.

<sup>54</sup> Tzevat, *TDOT* 2:341. cf. J.J. Schmitt, ‘The Virgin of Israel: Referent and Use of the Phrase in Amos and Jeremiah’, *CBQ* 53 (1991), 365–87.

Texts such as Exod. 22:15–16<sup>55</sup> and Deut. 22:13–21<sup>56</sup> make it clear that virginity was a central concept in the range of meaning of בתולה. The latter text also clearly indicates that a girl was expected to be a virgin at the time of her wedding,<sup>57</sup> and this was an issue of paramount importance,<sup>58</sup> closely connected with a social valuation of chastity, as ‘the loss of virginity is regarded as a proof of unchastity’.<sup>59</sup> Virginity, chastity, purity — these are all deeply intertwined categories, and drawing sharp distinctions between them is unhelpful.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>55</sup> In Exod. 22:15–16 we find a law about seducing a בתולה who is not betrothed (ארשה). The punishment envisioned for this offence is not as serious as that prescribed for the seduction of the בתולה who is betrothed (Deut. 22:22–7), as this latter case was treated as tantamount to adultery. Cf. G.J. Wenham, ‘“Betûlâh” A Girl of Marriageable Age’, *VT* 22 (1972), 326–48 (330). There is a gradation in the seriousness of the offence if the בתולה is betrothed because the social fabric is more directly affected.

<sup>56</sup> In Deut. 22:13–21 there is the case of the man who rejects his wife because he found in her no בתולים (vv. 14, 17, 20). Upon this charge, the parents of the accused woman have to produce the בתולי נערה (v. 15, 17), which is undoubtedly some form of cloth or garment (השמלה v. 17). Upon failure to produce the בתולים, the accused woman would be executed, for ‘acting foolishly’ (21). If the parents are able to produce the evidence in favour of their daughter, she is acquitted and the accusing husband is punished, ‘for bringing an evil name upon a בתולת ישראל’ (v. 19).

<sup>57</sup> B. Wells, ‘Sex, Lies, and Virginal Rape: The Slandered Bride and False Accusation in Deuteronomy’, *JBL* 124 (2005), 41–72 (41). Wenham, ‘Betûlâh’, 330, offers a very ingenious interpretation of this law, in an attempt to prove that here בתולה should be translated ‘girl of marriageable age’ and בתולים should be translated ‘tokens of adolescence’ instead of the more commonly accepted ‘tokens of virginity’. He argues that here the husband has an issue with the fact that there have been no signs of menstruation since the wedding (which, in Wenham’s view, could have happened some time before the accusation took place). This could mean either that the girl was not yet nubile or, even worse, that she was pregnant by a different man by the time of the wedding. The garment produced by the parents would then have the function of showing that she was in fact nubile when she married. His interpretation is, however, strained and against the grain of the text. In particular, it fails to do justice to the massive evidence of the practice of producing signs of virginity across several near Eastern cultures.

<sup>58</sup> Wells, ‘Virginal Rape’, 43 n. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Tzevat, *TDOT* 2:343.

<sup>60</sup> Wells, ‘Virginal Rape’, 48–9, observes that in the ancient Near East, there were two basic types of sexual infidelity considered to be adulterous. He calls them *adultery post-consummation* — which ‘involved a fully married woman having sex with any man other than her Husband’; and *adultery while betrothed* — which took place occurred during the period of inchoate marriage or betrothal. This second case is where Deuteronomy 22 fits. For Wells, the text indicates that the timing of the adultery does not matter, since the issue is the deceitful conduct of the father who hid from the groom that his daughter was not a virgin. For Wells, this is a question of *sex plus deception*, which gives the case the same legal status of adultery while betrothed.

Lev. 21:7, 13–15 and Ezek. 44:22 deal with the marriage requirements of priests. The injunction to marry a בתולה, which is explicitly directed only to the High Priest in Leviticus is extended to all priests in Ezekiel. In Lev. 21:14, it is stated specifically that the High Priest is to take a בתולה *from his own people*. The reason given is that ‘he may not profane (חלל) his children among his people’. In Ezek. 44:22, the Zadokite priesthood is commanded to marry either a בתלת מזרע בית ישראל or a widow of another priest. In both contexts, the issue is keeping the ritual and ethnic purity of priests and their families. Tsevat’s observations are helpful, in stating that the passage in Ezekiel in particular ‘makes it clear that the viewpoint here is not anatomical, but sociological’.<sup>61</sup> But we cannot lose sight of the fact that virginity is ultimately the hallmark of the purity envisaged in these texts. While in them the notion of virginity is expanded to signify purity in the cultic and ethnic senses, this is nonetheless an *expansion* of the basic notion of virginity.

Wenham suggests that the evidence of Akkadian and Ugaritic cognates, and of the biblical texts mentioning בתולות, indicates that בתולה should be translated as ‘girl of marriageable age’ and not ‘virgin’. In his view, the term ‘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 that does not allow, for Wenham, the conclusion that בתולה is a technical term for ‘virgin’.<sup>62</sup> Wenham’s formulation of the problem is, however, flawed. The question whether בתולה is a technical term for ‘virgin’ is immaterial. Asserting that בתולה means ‘girl of marriageable age’ does not preclude the fact that virginity is, in most cases, an ideal state for the בתולה.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Tzevat, *TDOT* 2:343. Cf., also, T. Frymer-Kensky, ‘Virginity in the Bible’, in V.H. Matthews *et al.* (eds), *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (JSOT Supplement Series 262, Sheffield 1998), 79–96 (80), who states that ‘here the essential requirement is that she has not been stamped as a non-priest. She is a daughter of Israel, or has been introduced into the priestly caste by another priest’.

<sup>62</sup> Wenham, ‘Betūlāh’, 347.

<sup>63</sup> In many instances, the phrase ‘who had known no man’ is appended to בתולה, for emphasis (cf. Gen. 24:16; Lev. 21:3; Judg. 21:12). It can be restrictive (meaning, ‘in fact, one who...’) or descriptive (meaning, ‘i.e., one who...’). Cf. Tzevat, *TDOT* 2:341, and F. Zimmermann, ‘Some Textual Studies in Genesis’, *JBL* 73 (1954), 97–101 (98–100). Wenham affirms that this is evidence against the meaning ‘virgin’ for בתולה, because the addition would make this meaning redundant. This is remarkable because, when discussing Middle Assyrian law A55, Wenham, ‘Betūlāh’, 329, argues against the view that, since *batultu* meant ‘virgin’, the majority of the pleonastic clauses are to be seen as later expansions, by pointing to earlier Sumerian laws that use similar circumlocutions to define virginity. For the Sumerian texts he has in mind, cf. note 3, on the page.



From the examples in the legal corpus of the Hebrew Bible, it is quite clear that בתולה denotes a young age, but also quite markedly means 'virgin'. The two concepts are in fact intertwined in the term, and, as Frymer-Kensky rightly observes, 'the cultural expectation that young girls should remain virgins is embedded in the Hebrew language'.<sup>64</sup>

The same can be said about cognate terms in other ancient Semitic languages.<sup>65</sup> According to Cooper, this similarity stems from the fact that in ancient Semitic cultures there was an expectation of virginity for unmarried girls. This expectation was connected with complex networks of social, economic, and familial relations.<sup>66</sup> So there are imbedded in the Hebrew term בתולה, as well as in its cognates, specific sets of cultural assumptions. When analysed in the context in which they appear, it becomes clear that, regardless of their etymology or assumed 'basic meaning', these terms denote a pristine quality, identified with youth, 'freshness', and, primarily, virginity. As it was the case with the range of meaning of παρθένος, these culturally intertwined concepts that constitute the conceptual frame of בתולה, can also only be dissociated by means of analytical and artificial semantic abstractions.

Besides the intricate relationship of concepts within the range of meaning of בתולה, we note further that there are actually great areas of

<sup>64</sup> Frymer-Kensky, 'Virginity', 79.

<sup>65</sup> C.H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome 1965), 378a, aptly noted, after translating Ugaritic *btl* by 'girl, virgin', that the term is not to be taken exactly like the English term 'virgin', because 'there is no word in the Near Eastern languages that by itself means *virgo intacta*'. There is, in fact, since the studies of B. Landsberger, 'Jungfräulichkeit: Ein Beitrag zum Thema "Beilager und Eheschliessung"', in J.A. Ankum *et al.* (eds), *Symbolae Iuridicae et Historicae Martino David Dedicatae* (Leiden 1968), 41–105, and J.J. Finkelstein, 'Sex Offenses in Sumerian Law', *JASOR* 86 (1966), 355–72, a consensus that there is no precise word for 'virgin' in Sumerian or Akkadian, and that the concept of virginity can only be expressed negatively in those languages. Cf. Wenham, 'Betüläh', 327–8. This has been recently confirmed by J.S. Cooper, 'Virginity in Ancient Mesopotamia', in S. Parpola and R.M. Whiting (eds), *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of the XLVII Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki* (The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki 2002), 91–112.

<sup>66</sup> Cooper, 'Mesopotamia', 100. There are two parallels between the situation in ancient Mesopotamia and Rabbinic thought. First, in both contexts, virginity is closely tied with socio-economic and familial transactions. Also, in both contexts, there was a moral dimension attached to the notion of virginity. Cf. Cooper, 'Mesopotamia', 101, S. Lafont, *Femmes, droit et justice dans l'Antiquité orientale: Contribution à l'étude du droit pénal au Proche-Orient ancien* (OBO 165, Göttingen 1999), 131–2, and M.J.H.M. Poorthuis, 'Rebekah on Her Way to Marriage: a Study in Midrash', *JSJ* 29 (1998), 438–62 (438).

overlap across terms that denote young women in Hebrew. In Deut. 22:19–20, for example, נערה refers twice to the same girl earlier referred to as בתולה. Notions such as youth and virginity, among others, which are part of the conceptual frame of בתולה also pertain to other related terms referring to young women, such as נערה and עלמה. This is because all these terms correspond to referents in the world (young women) to whom certain cultural notions are attached. When these referents are mentioned, the cultural notions attached to them are variously evoked. When discussing these terms, it is common for scholars to offer stereotyped translations, such as בתולה ‘virgin’, נערה ‘girl’, and עלמה ‘young woman’. But their areas of overlap and distinction are very difficult to represent.<sup>67</sup>

## 6. The Range of Meaning of עלמה

If we turn our attention to עלמה we shall be better able to appreciate the issue. At the outset, we must agree with Barr’s assertion that the simple identification of עלמה as ‘young woman’ is misleading, as it ‘fails to take account of the *rarity* of the word and the *very limited* range of usage that is relevant for the elucidation of the Isaiah passage’.<sup>68</sup> In fact, the root עלם occurs only ten times in the MT.<sup>69</sup>

In Pss 9:1, 46[45]:1 and in 1 Chron. 15:20 it appears in the technical musical term עלמות, which is irrelevant for our purposes. In Ps. 68:25, עלמות is the plural of עלמה and refers to players of tambourines. Here, the term also seems to encompass the notion of youth, and conceivably some sort of official, perhaps courtly, designation. There is nothing in this example that speaks either in favour or against the meaning ‘virgin’.

In Song 1:3 and 6:8, the plural עלמות clearly refers to young women. In 1:3, in the context of the praises of the groom anointed with fragrant oil, we read that the עלמות love (or desire) him. In 6:8 the groom is exalting his object of desire above all the other women who, presumably, were ‘available’ to him: sixty queens, eighty concubines, and עלמות without number. While Barr argues that the erotic connotation of these verses speaks against the meaning ‘virgin’, it has to be stressed that the use of the term in 6:8, in distinction to פילגשים ‘concubines’, makes the connotation ‘virgin’ quite possible. Besides the question of the virginity of the עלמות, the use of the term in these verses seems to evoke

<sup>67</sup> Barr, ‘Word’, 64.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 66.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 63, reckons nine cases, leaving Ps. 9:1 out.

youth, and to designate some kind of ‘official’ or recognized social category of courtly servants.<sup>70</sup>

The singular *עלמה* occurs only four times. Prov. 30:19 is the occurrence that could speak more strongly *against* the meaning ‘virgin’, if the verse is understood to refer to cohabitation with a *גבר* ‘man’. The reference can, however, be simply to courtship or to the process of entering into marriage, in which case it would be at least culturally desirable that the *עלמה* were a virgin. Here, youth seems to be a necessary concept in the frame of reference of the term. And while it cannot be proven that virginity is also envisaged, neither is the possibility overruled. The other three occurrences of the singular form are Gen. 24:43, Exod. 2:8, and Isa. 7:14, all in the articular form *העלמה*.

In Exod. 2:8, *העלמה* refers to the maidservant of pharaoh’s daughter. The term here denotes *youth* — the maid is presumably young — subordination, and, viewed in connection with the other uses above, it is conceivable that it also evokes notions of a particular social category in courtly circles. Although the text does not mention anything regarding her sexuality or marital status, it is reasonable to assume that she was single, and thus likely expected to be a virgin.

In Gen. 24:43, the term appears in the context of Abraham’s servant’s mission to find a suitable wife for Isaac. In the text, a variety of terms referring to women is used. Rebekah is referred to by *אשה*, but most often by *נערה* (five times, 24:14, 16, 28, 55, and 57), once as *בתולה* (24:16) and once as *עלמה* (24:43). The specific context of the use of *עלמה* in 24:43 is the servant’s narrative of the nature and purpose of his mission to Rebekah’s parents. He reports to them how he stood by the spring and waited for the *עלמה* to whom he would direct his test question. Rebekah, obviously, is the one who gave the expected answer.<sup>71</sup> It is unclear why this specific term is employed here, against the other possibilities present in the text (*נערה*, *בתולה*, or *אשה*). It is conceivable that this is just a stylistic move. It is also possible that there are specific semantic or cultural reasons, but this is difficult to ascertain. In the text, *בתולה* is only used to stress Rebekah’s virginity, *אשה* is used in the context of references to marriage, with the specific sense of ‘wife’, and *נערה* specifically evokes youth. Each of these terms would seem to be adequate in the light of our present knowledge. Our survey of the uses of *עלמה* does not enable us to perceive anything particu-

<sup>70</sup> Cf. the use of *בתולות* in Ps. 45:14.

<sup>71</sup> Delling, *TDNT* 5:831, n.33, appropriately remarks that the reference in Gen. 24:43 is not to Rebekah herself, but generally to the girl promised to Abraham’s servant.

larly significant about the term here, apart from the already mentioned connotations of youth and, conceivably, subordination and virginity.

## 7. The Treatment of עלמה in the LXX

How does the LXX deal with עלמה? In both Song 1:3 and 6:8, the LXX renders עלמה by νεῦνις. In Prov. 30:19 we find a form of νεότης ‘youth’. The articular occurrence in Exod. 2:8 is rendered by νεῦνις ‘girl’. As mentioned previously, only Gen. 24:43 and Isa. 7:14 have παρθένος as an equivalent. This analysis puts us in a position to evaluate better the common notions that the rendering of עלמה as παρθένος is ‘unique’ and that νεῦνις is ‘the most frequent equivalent of עלמה in the LXX’. In fact these are the only two terms that render the rare Hebrew word more than once; νεῦνις is used three times while παρθένος is used twice. The difference, in fact, is not that significant, and analyses that capitalize on the ‘unique’ use of παρθένος as a rendering for עלמה should be evaluated in this light.

It has been argued that νεῦνις is a more adequate equivalent of עלמה because it does not carry the notion of virginity. The term νεῦνις is indeed very general, and it is not possible to extrapolate the specific meaning ‘virgin’ from textual clues in any of its uses in the LXX. The possibility that νεῦνις could mean ‘virgin’ can only be inferred from cultural assumptions regarding the sexual state of the young girl to whom reference is being made. To argue this is different from saying that the term *does not express* the notion of virginity, which implies that νεῦνις precludes this idea.

But there is one specific concept that seems to be distinctive of νεῦνις/νεανίσκος, namely, ‘servant’. The Hebrew term נער is attested with this meaning, for example, in Judg. 19:13, 19 and Ruth 2:5 (in which case the LXX renders נער by παιδάριον). The standard use of νεανίσκος as the LXX counterpart could indicate that the Greek term carried a similarly specific meaning. Also, it is noteworthy that in Josh. 2:1, 23, and 6:22 the Hebrew אנשים is rendered by νεανίσκοι. This was probably influenced by 6:23 where the spies are referred to as הנערים המרגלים (LXX οἱ δύο νεανίσκοι οἱ κατασκοπεύσαντες). It could also indicate the general notion that νεανίσκος is a more particular designation of a servant.

If it can be argued that LXX Pentateuch served as a lexicon for future translators, this could hold the key for understanding the rendering at Exod. 2:8.<sup>72</sup> As we saw previously, in Exod. 2:8, העלמה refers to

<sup>72</sup> On the question of the influence of LXX Pentateuch on the vocabulary of LXX

the maidservant of Pharaoh's daughter. It is quite clear that the עלמות of Song 1:3 and 6:8 are, like the girl in Exodus, courtly maidservants. This could have provided the translator of the Song of Solomon with a clue for the rendering. He could also have just used a general term for 'young woman' that was perfectly adequate. It is simply not possible to make a decision in either direction.

## 8. The Choice of παρθένος as a translational equivalent for עלמה

We still need to seek an explanation for the connection between עלמה and παρθένος. The connection between בתולה and παρθένος is easy to ascertain because of their standard relationship abundantly attested in the LXX. In our analysis, we confirmed the suspicion that there is great overlap in the range of concepts covered by the two terms. In both, 'virginity' appears as a strong underlying concept. They also denote 'girls of a marriageable age'. There are strong cultural assumptions underlying both terms, which connect 'youth' and the expectation of virginity. Both terms are also open to possible application to a woman who has experienced sexual intercourse, although these would be effected and evaluated differently by the cultures in question. But in the light of the rarity of עלמה and its rendering in the LXX, is it possible to suggest anything about its rendering as παρθένος? In order to answer this question we turn first to the only other instance of the connection in the LXX, Gen. 24:43.

We notice that, in Genesis 24, παρθένος is used with a variety of terms. Barr observes that as the theme of the chapter is the finding of a wife for Isaac, a high concentration of words for 'girl', 'woman', etc., is to be expected. He notes — leaving out what he calls 'the common word for 'woman' or 'wife' (אשה/γυνή) — that in the Hebrew version, Rebekah is most often referred to as נערה (five times), once as בתולה, and once as עלמה. In the Greek, she is referred to five times as παρθένος and twice as παῖς. Below is the table of equivalents, following Barr.<sup>73</sup>

Isa. cf. J. Ziegler, *Untersuchungen zur Septuaginta des Buches Isaias* (ATA 12.3, Münster 1934), 134–75. For general observations about the influence of LXX Pentateuch on the rest of the LXX books, cf. the differing views of E. Tov, 'The Impact of the Septuagint Translation of the Torah on the Translation of the Other Books', in *The Greek and Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays on the Septuagint* (Leiden 1999), 183–95, and J. Lust, 'The Vocabulary of LXX Ezekiel and Its Dependence upon the Pentateuch', in M. Vervenne (ed.), *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic Literature — Festschrift C. H. W. Brekelmans* (BETL 133, Leuven 1997), 529–46.

<sup>73</sup> Barr, 'Word', 67–9.

	MT	LXX
Gen. 24:14	נערה	παρθένος
Gen. 24:16	(a) נערה (b) בחולה	παρθένος παρθένος
Gen. 24:28	נערה	ἡ παῖς
Gen. 24:43	עלמה	παρθένος
Gen. 24:55	נערה	παρθένος
Gen. 24:57	נערה	παῖς

While it is quite conceivable that the translator wants to focus on and stress Rebekah's virginity — which was a hotly debated issue among rabbis of the Amoraic and Tannaitic periods<sup>74</sup> — Barr is probably right in his conclusion that the Genesis translator used *παρθένος* in the general sense of young female, in a similar way to the English 'girl'. The two cases where *παῖς* is used (verses 28 and 57) are cases where the context is that of the family. These indicate that 'the translator is, at least at times, sensitive to context and appropriateness: for he could have perfectly well have used *παρθένος* in both these cases, and no one would have noticed'. A similar sensitivity seems to be shown in 34:3–4, since in verse 3 *παρθένος* is employed twice for *נערה* and in verse 4 *παῖς* is used for *ילדה* and *נערה*, both terms being used in a family context. Barr also notes that, in Deut. 22:15–28, *παῖς* is quite consistently used to refer to daughters of marriageable age.

The rendering of *עלמה* as *παρθένος* in 24:43 does not, for Barr, indicate in any way that the Hebrew term had any special connotation of virginity, but, being a rare word for 'young woman', was rendered by the translator with the same general term that he used for all such words in the chapter, except in the cases where the specific family context required *παῖς*.<sup>75</sup>

What, then, can we say about the rendering of *עלמה* by *παρθένος* in LXX Isa. 7:14? We have seen that *παρθένος* has a primary meaning of 'virgin', but that it was variously used to designate young women in general. *עלמה*, on the other hand, does not seem to refer *primarily* to virginity, although, in the very limited number of examples available, we have argued that it was likely that the *עלמות* could be expected to be virgins. We saw that in LXX Gen. 24:43, *παρθένος* could have been

<sup>74</sup> For a comprehensive and stimulating account of Midrashic developments in the interpretation of Genesis 24 and Rebekah's virginity, cf. Poorthuis, 'Rebekah'.

<sup>75</sup> Barr, 'Word', 71. In Gen. 41:2, *νεκλίσκος* is used in connection with *παῖς*, which here has the specific meaning of 'servant'.

used to stress the girl's virginity, or it could simply have been used as an acceptable equivalent to the word referring to a young woman. Again, it is very difficult to make a decision in any direction.

## 9. Conclusion

The only conclusion we can draw from this is simply that the nature of the terms denoting young women is such that it is difficult to detect a theological purpose in the rendering of עלמה by παρθένος in LXX Isa. 7:14. There are cases when it is possible to see theological manoeuvres imprinted in the choice of a term. When, for instance, the Isaiah translator employs the name of a Hellenistic deity, as in 14:12 and 65:11, or a specific ethnic designation such as Ἑλληνας for פלשתים in 9:11(12), the presence of a purposeful 'actualizing' rendering is quite clear.

The same cannot be said of terms with such broad cultural applications and nuances as designations for young women. It is difficult enough for modern speakers of European languages to discern specific shades of meaning for terms such as 'girl', 'maid', 'virgin', 'young woman', etc., let alone to judge minutiae of the translator's mental process when he chose to connect two such terms in two vastly complex and unrelated languages.<sup>76</sup>

If we study the overall context of the LXX version of the Immanuel oracle and determine its theological character we might be able to favour one explanation for the use of παρθένος over others, but this is a one-way path: one cannot use any evidence offered by the rendering παρθένος to help build a case for a specific theological reading of the Immanuel oracle.

<sup>76</sup> For an excellent discussion of the issues involved in detecting theological exegesis in the LXX, cf. E. Tov, 'Theologically Motivated Exegesis Embedded in the Septuagint', in *The Greek and Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays on the Septuagint* (Leiden 1999), 257–69. Cf., also, J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London 1961).



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