THE MATTHEAN DEPICTION OF MARY'S VIRGINITY

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INTRODUCTION

The "virgin birth" of Jesus is recorded in two Gospels; Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 2:1-19. Both accounts represent prominent theological images found in the Old Testament. Each account contains the prominent element of a virgin birth through the power of the Holy Spirit, however the two accounts are different and must be distinguished from each other. Luke places his birth account in the literary and theological traditions of the "sons of promise" accounts; as seen in the birth accounts of Isaac and Samson.[1] In these accounts the significance of the promised son, his integral place in Israel's history, and the parents' response to the announcement fuels the narratives. These are narratives that recount the hand of God intervening in the history of Israel, through chosen figures, at key times.

Matthew, on the other hand, grounds his birth account in the theology of prophetic fulfillment. Matthew, unlike Luke, is Jewish and will prioritize the Law and Prophets in his Gospel. For Matthew, the key text in the birth narrative is Isaiah 7:14, the Immanuel Prophecy. By using this text, Matthew is depicting Jesus in a Davidic light and portraying Mary as the virgin, foretold centuries before. In Hebrew there are two terms for "virgin"; *almah* (עלמה) and *betulah* (בתולה). Immanuel 7:14 uses the term, *almah*, in describing the virgin to give birth. This was a rarely used term, unlike the more common *betulah* that simply signified a girl of marriageable age. The term *almah* seems to denote a chaste virgin.

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[1] Cf.J. Roskoski, "Isaac and Samson: Sons of the Promises", *American Journal of Biblical Theology*   17, #17 (4/24/2016), for a full discussion on this topic.

By most reckonings, the term *betulah* is used about fifty times in the Old Testament and the term *almah* is only used about ten times.[2] Therefore, we propose that Matthew had a distinct purpose for choosing this text. It is no coincidence that *almah* is a rarely occurring term. He is placing the virgin birth into his theology of fulfillment, wherein Jesus fulfills the sign that will be given to the "house of David" and Mary fulfills the role of "virgin" who gives birth. Matthew is depicting Mary as a pivotal figure in Salvation History and her virginity plays a vital role in this depiction.

VIRGINITY IN THE BIBLE

The virgin held a somewhat complex place in the culture of the Ancient Near East. According to J.L. McKenzie, in the popular Semitic cultures "the virgin was endowed with great desirability and greater fertility than the woman who had known man . . . Socially the virgin was the unmarried daughter who was still under the power of her father".[3] In common usage, the term *betulah*, like the Greek *Parthenos*, did not always emphasize the "physical integrity" of the woman in question. However, the term did designate her as unmarried. Furthermore, McKenzie argues, the woman would not lose this "technical designation before marriage, even if she lost her physical integrity". Generally, however, the girl was married, or betrothed, shortly after she reached puberty. In ancient Semitic cultures, virginity was not a quality to be maintained, as motherhood and family were attributed high importance. This is illustrated in the account of "Jephthah's vow", sacrificing his daughter (Judges 11).

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[2] The breakdown is usually accepted as follows: *betulah*; virgin, 50x's, maid 7x's, maiden, 5x's and *almah*; plural, 6x's (Psalm 9:1, 46:1, 68:26, Song 1:3, 6:8, 1 Chronicles 15:20) and singular, 4x's (Genesis 24:43, Exodus 2:8, Proverbs 30:19, and Isaiah 7:14).

[3] J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce, 1965) 913.

However, Israelite Law places virginity in a bride in high esteem (Exodus 22:15; Leviticus 21: 3, 14; Deuteronomy 22: 13-21).[4]

The common term for "virgin", *betulah*, is usually understood and rendered as "maiden" or "young girl". Based on a study of Biblical texts, Akkadian, and Ugaritic cognates, G. Wenham concludes that the term means "girl of marriageable age". The term *betulah* "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 [chaste] of virginity". However, Wenham argues that this is not a technical term for "virgin".[5] On the other hand, Wenham allows for the possibility of the term, like the Greek *Parthenos*, gradually losing its broader meaning of "girl of marriageable age" and acquiring a more restricted connotation of virginity.[6]

According to C. Miller, the "connotation of virginity is not inherent in this word, although it can be demonstrated that the word does sometimes specifically connote a virgin". Usually, the specific connotation arises in the context of laws concerning a betrothed woman. Furthermore, the term *betulah* is often used in a generic or general sense, similar to the term נערה, young boy or lad. This term simply means a young girl, usually, of marriageable age. It can also have connotations of maidservant or a newly married woman.[7]

J. Schmitt points out that the "writers of the OT use the word in a variety of situations. From significant passages, one sees that the word's meaning is not that of the modern English word, one who has

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[4] Ibid., 914. McKenzie points out that virginity was considered an ascetic ideal in the NT but explicit recommendations of the ideal are scarce. Jesus himself recommends virginity only in Matthew 19:12. However, Paul throughout 1 Corinthians 7, proposes the ideal explicitly.

[5] G. Wenham, "Betûlāh", a Girl of Marriageable Age" *Vetus Testamentum* 22 #3 (1972) 347.

[6] Ibid., 348.

[7] C. Miller, "Maidenhood and Virginity in Ancient Israel *Restoration Quarterly* 22#4 (1979) 243.

not experienced sexual intercourse. The Hebrew is usually qualified by a phrase such as "who has never known a man" (e.g. Genesis 24:16, Numbers 31:18) when the word is used specifically to mean what the word "virgin" means today". Generally, one must conclude that the word refers to a young woman who has not been yet married.[8]

B. Waltke suggests that the term *betulah* derives from the unused root verb, *bātal*, meaning "to separate". He argues, following Wenham, that a "strong case can be presented that *betulah* is not a technical term for *virgo intacta* in the OT, a conclusion that has important bearing on the meaning of *almah* in Isaiah 7:14". Waltke goes on to point out that "whether *betulah* is used in a general sense, 'young woman', or a more particular sense, 'virgin', cannot be decided, as in; Ex. 22:16f; Deut. 22:28-29; Lev. 21: 2-3; etc. But in Lev. 21:13-14 and Ezk. 44:22 where *betulah* is contrasted with various classes of women who have had sexual experience, it seems the concept of 'virgin' is in view". He continues to state that is Joel 1:8 the *betulah* is called upon to lament the death of her husband. Also, in Job 31:1 the term seems to designate a "young married woman". Overall, Waltke argues for the somewhat ambiguous nature of the term *betulah* and makes the following comment;

> "What is clear is that one cannot argue that if Isaiah (7:14) in his famous oracle to Ahaz had intended a virgin he could have used *betulah* as a more precise term than *almah*".[9]

C. Lattey, with whose argument we would take some issue, seems to draw a different conclusion than Waltke. Lattey contends that "where it is certain that the sense 'virgin' is required the word is not *almah*

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[8] J. Schmitt, "virgin" *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY: Doubleday, 1992) 6: 853.

[9] B. Waltke, "virgin, maid, maiden" *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1: 137-138. Waltke is defining "virgin" by class definition- he overlooks the key to Matthew, chastity. This casts the *almah* in a different status.

but *bethulah*". However, he also points out that "the right conclusion to be drawn . . . seems to be that, of itself, *almah* does not imply virginity in the strict sense, but also that there is no instance in which it is applied to a woman already married. It appears, also, to signify a fairly young woman".[10] Lattey seems to be looking past the singularity and specificity called for in Isaiah 7:14. Also, the importance of the oracle itself would lend itself to a more narrowly defined word, to represent the momentous sign for the House of David, than the more common and general *betulah*. Therefore, we would look to the rarity of the use of *almah* and the specifics of its connotations to argue for this referring to "virgin" in a very strict sense. The term *betulah* could only be seen as implying "virginity in the strict sense" if and only if one presents an overall definition of virginity in all of its aspects. The distinction becomes clear; *betulah* needs qualifications explanatory definitions whereas *almah* is a term that can stand alone with no such attending definitions.

Overall, the term, *almah*, seems to connote a girl that has reached or passed puberty, is of marriageable age, but still might be under the protection of her family. The term is somewhat elusive and difficult to define with precision because, as A. Macrae points out, there is not a certain root for the word. Also, because of the number of occurrences of *betulah*, as opposed to the scant occurrences of *almah*, the exact connotation of the word is difficult to appropriate. However, Macrae states that "since *betulah* is used many times in the OT as a specific word for 'virgin', it seems reasonable to consider that the feminine form of this word is not a technical word for 'virgin' but represents a young woman, one of whose characteristics is virginity". However, consistent with Lattey, Macrae points out that "there is not

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[10] C. Lattey, "The Term Almah in Is 7:14" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 9 #1 (1947) 92.

instance where it can be proved that *almah* designates a young woman who is not a virgin".[11]

Vine's "Dictionary" states that *almah* "appears to be used more of the concept 'virgin' than that of 'maiden', yet always of a woman who had not borne a child".[12] E. Young argues that *almah* is the only word in Hebrew that unequivocally signifies an unmarried woman.[13] A. Glaser, similarly points out that "although *almah* does not implicitly denote virginity, it is never used in the Scriptures to describe a 'young, presently married woman'. It is important to remember that is in the Bible, a young Jewish woman of marriageable age was presumed to be chaste".[14]

R. Niessen comments that *almah* incorporates the elements of "youth" (הרענ) and "virgin" (בתולה). Therefore Niessen sees the word *almah* as the "more restrictive term" which refers to a "young woman of biological virginity".[15] Niessen also suggests that a clearer depiction of *almah* might be rendered in a look at the word for "remove", "uncover", or "uncover the nakedness"; *galah*, (גלה). This is the antonym for the root of *almah* (עלמה). The term *galah* connotes illegal intercourse (Lev 20: 11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21). Therefore, *almah* , according to Niessen, implies the concealment of the girl until a lawful marriage has taken place. A virgin was called *almah* "because as a woman she had not been uncovered- she had not known man.

Waltke, commenting on *galah*, points out that in the "Piel [binyan] it always denotes "to uncover" something which is normally concealed .

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[11] A. Macrae, "young woman" *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2: 672.

[12] Vine, ed. , "virgin" *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Nelson, 1996) 277.

[13] E. Young, *The Book Of Isaiah- A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 288.

[14] Z. Glaser, "Almah: Virgin or Young Maiden", *Issues: A Messianic Jewish Perspective* -online archives, vol 9 #1 (9/1/1993).

[15] R. Niessen, *"The Virginity of the 'Almah' in Isaiah 7:14"* *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 #546 (1980) 147.

. . But it is used most frequently in this stem for designating proscribed sexual activity. It occurs twenty-four times in Leviticus. . . and [also] in the expression 'to uncover the shame' which denotes sexual intercourse in proscribed situations, usually incest, also Deut. 22:30; 27:20. It is also used of uncovering or removing that which covers: the woman's skirt (Isaiah 47:3; Nahum 3:5) . . . In many passages, then, it has the connotation of 'to shame'.[16]

Westermann and Albertz discuss the term *galah*, "to uncover", at length. They agree that the Piel form of the word "always indicates the disclosure of something normally hidden. . . The chief use of the Piel refers, however, to the forbidden sexual realm (40x of the uncovering of private parts or of that which covers them: skirt, veil, cover). Twenty-four passages in this group occur in Leviticus 18 and 20. They are legal prescriptions treating forbidden sexual relations; 'to uncover the shame' here is primarily an expression for engagement in sexual intercourse. In many passage it has the meaning 'to rape'".[17]

The Occurrences of *almah*

In order to understand the Matthean depiction of Mary fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 we must look at the term in each of its few literary contexts. With this combination of term and context, we will see how the Old Testament depiction of the *almah* was deemed appropriate by Matthew to be used in his virgin birth account.

Genesis 24: 16, 43

In the famous account of the introduction of Rebekah to the Abraham-Isaac traditions we see a significant occurrence of terms, *betulah* and *almah*. In v. 16 we read the phrase, "a *betulah*, a man not knowing

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[16] B. Waltke, "uncover, remove" *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1:161.

[17] Westermann/Albertz, "to uncover" *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 1:317.

her".   E. Maly points out that Rebekah "corresponds to the ideal sought in a wife- beautiful and a virgin, the last followed by the parallel expression 'undefiled'". [18]   However, in v. 43 we read the phrase, "the *almah*" with no qualifying language.

This account suggests that *betulah*. In v. 16, is the more common term for any girl of marriageable age. The assumption of a chaste state cannot be made, so the qualifying of parallel phrase had to be employed. We would expand on Maly's point, Rebekah was the wife of the son of Abraham and the mother Jacob, or Israel, the father of the twelve progenitors of the Tribes of Israel. Such a pivotal character in the Patriarchal Age of Israel would be seen as an archetype or ideal, if not a model of behavior.

Moreover, the placement of *almah*, after the initial description of Rebekah's virginity is significant. Instead of using the common term for "virgin", the author switches to *almah*. This indicates that the author is trying to emphasize the importance of Rebekah and her virginity by using a rare term to describe her. The author saw the need to qualify the virginity of Rebekah, which suggests that *betulah* did not necessarily entail chastity. Furthermore, the use of the term *almah* after the term *betulah* suggests that *almah* contains all of the attributes of *betulah* with the addition of a chaste state.

Exodus 2:8

In this account Miriam, the sister of Moses approached the daughter of Pharaoh with the offer of finding a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby which had just been drawn from the water. The text refers to Miriam as "*the almah*". It is generally accepted that this occurrence simply means "the girl". However, because of her presumed young age we can infer that she was, indeed, a chaste virgin. Furthermore, the parallels to Mary of the New Testament must be observed. She was an integral and vital part of Israelite history, as she was closely

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[18] E. Maly, "Genesis" *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* 2 vols (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 1:25.

connected to Moses, the mediator of the Sinai Covenant. With the New Covenant, Jesus was establishing a new Israel. Therefore, by virtue of her intimate connection to Jesus, Mary was a vital and integral part of this new era in Salvation History.

1 Chronicles 15:20

This is a much debated verse among scholars. However, it is generally agreed that this is some sort of musical notation. G. Knoppers suggests that the term *alamoth* refers to "singers or musicians involved in this cult".[19] On the other hand, R. North argues for a different context for the verse. He, similar to Knoppers, contends that *alamoth* refers to "girls", possibly meaning "soprano". North goes on to point to the context in which this verse is placed; the inauguration of the Davidic tabernacle. He provides the following summary;

> "The Chronicler suppresses the suggestion of 2 Sm 6:12 that David set about securing the Ark because it brought blessings to its possessor. In its place, he introduces an entirely original emphasis on the tent, set up by David in imitation and continuance of the desert situation (Num 1:50). The Mosaic ritual has not been hitherto acknowledged by the Chronicler as preferred by YHWH; cf. 2:16.[20]

J.L. McKenzie argues for the probability of a very early portable tent shrine. Premonarchic Israel was a tribal federation "organized around a central shrine; the traditions of Israel indicate that the earliest form of this central shrine was a tent and not a building, and these traditions are found in documents earlier than the late Priestly source". Furthermore, the Oracle of Nathan "presupposes that a tent was the normal and traditional dwelling for the Ark (2 Sam 7:6)".[21]

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[19] G. Knoppers, *1 Chronicles 10-29* (NY: Doubleday, 2004) 623.

[20] R. North, "The Chronicler: 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah", *Jerome* 1: 410.

[21] McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 863.

R.E. Friedman points out that, according to the Biblical narrative, after the destruction of Shiloh the Tabernacle "somehow comes to be located at the High Place of Gibeon". When King David brings the Ark to Jerusalem, he inaugurates a new tent. However, he still sends the Chief Priest, Zadok, and his officials, to Gibeon to conduct the proper sacrifices, as directed in Leviticus 17".[22] Friedman continues to argue that the Chronicler depicts David offering sacrifice at the threshing floor of Ornan only because he is unable to travel to Gibeon (1 Chronicles 21:28-30). Interestingly, "the Chronicler's history also reports that this division of locations is the case at the beginning of King Solomon's reign, stating the Ark is in Jerusalem in David's tent but that Solomon and the people go to sacrifice at the Tabernacle at Gibeon (2 Chronicles 1: 3-6)". How the situation of division was resolved remains unclear. However, "both Chronicles and Kings report that when Solomon dedicated the Jerusalem Temple, he not only brought the Ark to the Temple but also to the Tent of Meeting as well (2 Chronicles 5:1, 1 Kings 8:4)".[23] These passages suggest that, under Solomon, the religious center of Israel was completely unified in Jerusalem with the *alamoth* being part of the Temple environment.

The context of these passages is entirely Davidic. However, the Biblical authors keep the Mosaic authority as the theological and historical backdrop of David's actions. For our purposes, the occurrence of a derivative of the term *almah* shows the importance of virginity in the Yahwistic faith. It is also significant that this term occurs in such an integral and pivotal moment in Israel's history.

Psalm 46:1

Psalms have always reflected the liturgies of Israel. However, there is much scholarly debate over the classification of this Psalm. Some

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[22] We see David acting accord with the Levitical code as anachronistic, but would suggest that the practices of the early monarchy formed the foundation of the later codified laws.

[23] R.E. Friedman, "Tabernacle", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY: Doubleday, 1992) 6: 293.

scholars, following S. Mowinckel, argue that this is an "enthronement psalm".[24] However, R. Murphy contends it is a "hymn of praise, or a song of Zion". He argues that there "is a clear structure of three strophes, each ending in a refrain: With God as a refuge there is nothing to fear (4, 8, 12). He supports this argument by pointing out that the second strophe "singles out God's presence in Zion, which preserves it from the nations". Furthermore, in the third strophe there is a consideration of the powerful deeds of YHWH and the "Oracle of Supremacy" is quoted in v. 11.[25]

However, on the other hand, one can make a strong argument that this is a "Hymn of Victory". In sharpening the point made by Murphy, one must look at the refrain of this Psalm; "The Lord of Hosts is with us, our stronghold is the God of Jacob". The reference to "hosts" means an army that is ready for war. The army, or hosts, to which is referred is unclear and the identity has been debated among scholars. J.L. McKenzie points out that this term appears in Exodus 7:4, a text considered to be an early tradition. He states that this text is perhaps the "best and earliest witness to the identification of the hosts in the title, "YHWH of Hosts". It seems, therefore, more probable that the original title designated "YHWH, God of the Hosts of Israel".[26] Significantly, such a powerful Palm is introduced by an attribution to the "virgins". Most scholars render the term על as "according to". Therefore, the Psalmist seems to suggest that the "virgins", possibly cult singers, have offered this "Hymn of Victory" to the powerful deeds of YHWH in some sort of liturgical setting.[27] In a liturgical context, one could argue that the "sopranos", the female singers were

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[24] For a detailed discussion of this point, cf. S. Mowinckel , "Psalm Criticism Between 1900 abd 1935" *Vetus Testamentum* 1 (1955) 13-33.

[25] R. Murphy, "Psalms", *Jerome*, 1:584.

[26] McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 375.

[27] If this theory is correct, an argument may be made which uses this Psalm as a model of sorts for Mary's "Magnificat", or canticle, found in Luke 1: 46-55. Although one must use caution so as not to overstate the similarities between the two texts. It is, however, the general context of a virgin reciting a hymn praising the might of the Lord that is recognizable and indisputable.

showcased in this recital. Admittedly, such a musical direction or notation is rare among the Psalms. Therefore, the most of which we can be certain is that the terms seem to indicate that there is a special, cultic, significance in these singers.

Psalm 68:26

Although a majestic Psalm, this Psalm is problematic for the interpreter. Although some of the Hebrew is poorly preserved, it seems as though this Psalm was written to be sung as the Ark of the Covenant was solemnly processed into the Temple. If this Psalm was to be used in the procession of the Ark into the Temple of Jerusalem, we must date its origin or compilation to the reign of Solomon.

Murphy categorizes this Psalm as a "Hymn of Praise". However, in summarizing the scholarly debate surrounding the Psalm, he states;

> "This obscure Psalm is difficult to classify; it has been called a collection of incipits, or opening lines of various songs [Albright], an 'eschatological hymn' [Gunkel], and a 'song of enthronement' [Mowinckel]. This hymn betrays no particular structure, and in many places the translation must remain uncertain. It is perhaps best understood as part of liturgy that commemorates Yahweh's saving deeds of the past and that accompanies procession and enthronement in the Jerusalem Temple".[28]

For our purposes, the placement of the reference to the "virgins" may be significant. Unlike in Psalm 46:1, the placement of these singers or musicians is in the description of the procession. This casts light on the importance of these Temple processions. P. Duff explains that "processions, a significant part of the cultus of ancient Israel, are depicted throughout the OT . . . The processions portrayed in the Bible grew out of the ritual practices of the ANE culture and the Hellenized culture of the E Roman Empire". Duff further states;

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[28] Murphy, "Psalms", *Jerome* 1:588.

> "The focus of the Israelite procession was the Ark. This is clearly evident in 2 Samuel 6, the most detailed processional account in the OT. Music figured prominently in these processions. 2 Samuel 6 depicts musicians playing lyres, harps, tambourines, systrums and cymbals: whereas the procession in Psalm 68: 25-27 is accompanied by singers, musicians, and young women playing tambourines".[29]

The Ark of the Covenant was the symbol of the presence of YHWH. It was the introduction of the Ark into the Jerusalem Temple which acted as its formal dedication (1 Kings 8). In 1 Kings 8:1-11 we read of the ceremonial transfer of the Ark from Zion, the "City of David" to the Jerusalem Temple. It should be observed that there is a special reference to the Priests carrying the Ark and, with the Levites, the sacred vessels. This reference seems to follow the Davidic order of procession. The clearest example of this is found in 1 Chronicles 15.

G. Knoppers offers a compelling discussion on the importance of Davidic processions. He points out;

> "In the ancient Mediterranean world monarchs were expected to attend to the infrastructure and to be efficient builders, beneficent rulers, and capable administrators. Monarchs were also expected to support the cult . . . In Chronicles, the monarch's persistence and punctilious care for the Ark are a credit to him, to his administration, and to the city he founded."

However, the Chronicler must address the problem of the first attempt at bringing the Ark to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6: 1-10). Knoppers points out the distinct differences between the Samuel and Chronicles accounts.

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[29] P. Duff, "Processions", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5: 470-471.

> "In the first story David convenes all Israel, invites the Priests and Levites, retrieves the Ark, and leads a joyful procession, but he does not personally attend to the care of the cultic symbol itself. When the first procession fails dramatically with Uzzah's death, David suspends the operation, becomes angry, and is distraught. But he does not abandon the quest. As a resilient leader, he presses on. The Chronicler's David is an astute expositor of the Torah. In conformity with Pentateuchal (Deuteronomic and Priestly) Law, the King concludes that the reason for the first debacle was the noninvolvement of Priests and Levites in carrying the Ark. In this manner, the Chronicler casts David as a devout and resourceful leader. The king accepts the divine verdict, adapts to the changed circumstances and rectifies matters. . . Precisely because David analyzes the root cause of the earlier disaster and directs the second procession, the second attempt is successful in bringing the Ark to its new home".[30]

Building upon Knoppers' argument, it seems likely that the processional sequence established by David was still used in the Solomonic era. Furthermore, it seems likely that the processional notation in Psalm 68: 26 is a piece of a larger or different composition. As earlier scholars have described this Psalm as a collection of incipits, we would suggest that verses 26-27 were the opening couplet of a stanza of another composition that was inserted into this composite text. We base our suggestion on the placement of the couplet. It seems oddly out-of-place at this point in the Psalm. We would expect to see it closer to the beginning, or even serving as the opening of the Psalm. More conspicuous is that this is only reference to the order of procession in the Psalm. Perhaps the Psalmist did not start with the detailed reference as he felt it was too

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[30] Knoppers, 631-633.

obvious; that the Ark was carried by the Priests and Levites. But, as described in the text, the order of the procession seems inverted, as God is mentioned first. We would look for God to take the climactic position, after the human actors. Therefore, we can argue that the sequence which is depicted suggests an important, albeit unclear, role for these musicians.

The importance carries over to the *alamoth*, "virgins", who are in the midst of the singers, who lead, and the minstrels, who were following. The notice of the *alamoth* indicates a vital role; perhaps a special musical arrangement for the high soprano voice of the maidens. It may also reflect a special designation in the music of the cult for these girls. One must be cautious not to overstate the point; but, once again we see the image of the chaste virgin playing an important background role for a dramatic moment in Old Testament history.

Proverbs 30:19

This is another verse whose meaning has been elusive to Biblical scholars. However, M. Fox advances a compelling analysis. Proverbs 30:19d is the completion of an epigram. The cohesion of the epigram is built upon the fourfold repetition of the term, *derek*, or "way". The phrase, "way of man" is usually "understood as a euphemism for sexual intercourse". The term *almah* refers to a "young woman, married or not. However, the epigram speaks of an unmarried one". The terms *geber*, "man", and *almah*, "maid", are not equivalent in status. A *geber* is a mature, robust, man whereas *almah* is closer to "girl". The preposition b^e, usually meaning "in" or "by" or "with", is somewhat ambiguous. Fox comments that "despite the possible ambiguity, it is very likely that the man's deed in Prov. 30:19d is sex with a girl, a maidservant perhaps, rather than a courtship". However, according to Fox, the act to which this phrase refers does not specifically denote adultery, the violation of another's

marriage. The act could be licentious or wondrous, in the sense of surprising.[31]

Supporting Fox's contention that this is not an adulterous affair is the allusion to the adulterous woman in verse 20. Many scholars have argued that this verse stands outside of the epigram, concluding in verse 19, based on a different pattern of syntax. Fox, and others, have suggested that this is the "first interpretation of 19".[32] If this is the case, than two possible conclusions arise; verse 20 is an explanation of the girl in v. 19 or that a contradiction or irony is presented between the maid and the adulterous woman.

The context of the epigram seems to support the latter conclusion. The things talked about are "wonderful", פלא , *pala*. It also has the connotations of "mysterious". V. Hamilton states that "preponderantly both the verb and substantive refer to acts of God, designating either cosmic wonders or historical achievements on behalf of Israel". The root refers to events that are unusual or beyond human capabilities. According to Hamilton;

> "We may add that it is essential that the miracle is so abnormal as to be unexplainable except as showing God's care or retribution. . . There is to be a public sharing of what God has done and not just a private musing. It is of interest to note that the function of God's wonders is ultimately to make mercy available to the recipient or reciter, and not just to make a demonstration of power". [33]

R. Albertz points out that two-thirds of the occurrences of this root are found in the "psalm genres". Albertz states;

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[31] M. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009) 870-872.

[32] Ibid., 873.

[33] V. Hamilton, "wonder", *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2:723.

"In the large, major category of its usage, the root [פלא]
indicates an event that a person, judging by the
customary and the expected, finds extraordinary,
impossible, even wonderful. [The meaning] never
hinges on the phenomenon as such but includes both
the unexpected event as well as one's astonished
reaction to it. Consequently, the language of [פלא] is
the language of joyous reaction (praise). The wonder,
the astonishment, includes the recognition of the limits
of one's own power to conceptualize and comprehend .
. . it is predominantly understood as God's activity".[34]

Albertz also points out that "in the vast majority of cases, פלא
characterizes Yahweh's acts of deliverance, both the great acts of
deliverance of the people in the early period of Israel's history and the
various acts of deliverance experienced by individuals.[35] Therefore,
these wonders relate predominantly to God's historical action.
Albertz points to the argument that "the primary relationship of פלא to
God's act of deliverance demonstrates that wonders in the OT do not
refer to the breach of an objectively established order (e.g. natural
law) but to exceeding one's specific expectations or what one
considers possible in one's situation".[36] Proverbs 30:18 "links the
astounded observation of nature with the hymnic praise of God's

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[34] R. Albertz, "to be wonderful" *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols
(Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 2: 982.

[35] It should be observed that this root occurs in the birth account of Samson (Judges
13:18), when Manoah asked the angel of the Lord his name and the angel
replied that it is "wonderful" or, as often translated, "mysterious". In this
account we see God's activity in the early history of Israel, beginning the
deliverance Of Israel from the hand of the Philistines (Judges 13: 5). We also
see the dramatic reaction of Samson's parents, particularly Manoah, who
thought he had seen god as was now going to die. Furthermore, we see the
exceeding of the parents' expectations, as Samson's mother was thought to
have been barren (Judges 13:2). Therefore, this is a classic example of the
properties of פלא and how God's activities are often beyond human
understanding and explanation.

[36] This prefigures Mary in her objections to the Angel in the Lukan birth account of
Jesus (Luke 1:34).

wondrous acts". While the association with the historical acts of deliverance may be lessened, God's activity is seen in "natural processes".[37]

Song of Songs 1:3

The context of this verse is that of an introduction speaking of love's desires. Verse 3 initiates a shift in the object of the speech. R. Murphy points out that the introductory passage begins with a dialogue between the girl and the daughters of Jerusalem. However, in v. 3 "the girl addresses her lover as though he were present and speaks of the intoxicating effects of his love". We also see an example of the "vitality of the name in OT thought".[38]

J.L. McKenzie presents a compelling explanation of this vitality. He writes;

> "It is a widespread cultural phenomenon that the name is considered to be more that an artificial tag which distinguishes one person from another. The name has a mysterious identity with its bearer; it can be considered a substitute for the person, as acting or receiving in his place. The name is often meaningful; it not only distinguishes the person, but it is thought to tell something of the kind of person he is . . . For the name not only suggested its proper meaning, but also words of similar sound; it was part of the mysterious fullness of the power of the name that it should signify more than the word itself, and when such assonances could be observed they were taken as instances of the power of the word. The name was not merely an

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[37] Albertz, 2:984-985.

[38] R. Murphy, "Canticle of Canticles", *Jerome*, 1:508.

identification mark; the name must be known, and in this sense it is fame or reputation".[39]

According to M. Rose, the name of someone or something is a "distinguishing mark". This "distinguishing mark makes it possible to differentiate, to structure, and to order . . . the knowledge of the name opens up specific human dimensions for communication and for fellowship. The one who knows the name of a god or a human can appeal to them. The knowledge of the name can thereby have effective power".[40]

The verse reads that the "virgins" (*alamoth*) love this man, who is a king (v.4). Clearly, the virgins have a close connection with this king and they enjoy free communication with him. Based on this connection and communication one might assume that the virgins hold a special status or garner particular favor with the king.[41]

Song of Songs 6:8

In this verse we see the special status of the virgins, already suggested in 1:3, sharply defined. The overall context of the verse is the incomparable beauty of the beloved one. Murphy comments that even "the royal harem that would be compared to her is forced to admit her superiority".[42]

The aspect of comparison is significant. The "virgins" are set in contrast to the sixty queens and eighty concubines. According to many scholars, that concubinage existed as a cultural institution is clear. However, the legal status, if any, of concubines is unclear. Scholars also agree that there existed a distinction between wives (in this case, queens) and concubines. But this is not a subordinate

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[39] McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 603.

[40] M. Rose, "Names of God in the OT", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4:1002.

[41] Once again, we see a prefiguring of Mary, as Mary is called "favored daughter" by the Angel in Luke 1:28.

[42] Murphy, "Canticle of Canticles", *Jerome*, 1:509.

relationship as the concubines were not regarded as wives of lower or secondary status. R. de Vaux comments about the royal household and harem:

> "In a society which tolerated polygamy, the possession of a large harem was a mark of wealth and power. It was also a luxury which few could afford, and it became the privilege of kings".[43]

According to the argument of de Vaux, and others, it seems that the royal harem was comprised of the queens and the concubines.[44] Women were introduced into the harem to satisfy the king's pleasures and, often, to solidify his policies with other nations or peoples. Yet, this verse makes a further separation in the women connected to the king; the "virgins". The specific connection to the king is impossible to discern. However, the virgins depicted as having a special, distinctive, place in the royal assembly. By their status, and beauty, the virgins serve to illuminate and illustrate the relationship between the king and his beloved.[45]

Isaiah 7:14

Possibly the most debated and analyzed of the *almah* passages, this is the text which Matthew used to describe the Virgin Birth of Jesus (1:23). Because of its powerful New Testament resonances, this verse seems to demand more attention than the other *almah* passages. The historical context of the passage, the well-documented Assyrian crisis,

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[43] R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions* 2 vols (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 1:115.

[44] One must observe that this verse is the only use of the term "queen" in connection with Israel, as most scholars interpret the female beloved's identity. Moreover, it is well documented that often concubines were originally slave girls who found favor with the master.

[45] We point out that in v. 9 we see the queens and concubines being grouped together again. The virgins are not mentioned. This further supports our contention that the virgins comprised a special group within the royal assembly.

need not be rehearsed here. However, the use of the term, *almah*, is critical to one's understanding and interpretation of the text.

Clearly, the *almah* is nameless, which opens the way for a wide array of identifications. However, her namelessness does not undermine her role in bringing forth this sign to the House of David. The core of the debate regarding this passage centers on the characteristics of the person. Because of the anonymity of the *almah*, some have speculated that the person is only representational in nature. However, C. Feinberg opposes this understanding. He states;

> "First of all, it must be noted that the noun has a definite article. For many this phenomenon is without significance. . . The better interpretation of the passage would see a significance in the Prophet's use of the definite article, pointing to a specific person".[46]

Therefore, it is justified to look for a historical person to be the *almah*.

The question then shifts to the girl or woman's virginity. The fact that Isaiah used the term *almah* has aroused much scholarly interest and argument. The issue is made more complicated by the occurrences of the terms for "virgin"; that *almah* is used rarely while *betulah* is much more common. Due to the scarcity of occurrences of the term *almah* and the many occurrences of the term *betulah* some scholars have come to question the virginity of the Isaian *almah*. J. Owens typifies this argument. He states:

> "[The term] *almah* is used only nine times in the entire Old Testament whereas *betulah* is used fifty (50) times. If Isaiah had intended to convey the idea of virginity he could have used the word which was more

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[46] C. Feinberg, "The Virgin Birth in the Old Testament and Isaiah 7:14", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119 #475 (1962) 255.

specific and in common usage than the word he employed".[47]

R. Wilson offers a contrary position to Owens' assessment. Wilson states;

> ". . . two conclusions from the evidence seem clear; first, that *almah*, so far as known, never meant 'young married woman'; and secondly since the presumption in common law and usage was and is, that every *almah* is virgin and virtuous, until she is proven not to be, we have the right to assume that Rebecca and the *almah* in Isaiah vii 14 and all other *almahs* were virgin, until and unless, it shall be proven that they were not".[48]

Wilson's argument is compelling because, unlike Owens, he is not basing his assessment on the number of occurrences. Furthermore, he is not denying the virginal qualities that can be associated with *betulah*. He, like Matthew did, is looking at the overall depiction of *almah*, as presented by the Biblical passages.

R. Reymond proposes a complementary argument to that of Wilson. He argues that "God's 'sign' to the House of David entailed the announcement that a virgin would both conceive and *while still a virgin* bring forth a son- definitely a miracle and answering thereby the demands [contained] in the word 'sign' which was God's characterization of the future event".[49] He continues on to draw a comparative argument between the Isaiah text and Matthew;

> "A careful reading of both Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:22-25 will disclose that the עלמה was to be a virgin

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[47] J.J. Owens, "The Meaning of 'almah' in the Old Testament", *Review & Expositor* 50 #1 (1953) 60.

[48] R.D. Wilson, The meaning of 'almah ' (a.v. virgin) in Isaiah vii 14", *Princeton Theological Review* 24 #2 (1926) 316.

[49] R. Reymond, "Who is the 'almh of Isaiah 7:14", *Presbyteroin* 15 #1 (1989) 6.

not only at the time of her marriage but also at *the time of her conception and delivery*".[50]

Possibly, Matthew has tapped into a very ancient annunciation formula in his use of Isaiah 7:14. C. Gordon argues for the antiquity of such a formula. He state;

> "The commonly held view that 'virgin' is Christian, whereas 'young woman' is Jewish is not quite true. The fact that the LXX, which is the Jewish translation made in pre-Christian Alexandria, takes *almah* to mean 'virgin' here. Accordingly, the New Testament follows Jewish interpretation in Isaiah 7:14. Therefore, the New Testament rendering of *almah* as 'virgin' rests on older Jewish interpretation, which in turn is now borne out for precisely this 'annuniciation formula' by a text that is not only pre-Isaianic but is pre-Mosaic in the form that we now have on clay tablet".[51]

Gordon's argument is compelling. The existence of such an ancient "annunciation formula" might shed further light on the Immanuel passage of Isaiah and the entire "Child of Promise" motif, which is strongly connected to it.[52]

F. Moriarty proposes an argument which enlarges the context of Isaiah 7:14.

He argues that a trilogy of passages exists; Isaiah 7:14-17, 9: 1-6, and 11: 1-5. This trilogy has one common theme; Royal Messianism. This trilogy has one common application; one royal messianic

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[50] Ibid., 10.

[51] C. Gordon, "Almah in Isaiah 7:14", *The Journal of bible & Religion* 21 #2 (1953)106.

[52] We suggest more study is needed on this topic, but we can only acknowledge its rich potentialities as a close examination would take us too far afield of our study.

figure.[53] He continues to argue that "to these oracles the prophecy of Micah 5:3 has a close relation because the mother occupies the same special place already vindicated of the *almah* in 7. Some authors have identified the *almah* of Isaiah with *yôlēdâ* (a woman in labor) of Micah, his contemporary. [54]   Also, according to Moriarty, "the formula of the oracle in v. 14 has parallels elsewhere in the OT (Gen. 16:11, Jg. 13:3).[55] This argument is similar to that of H. Wolf, who contends that the girl was not pregnant at the time of announcement. This aspect parallels the birth account of Samson (Judges 13:3-5) and is similar to the birth account of Ishmael (Genesis 16:11). Furthermore, the close similarity in structure between the birth announcements of Ishmael and Samson and that of Immanuel underscores the significance of the child.[56]

J. Motyer also argues for the significance of the child. He states;

> "The content of Isaiah 7:14 does not dwell in isolation.
> It belongs to a connected and indeed interwoven series.

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[53] F. Moriarty, "The Emmanuel Prophecies", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 19 #2 (1957) 226.

[54] Ibid., 231.

[55] Ibid., 230.

[56] H.M. Wolf, "A Solution to the Immanuel Prophecy in Isaiah 7:14-8:22", *JBL* 91 #4 (1972) 456. Wolf's point of significance of the child is well taken and undisputable. Also, his structural analysis is very powerful, as both the Isaiah passage and the Samson account each predict the child with the exact same words, "conceive and bear a son". Additionally, Wolf'sd argument shows the relationship of the Isaiah text to the birth account in the Samson narratives. Form critically, one must make this connection n with caution because the birth account of Samson belongs to the "Child of Promise" motif, cf. birth accounts of Isaac (Gen. 18), John the Baptist (Luke 1) and Jesus (Luke 1-2). Three main factors are present in each of these accounts; the announcement, the overcoming of an obstacle to pregnancy, and the *fulfillment of the promise or announcement*. In the Isaiah passage, the person who fulfills the prophecy is not definitely presented. Moreover, the "Child of Promise" passages of Isaac, Samson, John, and Jesus are quite compact accounts, telescoping the events from announcement to birth very effectively. With no announcement or obstacle stated and being part of trilogy, with the addition of the Micha text, the Isaiah passage does not seem to be congruous with the "Child of Promise" traditions. But, the importance of the mother and child remain paramount.

> Immanuel is the possessor of Judah (8:8); he is the
> ultimate safeguard against the machinations of the
> nations (8:10). Isaiah could not have used the
> reassuring words 'God is with us' unless a direct
> reference to the child whose name this was; Immanuel,
> consequently, the great 'Prince of Four Names' , the
> heir and successor of David (9:6, 7) . . . one born in
> David's line is unequivocally divine.[57]

Overall, the *almah* of Isaiah 7:14 must go unnamed, as does the
mother of Samson. However, from Biblical evidence and scholarly
arguments, it seems that she was a young, unmarried, chaste girl. As
with the other *almah* passages, we see this virgin playing a significant
role in a saving act of YHWH; this time bearing the actual "sign" of
God's presence among His People- Immanuel.

DEPICTION OF THE *ALMAH*

Although the occurrences of the term are relatively few, the above
texts allow us to move toward an understanding of the role of that the
almah played in OT thought. The first characteristic of the *almah*
which emerges is the role which she plays in significant events. In
each case, the *almah* in question is a participant in or a witness to
significant events in Biblical history. Rebecca was a key player in the
progeny of Abraham and, therefore, the fulfillment of the Covenant
made between him and God. Miriam was an integral factor in the life
of Moses, the mediator of the First Covenant. The *almahs* were
witnesses to the inauguration of the Davidic Tabernacle in 1
Chronicles 15. The *almahs* offer up the "Hymn of Victory"
celebrating the power of YHWH in Psalm 46. Likewise, in Psalm 68,
we see the *almahs* taking part in a "Hymn of Praise" commemorating
the saving deeds of YHWH. In Proverbs 30:19 the text places the

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[57] J. A. Motyer, "Content and Context in the interpretation of Isaiah 7:14", *Tyndale Bulletin* 21 (1970) 123.

almah in the context of something "wonderful", a term connected to the great acts of deliverance performed by YHWH. The two references in Song of Songs point to the special relationship that exists between the *almah*, possibly Israel, and the King, possibly YHWH. Finally, in the Isaiah passage the *almah* plays a vital role in bringing forth the "sign" for the House of David. The Biblical writers knew the gravity and significance of the events which they narrated. It seems doubtful that they would use a common, possibly ambiguous, term to designate the witnesses to Divine acts of power. The common term, *betulah*, would not be fitting to describe these uncommon events. However, we see the *almah* always in a supportive, if not foundational, role to the acts of YHWH as He reveals His salvific will upon the historical stage. This illustrates the special role of the *almah* in the Salvation History of Israel and, perhaps speaks to the scarcity of occurrences of the term in OT usage.

The prime characteristic, and the one of the utmost importance, is the virginity of the *almah.* From the OT passages, it seems that the *almah* was, undoubtedly, a ***chaste, young girl.*** Factoring out the Matthean interpretation for now, we can find support for this statement in controllable evidence found in our aforementioned occurrences. Generally, scholars agree that any maid in question will be young, so youth is not a major focus of debate. Therefore, the chastity issue now comes into bold relief and whether there is any textual evidence for this characteristic. The account of Rebecca provides early support for chastity. Following Maly, it should be observed that the term, *betulah*, needed a qualifying comment regarding any chaste state.[58]

[58] This seems to indicate that *almah* is connected with chastity. Also, the Lukan account contains such a qualifying comment from Mary herself (1:34). We would suggest that such a comment was retained to avoid any ambiguity that might arise with the Gk term *Parthenos*, a general term for virgin. This illustrates Luke's knowledge of the Greek language and term and that wanted to avoid scandals and issues regarding Mary's virginity. He also wrote to a Greek audience and knew that the OT connotations attached to *almah* may be lost on his audience. However, Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience who had an understanding of the connotations and issues surrounding the term and he could include it readily.

As already pointed out, the term *almah* comes after the term *betulah* which suggests that the term, *almah*, is being depicted as necessarily containing the connotation of chastity. The other clear example of the chaste state of the *almah* is Songs 6:8. As we have noted, the idea of separation from the queens and concubines denotes a special role of the virgins. While the queens and concubines, the harem, serve as political power instruments and objects of kingly pleasure the virgins seem to be removed from this sort of designation and activity. Yet, while removed from these roles, the virgins still seemed to have enjoyed close communication and contact with the King.[59] Finally, the text of Isaiah 7:14 provides more support to our contention of the chaste state of the *almah*. To paraphrase Wilson's argument, based on common law and custom, we can assume the virtue of any *almah*. In his prophecy, Isaiah used a term which contained special connotations to illustrate the magnitude of this sign for the House of David. The more common term, *betulah*, might lessen the rhetorical impact of the prophecy because of the needed attending explanations.

Therefore, the *almah* can, and should, be understood as a young girl, usually of marriageable age- Miriam in the Exodus account being a notable exception. She is a chaste witness and, sometimes, a factor in the saving acts of God. The Old Testament, by the scarcity of occurrences of this term, depicts a special nature and role for this young woman. It is in this role, depicted by the Old Testament, that Mary is cast in the Matthean account of the birth of Jesus.

Matthew's use of the image of *almah*

The uses of the image of the "virgin" in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth differ greatly. Luke, in a masterful piece of writing, firmly embeds Jesus' birth account in the literary and theological traditions of the OT. He does this by presenting the birth in the "Child of

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[59] One has to be cautious not to overstate this argument as, due to the scarcity of occurrences, a full depiction of this role is neither given nor possible to determine. However, we contend that this text provides a strong indication and evidence for the role of the *almah*.

Promise" format. As we have noted, Luke uses all of the classic elements of this format or motif; announcement of an imminent pregnancy, an obstacle to this pregnancy which is stated in the account, the role or mission of the boy, and the fulfillment of God's word in the narrating of the birth of the child. The announcement passage in Luke seems to culminate this tradition as we see the Angel Gabriel making the announcement, not an unnamed angel or messenger, Mary specifically stating her virginal status, which is the ultimate obstacle to pregnancy, and the mission of the son who is to be born. Depicting this event as a culmination allows Luke to develop a forward orientation, as illustrated in Mary's Canticle- The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55).[60]

Undoubtedly, the sons of promise in the OT, Isaac and Samson, were well known to Matthew. A chaste state of the mother was not part of the traditions; this was an addition of Luke. Matthew wanted to present an *almah*, not just a childless woman. Therefore, Matthew appealed to the prophetic tradition of Isaiah. Many attempts to explain and interpret Matthew 1:23 have been made. Several "logical" explanations, as distilled by J. Willis, have emerged; allegory, accommodating reason to methods of argumentation, analogy between Immanuel and Jesus, double-fulfillment, type-antitype, midrash, *pesher* or commentary, and *sensus plenior* or fuller sense of Isaiah.[61] While these explanations all have merit, none of them seem to capture the singular quality of Matthew's birth account.

It has long been argued by scholars that Matthew is the most "Jewish" of the Gospels, as he wrote primarily for a Jewish Christian audience and was Jewish himself. Therefore, we can assume that he knew the Hebrew meanings attached to the terms *betulah* and *almah*. As

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[60] Luke's use of the "Child of Promise" format deserves much more study and comment, but we use it only for contrast to Matthew's use of the image of the *almah.*

[61] J.T. Willis, "The Meaning of Isaiah 7:14 and its Application in Matthew 1:23", *Restoration Quarterly* 21 #1 (1978) 15-16.

important as the denotations and connotations of these terms are, the true significance of the Matthean description of the Virgin birth of Jesus rests in his use of Scripture and OT prophecy. J.L. McKenzie offers a summary of the significant role of Scripture in Matthew's Gospel;

> "The Jewish Christian character of Mt is evident in his conception of Jesus as the fulfillment of the OT, a theme which is more prominent in Mt than in Mk-Lk . . . The idea of fulfillment is basic in Mt and perhaps original with him; but it would be a misconception to understand fulfillment in terms merely of prediction of future events. Jesus fulfills the OT by being the reality which is initiated in the OT, which, because it is the earlier phase of a single saving act, exhibits a community of character and traits with Jesus".[62]

Therefore, Matthew seems to depict the idea, as we have suggested earlier, that the theme of witnessing or participating in God's saving acts runs through the *almah* passages.

H. Creager points to the messianic character of the Matthean account. Matthew makes extensive use of messianic prophecies. In his Gospel, there are three major types of OT messianic prophecies; explicit or direct predictions of the Christ, as found in Micah 5:2, general statements about the messianic era and the blessings connected to it, without any reference to a personal messiah (Isaiah 2:2-4), and a large number of passages in which the primary significance is in their connection with situations or events that transpired in OT times but have as secondary reference and application to Christ.[63]

In Matthew 1:22-23, as R.E. Brown points out, the OT is cited directly. Brown states that this is the first instance in the gospel of

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[62] McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 555.

[63] H.L. Creager, "Immanuel Passage as Messianic Prophecy", *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 #4 (1955) 339.

"formula citations or fulfillment citations". These are citations of Scripture that are "introduced by a *formula* which indicates that the NT event took place in order to *fulfill* the OT passage which is being cited". He continues;

> "That Jesus is to be related to the Scriptures is a commonplace in early Christianity, but Matthew has uniquely standardized the fulfillment of the prophetic word. In finding this fulfillment, Matthew makes no attempt to interpret what we might consider the full or contextual meaning of the OT text that he cites; rather he concentrates on features of the text wherein there is a resemblance to Jesus or the NT event. His method of quoting the prophet directly rather than weaving an allusion into the wording of the Matthean narrative is an indication of a Christian effort to supply the story of Jesus with OT background and support".[64]

Brown continues and contends that the citations had a "didactic purpose". They were meant to inform Christian readers and give support to their faith. The fact that some citations are connected with the "minutiae of Jesus' career" seems to indicate that the whole of Jesus' life "lay within God's foreordained plan". Significant is the fact that there is an uneven distribution of citations throughout the gospel, with the highest concentration being in the Infancy Narratives. Brown attempts to explain this distribution;

> "This concentration of formula citations may mean that the evangelist regarded the infancy as a section of Jesus' life still relatively unexplored in reference to the

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[64] R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (NY: Doubleday, 1993) 97. We would add Mt. 2:23 as an example of Matthew's concentration on a resemblance between an OT event and an event in the life of Jesus. Herein we see a general reference to the "prophets" and the closest match to this citation is Judges 13:5, the prediction of the Naziritic status of Samson. Clearly, Matthew felt that this linguistic "resemblance" was strong enough to use in the narration of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus.

> OT. In this it might be contrasted to the passion which had been studied against an OT backdrop from the beginning of Christian preaching. The readers of the passion story would not have been in such need of Matthew's *nota bene* technique of formula citations".[65]

The above arguments of Creager and Brown are supported by H.M. Wolf, who states that "Matthew's use of this passage [Isaiah 7:14] in the New Testament is consistent with his references to other OT verses. On occasion he employs a secondary interpretation which differed considerably from the primary meaning". [66] If we may restate Wolf's position; the primary focus and fulfillment of the Isaiah passage may have been in the historical period of the Assyrian ascendancy. However, Matthew cares little about this historical context, although he most probably knew it very well, and sees a second fulfillment or trajectory of the prophecy. He also sees a resemblance to the traditions surrounding Mary. The trajectory and resemblance allow Matthew to overlay the Isaiah passage onto the birth account of Jesus.

J.A. Motyer argues strongly for the infancy text of Matthew being the object of the trajectory of the Isaiah passage. He states;

> "The Biblical claim that the Immanuel prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus Christ is not only and obviously justified. . . It is clear that Jesus alone has the credentials to claim the Divine-human ancestry and nature, the righteous character and worldwide rule prophesied or Immanuel. Clearly, also in Him the full implications of Immanuel's birth of the עלמה are realized. As an examination of Biblical usage will show, עלמה is the only Hebrew word which *without qualification* means an unmarried woman- however

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[65] Ibid., 99.

[66] Wolf, "Solution", 456

> marriageable she may be. Its rival in this discussion,
> בתולת , too often requires some such additional
> description as 'neither touched by man' (Genesis
> 24:16, Judges 11: 37-39) to merit serious consideration
> as a technical term for *virgo intacta*. Matthew,
> therefore, performed no exegetical sleight of hand in
> translating Isaiah 7:14 with the word p*arthenos.*[67]

Some scholars, such as Z. Glaser, give credibility to the Matthean passage because he is not trying to fit Jesus' birth and life into a traditional mold. Rather, Matthew is relying on Scripture to explain the Virgin birth. This supports Brown's contention that the purpose of the Infancy Narratives was didactic in nature.

Therefore, Matthew presents a well-defined depiction of the *almah*. He draws upon the imagery presented in the OT. She is a young, chaste, girl of marriageable age. She bears witness to the saving acts of God, often as a vital factor in these acts. These acts, as described in Proverbs 30:19, are wonderful beyond understanding. They are seen as God's activities, historical events on behalf of Israel, therefore often beyond human capabilities and comprehension. Yet, the *almah* is part of the sweeping events of Salvation History. These qualities, seen in varying degrees in all of the texts in which the term occurs in the OT, come together, are culminated, and embodied in Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Through his use of Biblical imagery, Matthew reveals his belief that Mary was indeed a chaste virgin at the birth of Jesus. However, even though he suggests his view with powerful OT texts he is still careful how he presents the Virgin Birth. He states that it was through the power of the Holy Spirit (1:18). Brown argues that "neither in Matthew or Luke does the divine begetting of Jesus become a sexual begetting. The Holy Spirit is the agency of God's creative power, not

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[67] J. A. Motyer, "Content and Context in the Interpretation if Isaiah 7:14", *Tyndale Bulletin* 21 (1970) 125.

a male partner in a marriage between a deity and a woman (*hieros gamos*)".[68] We propose that one reason for this emphasis on the activity of the Holy Spirit is that Matthew must guard against confusion with the Greco-Roman gods, Zeus (Jupiter) and Herakles (Hercules)

The image of Hercules bore heavily upon the Gospel writers. In c. 167 BC, the Seleucid ruler of Judaea, Antiochus IV Epiphanes formally "rededicated the Jerusalem Temple as a shrine to the supreme Greek deity, Olympian Zeus".[69] Also, by the time of the Gospels the original Grecian hero, Herakles, had been deified (2 Maccabees 4:19) and, under Roman influence, developed into the Roman god, Hercules. Herakles/Hercules was the son of the father-god, Zeus/Jupiter and a mortal woman. He had special powers which came from his father. Upon his death he was taken up to Olympus, his apotheosis, by the power of his father, where he came into his full glory. In short, Hercules occupied a similar place in the Greco-Roman religion as Jesus was seen to have been given in Jewish Christianity. Quite possibly, this understandable confusion was a catalyst for Christian preaching to shift its emphasis from being "less missionary" to "more didactic".[70] Therefore the theological problem for Matthew, as well as for Luke, was to guard against such confusion. The Christian faith was new and they had to be concerned about syncretism, a blending of religious faiths. The Greek mythological traditions seem to have had a tendency to absorb local traditions into the cycles of traditions as they spread across the countries.[71]

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[68] Brown, *Messiah*, 137.

[69] M. Grant, *The History of Ancient Israel* (NY: Scribner's, 1984) 208.

[70] Ibid., 99.

[71] Matthew, and Luke, knew well the power of the Greek influence on Jerusalem. Judaism had been corrupted by Hellenism, as a gymnasium was constructed in Jerusalem, as part of the Hellenization of the city (1 MC 1:14; 2 Mc 4:12). Many scholars comment that a gymnasium was an essential feature of a Greek city, or *polis*. Moreover, Antiochus IV Epiphanes proposed the name, "Temple of Olympian Zeus" for the Jerusalem Temple (2 Mc 6:2). This seems to be in an attempt to make Jerusalem a symbol of the Seleucid Empire. Therefore,

MATTHEW AND THE QUESTION OF MARY'S PERPETUAL VIRGINITY

While Matthew does not directly confront the issue of "perpetual virginity" in his Gospel, his writing brings the idea of Mary's chastity to the forefront. With the term, *almah,* in the Immanuel passage of Isaiah, Matthew is making the argument for Mary being a chaste virgin at the time of Jesus' birth. Many Christians, particularly the Latin and Orthodox Churches, maintain that she kept her virginity intact throughout her life. We propose that, although not engaging the question, Matthew built the foundation for this theological teaching.[72]

We would suggest that Mary preserved her virginity as a continuation of her role in the saving act of God. The idea of sexual abstinence, within the confines of marriage, in service of the Lord has its roots in the Old Testament. P. Staples contends that there are at least two contexts in which normal conjugal activity must cease; Theophany and Holy War. In each context, one is attempting to achieve the "highest degree of personal holiness" possible in light of the "unusual intensity" of God's presence.[73]

The text of Exodus 19:15 commands complete sexual abstinence in preparation for the great Theophany. However, we see the practice of sexual abstinence, most prominently, in the accounts which speak of the warrior's preparation for battle. Such abstinence occurs twice in the Davidic traditions; 1 Samuel 21:6, wherein David speaks of the

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there was a viable danger of Jesus, and Judaism, being absorbed into Hellenism.

[72] The first extended theological treatise advocating the inviolable and perpetual virginity of Mary was the *Protoevangelium of James*. Herein the author argues that Mary was vowed into lifelong chastity by her m other, in the tradition of the OT accounts 1 Samuel 1:11, 2:22, and Luke 2:36-37. While this argument fulfills all the conditions presented in the Gospels concerning the virginity of Mary, there is little evidence to support the idea of such a vow made by Mary's mother, Anne.

[73] P. Staples, "Occasions for Sexual Abstinence in the Bible", *Modern Churchman* 11 #1 (1967) 27.

consecration of his men in the "Holy Bread" event, and 2 Samuel 11:11, wherein we see Uriah the Hittite refusing to sleep with Bathsheba.

While the context of a Holy Warrior may not apply to Mary, undoubtedly the context of Theophany does apply. In citing the Isaian text, Matthew is depicting the most intimate of experiences of God's presence. The term "Immanuel" is usually rendered "God is with us". This great sign to the House of David was within the physical body of Mary; constituting an "unusual intensity" of God's presence, of which Staples speaks, approximated by none other. This, in turn, would lead her to live in a state of the "highest degree of personal holiness" possible throughout her lifetime; that of a chaste virgin in service to the Lord.

There is another passage in the Old Testament which seems to provide a scriptural foundational for the idea of Mary's perpetual virginity; Numbers 30. The context of this chapter is vows and oaths of unmarried people. The passages regarding women begin with v. 4 and state that the verbal commitments of a woman may be disavowed by the man who exercises legal control over her; her father or husband.[74] By this law, Joseph could have disavowed Mary's assent to God's will. This may have been the reason for Matthew's powerful focus on Joseph throughout the birth account. It is well documented that the virginity of a girl is to be protected by her parents, primarily the father. According to vss. 7-8 the husband takes up the "previously responsibilities of the father". Any commitments made by the girl will remain in place if the husband, as analogous to the father, remains silent at the time of his hearing.[75] Therefore, Matthew seems to be applying this set of laws to the situation of Mary and Joseph, as in 1:19 we read that Joseph did not want to expose her to the law and wanted to divorce her quietly when he found out about her pregnancy during their betrothal period. Mary had made a commitment, or had

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[74] B. Levine, *Numbers 21-36* (NY: Doubleday, 2000) 431.

[75] Ibid., 432.

one conferred upon her, to the service of God when it was announced that she would become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. By his silence and subsequent marriage to Mary, Joseph is honoring the commitment entailed in the pregnancy. Moreover, he is taking up the responsibilities of her father by now becoming the caretaker and protector of her virginity.

The profound significance of Joseph's actions emerges in the Matthean account. As Brown argues; by taking Mary, with child, into his home "rather than divorcing Mary as he had proposed (1:19); Joseph assumes public responsibility for the mother and child who is to be born". This responsibility is further emphasized by Matthew in the naming of the child. Again, following Brown, "by naming the child, Joseph acknowledges him as his own; the law prefers to base paternity on the man's acknowledgement . . . Joseph, by exercising the father's right to name the child (cf. Luke 1:60-63), acknowledges Jesus and thus becomes the legal father of the child".[76]

A major concern of Matthew is that Jesus is the "son of David". One must remember that Matthew's key prophetic passage, Isaiah 7:14, is in the context of a sign to the "House of David". This sonship is through the agency of Joseph. However, according to Brown;

"Matthew takes great pains to stress that his descent was not communicated through normal sexual relations between husband and wife . . . Matthew refuses to allow the reader to misunderstand Mary's situation the way Joseph does in 1:19. Rather he tells the reader ahead of time in 1:18 that Mary's pregnancy is through the Holy Spirit. If Matthew rules out any human sexual agent in the begetting of the child, he goes further by denying sexual relations between Mary and Joseph. After the child has been conceived (1:25). Davidic

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[76] Brown comments in his notes; "legal father is a better designation than foster father or adoptive father. Joseph does not adopt someone else's son as his own; he acknowledges his wife's child as his legitimate son, using the same formula by which other Jewish fathers acknowledged their legitimate children".

descendancy is to be transferred not through natural paternity but through legal paternity"[77]

Therefore, Matthew has composed this birth account in such a way that there can be no question or scandal involving the birth and legitimacy of Jesus in the house of Joseph. Matthew embeds the birth account in Jewish Law (Numbers 30) and in doing so, depicts Joseph as a patriarch who will safeguard Mary and Jesus. Moreover, by taking over the patriarchal role of the family, assuming the role of Mary's father, it follows that Joseph would be the force chosen to preserve Mary's chastity after the extraordinary conception which occurred.

Mary, The Perpetual Virgin

The extraordinary, or theophanic, conception has a background in the traditions of the Scriptures; Holy War and the presence of God. With this scriptural background, the argument that Mary preserved her chastity while pregnant and until the lawful ceremony of naming the boy is defensible and completely plausible. However, we propose that with this scriptural foundation, and role tasked to her through the Annunciation, Mary and Joseph preserved her chastity throughout her life- making her a perpetual virgin. Matthew sees her as the link to Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior, and the one who will break the power of sin and, thereby, open the Kingdom of Heaven.[78] Therefore, her role, and chastity, was to be forever tied to the Kingdom.

The idea of celibacy, foregoing sexual relations, for the sake of the Kingdom of God (literally, "heavens" in Matthew) is an idea found in Matthew 19:12. This passage is unique to Matthew but fits well with his recurring theme of the Kingdom, or reign, of God. M. Pamment

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[77] Brown, *Messiah*, 138. The text is more precise than Brown, as the Greek text clearly states that Joseph did not divorce Mary in the time until she brought forth a son and he named the boy.

[78] Matthew, in using circumlocution, prefers "Kingdom of Heaven" to "Kingdom of God".

supports this as she argues that Jesus is advocating celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, thus abrogating Genesis 1:28. Pamment states that this teaching is consistent with the Matthean emphasis on complete dedication to God and His Kingdom.[79]

F. Moloney claims that 19:12 "can take us back to the *ipsissima verba jesu* [very words of Jesus Himself] used by Matthew or his source, in which Jesus speaks of the purpose and functions of his own celibate life".[80] Maloney contends that Matthew 3-9 did not formulate one message, about marriage and divorce being directed at the Pharisees, followed by another separate statement in vss. 10-12, about voluntary celibacy directed to the disciples. On the contrary, vss. 3-9, which were taken from Mark and rearranged for his own purpose by Matthew, constitute the preface for the dialogue of question and answer found in vss. 10-12.[81] The passage 19: 9-12, save for the question in v. 10, "are directed to the same problem: the regulations of the marriage of the newly-arrived gentile converts". Verse 12, specifically, continues and concludes the argument on divorce.[82] Matthew according to Moloney, argues that celibates should be "swept off their feet by the overwhelming presence of God's Lordship that there can be no possibility of committing themselves to a further marriage relationship".[83] This argument applies particularly to Mary as she had a unique experience with the presence of God; she felt the overwhelming power of the Holy Spirit with her conception, had her body as the host for the Messiah, was the mother to the Messiah- the divine sign to the House of David, and felt the power of the Holy Spirit again at Pentecost. Throughout her life, Mary was enveloped by God's presence. She did not need a vow to win divine favor; it

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[79] M. Pamment, "Singleness and Matthew's Attitude to the Torah", *JSNT* #17 (1983) 80.

[80] F. Moloney, "Matthew 19:3-12 and Celibacy: A Redactional and From Critical Study" *JSNT* #2 (1979) 42.

[81] Ibid., 46.

[82] Moloney, 48.

[83] Ibid., 49.

was already conferred upon her. The presence of God was a fulfillment to the prophecies. Her perpetual chaste state was the culmination, not mere fulfillment, of the role of the *almah* in the Old Testament. The text of Matthew 19:12 seems to support Mary's role. Moloney was correct in his assessment that this text regulates marriage. But, the text goes beyond concerns over converts and clarification of the Law and looks to the Kingdom of God. Mary was the embodiment of this unique Matthean teaching and the ethics of the Kingdom was consistent with such a life as hers.

H. Kvalbein contends that accepting the reign, Kingdom, of God was not a passive undertaking and argues;

> "Jesus has performed the Reign of God in his time in the form of miracles and parables, in actions and in words . . . so that we can come under his rule and participate in this performance. To live in the Kingdom of God is to live in a fellowship where the values of the Kingdom are performed in living life".[84]

Also consistent with the ethics of the Kingdom is the renouncing of marriage, and accompanying sexual obligations. Kvalbein states such actions constitute an "ethos far beyond the demands of the Law. Marriage is in accord with God's will according to the Creation story. But the call to the Kingdom ministry has an even higher priority . . . [it] is not linked to the demands of the Law, but to the demands of the Kingdom".[85] Kvalbein concludes;

> "The Kingdom is the ultimate motivation for a life according to God's will . . . Discipleship may imply demands far beyond the Commandments of the Law, e.g. renouncement of marriage and family life, of profession and economic security. A willingness to

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[84] H. Kvalbein, "The Kingdom of God in the Ethics of Jesus", *Communio Viatorum* 40 #3 (1998) 200.

[85] Ibid., 215.

such renunciation is <u>in principle</u> demanded from all disciples or all Christians".[86]

B. Wiebe argues in a similar way. Wiebe states;

> "To participate in the Kingdom is to anticipate the end of evil and the vindication of God's righteousness . . . Response does not take the form of waiting simply for the coming of a future event but of participation in the Kingdom of God as it has begun and is revealed at the end in glory".[87]

Also, the Kingdom of God, unquestionably, has a future orientation but is "effective already in the present. This calls for corresponding action in human response . . . Active response is the only way to participate in it. Those who, for the sake of the Kingdom, leave behind everything participate in a new family [community]".[88]

Following these arguments, we propose that Mary and Joseph did not renounce the Law and institutions like marriage. Rather, for the sake of the Kingdom of God they went beyond the constraints and obligations of inherent in the Law. They were to establish a new community of faith that would lead people to the Kingdom. By her lifelong chastity, Mary became the model of response to the call of the Kingdom. Therefore, she was completely congruous, possibly foundational, to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19:12.

CONCLUSIONS

Matthew uses a two-fold, Scriptural, method in presenting the birth of Jesus. He avoids the "Child of Promise" format, favored by Luke and, instead works to embed the birth of Jesus in the Law and

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[86] Ibid., 227

[87] B. Wiebe, "Messianic Ethics: Response to the Kingdom of God", *Interpretation* 45 #1 (1991) 35.

[88] Ibid., 41.

Prophets. This provides a powerful complement to the presentation of Luke, who relies on a more literary theological tradition. It is significant to observe that the Gentile, Luke, and the Jewish Disciple, Matthew each presented the birth of Jesus in traditions that insisted on a chaste, virgin, birth. The most prominent example was the use of *almah*, from Isaiah 7:14, in the Matthean account.

However, based on the Scriptural evidence we can propose that although Matthew never *explicitly* stated that Mary was a perpetual virgin he definitely laid the foundation for the theological teaching of the Catholic Church. He presented Mary as the culmination and fulfillment of the OT *almah* passages. She was not only a witness but a vital participant in the greatest saving act of God, the bringing about of the Kingdom as embodied in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, her son. The Kingdom of God is tied to the "eschatological hope of Israel. For the hope of Israel was the hope of the coming of the Kingdom of God."[89]

From the moment of conception, Mary's life was inextricably bound to that of her son and, therefore, the establishment of the Kingdom. J. Bright argues that the call of the Kingdom is not "a call to honor or to victory, as the world understands those terms, but to utter self-denial. Over and over again we hear of the tremendous cost of it. One leaves father and mother, home and family, at its summons".[90] Moreover, the "ethics of the Jesus are the ethics of the Kingdom; and Jesus expected his followers to take them seriously, not only in his generation but in all generations".[91] Mary was the original model of response to the call of the Kingdom of God. Mary's perpetual virginity was the sign and seal of her response that would stand as a symbol for her own generation and in future generations.

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[89] J. Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville; Abingdon, 1953) 18.

[90] Ibid., 210

[91] Ibid., 223.

Mary provided the human element of the Incarnation, the moment when the Word of God became flesh. With the Incarnation humanity was forever dignified.   The Incarnation also glorified Mary's virginity. As only the chaste *almah* could be the foretold sign and be part of this saving event. Our position finds agreement in Article 499 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which is based on *Lumen Gentium*;

> "The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man.   In fact, Christ's birth 'did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it'. And so the liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as *Aeiparthenos*, the "Ever-Virgin".

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