



si si no no

"But let your speech be, 'Yes, yes,' 'No, no'; and whatever is beyond these comes from the evil one. (Mt. 5:37)"

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Casting a Shadow on Mary's Virginity

Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.

This famous text of Isaías (7:14) was the topic of the papal catechism [taught every Wednesday by the Holy Father-Ed.] on January 31, 1996. We read there:

In the context of the message of the angel who invites Joseph to take with him Mary, his wife, "for that which is formed in her is the handiwork of the Holy Ghost," Matthew attributes a Christological and Marian signification to the speech. In fact, he adds, "All this was done that it might be fulfilled which the Lord spoke by the prophet saying, "Behold a virgin shall be with child and bring forth a son and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (Mt. 1:22,23).

St. Matthew the Evangelist writes under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. Therefore, it is for the least improper to say that he "attributes a Christological and Marian signification to the speech." It would be, on the contrary, precise to say that, under the divine inspiration, he gives the true signification concerning it. Moreover, this signification is clearly manifested also by words of the prophet Isaías:

Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb and shall bring forth a son and thou shalt call his name Jesus (Lk. 1:31).

THE HOLY FATHER'S "CATECHISM" OF THE PEOPLE CONTINUES:

This prophecy does not announce explicitly, in the Hebrew text, the virginal birth of the Emmanuel: the word used (*almah*), in fact, signifies quite simply a young lady and not necessarily a virgin. Besides, we know that the Jewish tradition did not propose the ideal of perpetual virginity, nor has it ever expressed the idea of a virginal motherhood.

The word *almah* does not signify "quite simply a young lady," but an unmarried young lady, a young girl for marriage and therefore, without exceptions, a virgin. The prophet, in using *almah* (young girl for marriage), and not *issah* (a married lady) for the mother of the Emmanuel who shall conceive and shall bring forth a son means to indicate clearly the virginity of this conception and of this childbirth...:

...so much so that it will be she who will give the name to her son, whereas it is normally the role of the father to do so.¹

In Hebrew, it is true, *betulah* is the precise word employed for virgin. But in biblical usage, *almah* is, for motives that we have just explained, a synonym of *betulah*. Thus in Genesis 24:43, Rebecca, before her meeting with Isaac is called *almah*, and in verse 16, *betulah*....In Exodus 2:8, Mary the sister of Moses, not even an adolescent, is called *almah*. We can also refer to the Canticle of Canticles (1:3; 6:8), which distinguishes the young ladies, virgins, queens and the other wives of the king. See also Psalm 68:26. "Isaías," writes L. Dennefeld, "preferred to name the mother of the Emmanuel, *almah*, signifying a young lady unmarried because a young unmarried lady should be considered a virgin till proof of the contrary." Dennefeld brings to light that the signification of virgin is reminded to us by the context: Isaías obviously wants to express a unique privilege which distinguishes the mother of the Emmanuel from all other mothers and this privilege cannot be one to be considered outside of marriage in the ordinary course of events, because this instead of honoring, would rather dishonor the mother of the Emmanuel.² That is why the translation in Isaías 7: 14 *almah* (or rather *ha Almah*, with the article) is a virgin.

STEIMANN RESURFACES

In *The Jerusalem Bible*, Steimann also translates *almah* quite simply as "young lady." But this Steimann is not of "blessed memory," for his *Life of Jesus* was placed on the Index,³ and the Holy Office, in a letter dated February 11, 1962, forbade the author to write or to publish on biblical themes. But behold, his very unfortunate translation, which contradicted all Catholic tradition and biblical exegesis, now once again resurfaced in the "catechism" of Pope John Paul II.

Besides, it is true "that the Jewish tradition did not propose the ideal of a perpetual virginity," but it remains to be proved in a categorical manner that it "never has expressed the idea of a virginal maternity." On the contrary, J. Cales writes that in Isaías 7:14, the announcement of the Messiah, born of a virgin mother was not appearing for the first time: Isaías speaks of "the virgin" (*ha Almah*, with the article) who conceives and gives birth. He presumes this to be known, that a virgin will conceive, by those whom he addresses. In the parallel prophecy of Micheas (5:1 ff), we find a similar allusion to the virginal maternity, but which is even more unintelligible to those listeners who "know nothing about" the virginal motherhood.

Micheas, in fact, in his famous words (brought to mind also by the catechism of Pope John Paul II) says:

And thou Bethlehem Ephrata... out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler of Israel...and his going forth...from the days of eternity. It is for this that Jahweh shall give them up to the mercy of the other one till the time where is she that travaileth shall bring forth.

"By the words 'wherein she that travaileth shall bring forth,' Micheas refers certainly to the famous prophesy of the virgin in Isaías 7:14; prophesy which he presumes most well-known by his contemporaries," notes Fr. Vaccari. In this Fr. Vaccari is perfectly in line with J. Cales on the fact that the prophetic books of the Old Testament are nothing but a synthesis more or less in fragments of the prophetic preaching in which "the idea of a virginal maternity" was far from being unknown.

THE CONFIRMATION

The confirmation comes from the Old Greek version of the Old Testament, in which the Hebrew translator has rendered the Hebrew *ha almah* by *e parthenos*, *the virgin*. This is the way that the Syrian translator of the *Peschitto* [Syriac version of the Bible], translated the word as also did St. Jerome later in the Latin Vulgate. We can therefore conclude with Angelo Penna:

...that in Hebrew we do not read the technical term as virgin but by a less known and more general term which signifies "young girl for marriage." We must therefore admit that in times past the ancient Jews, in translating the passage into Greek (2nd century BC) showed clearly that they understood the text in the sense of a childbirth from a virgin.⁴

In the "catechism" of Pope John Paul II, however, we read:

In the Greek translation, nevertheless, the Hebrew words were rendered by the term *parthenos*, *virgin*. In this fact, which could seem simply like a particularity in translation, we must recognize a mysterious orientation given by the Holy Ghost to the words of Isaías to prepare the understanding of the extraordinary birth of the Messiah.

But why complicate that which is so simple, with the result being to throw a shadow of doubt on the "queen of Messianic prophecies"?- No. It is not necessary to suppose "a mysterious orientation given by the Holy Spirit," nor even a "particularity in translation." The explanation is evident: the ancient Jews in translating, even before the days of the birth of Christ, *almah* by *parthenos* (=virgin) clearly showed: 1) that they considered *almah* (maiden) as a synonym of *betulah* (virgin), and, 2) that "the idea of virginal maternity" was not at all absent from the Jewish tradition.

CONCLUSION

Pope John Paul II is not a Bible scholar and we have to presume therefore that behind this papal "catechism" there is an expert. An "expert" has cast a shadow on the term *almah* - a term which is used very clearly as a synonym of *betulah* (=virgin). That a "catechism" should propose doubts and not certitudes seems to us very grave. The more so since it is here a question of a "papal catechism" and that which is at stake is the "queen of all Messianic prophecies."

Paulus

(From *Courier de Rome*, Feb., 1997)

¹ F. Spadafora, *Il Libro Sacro*, ed. Messagero, Padua, p. 124.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Enchiridion Biblicon*, no.635.

⁴ Angelo Penna, *La Sacra Biblia*, ed. Marietti, 1962, vol.II, p.590.

A Happy Devil's Advocate Looks at the Beatification Process of Pope Paul VI <<[First Article](#)
The Worship of Idols <<[Second Article](#)
Semper Infideles (Unfaithful Forever) <<[Third Article](#)
Casting a Shadow on Mary's Virginity <<[Fourth Article](#)
[Index](#)

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