

A NOTE ON THE ARAMAIC COGNATE OF '*ALMAH*' IN THE TARGUMIM

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The Aramaic of the Targumim in regard to the cognate of '*almah*', one of the most famous words in the Bible due to its use in Isaiah 7:14 and the Christological interpretations of it there as "virgin", has not received sufficient attention in the standard lexicons and in scholarly literature up to now. These both routinely survey the '*almah*' passages in the Bible, and point all too briefly at the Aramaic, leaving the student unaware of the flood of light which the Targumim cast upon this term. This brief note is intended to remedy this deficiency.

The Aramaic word for '*almah*' is *uleimta*. *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* (*CAL*) defines this word simply as 'girl'. It is derived from the root '*-l-m*' ('to be strong'): see Deuteronomy 31:6, 7, 32; Joshua 1:6, 7; 10:25; Psalms 27:14; 31:25; 38:20; I Chronicles 22:13 in the Targumim.

While '*almah*' occurs only nine times in the Bible (two times it refers to a musical term whose meaning is uncertain), the Aramaic term *uleimta* occurs over seventy times in the Targumim. In Aramaic, '*almah*' and *na'arah* are translated as the same word. In Genesis 24:14, where Rebecca is called *na'ara(h)* in the Torah, she is called *uleimta* in *Targum Onkelos*; the same in Genesis 24:16a, 28, 43, 55, 57. See the seventh occurrence in that chapter in Genesis 24:61, where the plural is used for Rebecca's 'maids' – a second meaning of the term not found in *CAL*. The Hebrew *betulah* in Genesis 24:16b is *betulta*. In Genesis 34, *uleimta* occurs three times and describes Dinah after her rape (Genesis 34:3[2x], 12). In Judges 19 *Targum Yonatan*, it occurs six times and describes the concubine of a Levite (Judges 19:3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9). In *Targum Ruth* 2:5, 6; 4:12, it describes Ruth, formerly the wife of Mahlon. In Deuteronomy 22:20-21, it refers to the case of a married non-virgin, and in Isaiah 7:14 to a pregnant young lady. Consequently, the saying echoed by Christian writers since the days of Jerome (*Against Jovinianus* 1.32) that nowhere is the word '*almah*' used of a non-virgin or a married

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woman in the Scriptures does not hold true if the Targumim are taken into account. Nor does *uleimta* mean only 'marriageable girl', as in the definition of '*almah* in Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT): as proof see 2 Kings 5:2,4 *Targum Yonatan*.

Further light is shed on our term by looking at the masculine *uleima* (עֲלֵימָה). While '*elem*' ('lad'), the masculine of '*almah*', occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible (Ernest Klein in *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* [Jerusalem, 1987], page 473, incorrectly calls it a hapax legomenon), *uleima*, its Aramaic cognate, occurs far over 200 times in the Targumim. In Isaiah 7:15, it describes a child, an infant, the son of the *uleimta* of Isaiah 7:14 in the Immanuel prophecy; in Isaiah 8:4, the similar-aged son of Isaiah and his wife, the prophetess. In 2 Samuel 18:5 and 12, it describes Absalom, the son of David, and a married man and father of three sons and a daughter (2 Samuel 14:27). This demonstrates clearly that its range of meaning is the same as the feminine *uleimta*.

This abundant set of data from Aramaic makes recourse to Punic or Latin (Jerome) or Arabic (Gesenius, Brown-Driver-Briggs) or Ugaritic (HALOT) unnecessary to shed light on the sparsely used term '*almah*' in the Tanakh. Neither can the above-named Targumim be accused of anti-Christian bias in regard to the translation of '*almah*', as Aquila and Theodotion have been until their recent vindication. For they translate '*almah*' consistently as *uleimta*, in contrast to the inconsistency of the Septuagint's παρθένος at Genesis 24:43 and Isaiah 7:14, but νεᾶνις elsewhere. The same goes for the Vulgate's *virgo*. Likewise the Syriac Peshitta's *betulah* at Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23 rather than '*elaymtah*', the cognate of '*almah*'—clear evidence of Christian bias. Apparently, the translators responsible for the translation of these two texts recognized that the Aramaic for *betulah* indicated virginity and the Aramaic for '*almah*' did not. That '*elem=na'ar*' and '*almah=na'arah*' is demonstrated already in the Hebrew of the Tanakh ('*elem* in I Samuel 17:56 = *na'ar* in I Samuel 17:55, and '*almah* in Genesis 24:43 = *na'ara(h)* in Genesis 24:14), but the Aramaic of Targumim amplifies this manifold, extending the meaning of both terms to include childhood on the one hand and marital youth on the other hand.