

Missionaries, Messianics and the Masoretic Text

**How Non-Jews Have Translated Certain Biblical Hebrew Terms
To Suit Their Theologies and/or Objectives
With Excursuses On How Jews Translated The
Same Hebrew Words and/or Expressions**

Submitted by

Cantor Howard Nacht

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Advisor: Rabbi Dr. Bernard M. Zlotowitz

*For my Rabbi and Teacher,
With thanks, gratitude and appreciation.*

Howard

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Introduction

) Since the disputations of the 13th century C.E., one device that has been employed by Christian missionaries as a tool for convincing Jews to convert to Christianity is the utilization of quotations from the *Tanakh* that have been translated and interpreted so as to serve as “proofs” that they foretell the coming of Jesus, as well as his divinity and his role as the messiah. Gerald Sigal suggests that since the Hebrew Bible forms the basis of Christianity’s spiritual past, this approach is directed at undermining “the foundation of Judaism without attacking the Hebrew Bible.”¹ The Book of Psalms is one part of the *Tanakh* that has been used in this fashion. Psalm 2, in particular, is one where “proof” was “found where none exists by violating the integrity of the plain meaning.”² We will seek to determine whether or not Sigal’s definitive statement is reasonably justified. This will be done by tracing and examining the progression of translations of the following words and phrases in the Book of Psalms: נִשְׁכָּו-בַר (Ps. 2:12), לְמַנְצָה, מֶלֶךְ, אֱמֵן and מְשֻׁבֵּל from the original Hebrew through Greek and Latin then into English, and then by exploring a variety of commentaries for guidance in trying to understand and interpret each.

We will follow a similar process with Isaiah 7:14, focusing on the word עֲלָמָה, and, by necessity, its counterpart, בְּתוּלָה. Further, we will endeavor to determine whether the former is ever used in the Masoretic text to mean the latter.

¹ Sigal, Gerald, *The Jew and the Christian Missionary: A Jewish Response to Missionary Christianity*, KTAV Publishing House, Inc., New York, 1981, p. xv.

² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Psalm 2:12 נִשְׁקוּ-בֶר --

Psalm 2:12 begins with the phrase נִשְׁקוּ-בֶר. This phrase, and this particular variation of the root נִשְׁק (alternatively נִשָּׁק or נִשְׁקָ), appears only once in the Tanakh.³ While in modern Hebrew the root נִשְׁק can mean either to kiss or to arm oneself,⁴ many sources take the position that the actual meaning of this phrase is unclear. In eastern cultures kissing is a way of showing respect or homage to a person. Kissing the feet can be the mark of highest respect paid to a sovereign by a subject.⁵ While בֶר, in Aramaic, means son or son of,⁶ in Hebrew, among other things, it means pure or clean.⁷ Hence, נִשְׁקוּ-בֶר has been often translated as “Do homage in purity.”⁸ These statements regarding נִשְׁקוּ-בֶר just scratch the surface; a deeper inspection of both בֶר and the root נִשְׁק is in order.

The number one usage for בֶר (from בָּרָא), as a Chaldee word, to be found in Tregelles' translation of Gesenius is ‘son,’⁹ however he immediately tells us that this translation is usually found with a suffix added to בֶר, yielding בָּרִי. Nonetheless, he cites נִשְׁקוּ-בֶר as ‘kiss the son,’ while rejecting as ‘not very suitable’ the use of בֶר (from

³ Evan-Shoshan, Avraham, *New Concordance*, Kiryat-Sefer Ltd., Jerusalem, 1996.

⁴ Alcalay, R., *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary*, Chemed Books, Yedioth Ahronoth, Tel-Aviv, 1996, Vol. 2, p. 1704.

⁵ Bokser, Ben Zion, *Judaism and the Christian Predicament*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1967, p.262.

⁶ Melamed, Ezra Tsiyon, *Aramaic-Hebrew-English Dictionary*, The Samuel and Odette Levy Foundation, Jerusalem, 2005, p. 104.

⁷ Alcalay, R., *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 282.

⁸ *The Holy Scriptures*, According to the Masoretic Text, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1955.

⁹ Gesenius' *Hebrew-English Lexicon to the Old Testament*, Translated by Samuel P. Tregelles, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich., 1846, p. 138.

בָּרָר as 'pure' or 'chosen,' yet accepting 'clear' or 'pure' in a different context.¹⁰

Tregelles' analysis of נִשְׁקוּ-בָר does not shed much light either in making נִשְׁקוּ-בָר clearer.

The first meaning given is to join, arrange or put in order, the second, to arm oneself.

His third rendering, and perhaps his most troublesome, is 'to kiss.' He cites Gen. 31:28,

regarding the kiss through which "the vanquished promise fidelity and submission to

the conqueror," then he relates that to Psalm 2:12 and says, "[The Lord Jesus Christ is

here spoken of.]"¹¹ The BDB says 'son' outright, then later gives us בָּרָר,¹² followed by

several translations including those of the Septuagint and the Vulgate. The bracketed

phrase I take to be Tregelles' addition as no such Christological reference is in evidence

in the BDB, which lists 'kiss' as the first choice for translation, citing examples, and

then tells us that the exact meaning is uncertain.¹³

The earliest translation of the *Tanakh* is the Septuagint. Written in Greek, it is a

composite begun perhaps as early as 285 B.C.E. and completed over an extended period

of time. The Septuagint translates נִשְׁקוּ-בָר as δρᾶξασθε παιδείας, or "accept

correction."¹⁴ A footnote in Bagster states that this rendering is similar to the one "Jews

maintain,"¹⁵ which he most likely bases on the Targum, "קבילו אולפנא,"¹⁶ which can be

translated as 'accept' or 'receive' 'teaching' or 'instruction'.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 571.

¹² Brown, Francis, Briggs, Charles A., Driver, (BDB) *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, based on the Lexicon of Wm. Gesenius, translated by Edward Robinson, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1907, p. 135.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 676.

¹⁴ The Septuagint Version, Samuel Bagster and Sons, London, 1879, p.699.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ www.spertus.edu/Bibleworks/Targum.

) There were some early translations of parts of the Hebrew Bible from the Greek into Latin; however, when St. Jerome began a new translation of the *Tanakh* in 390 C.E. he worked from the original Hebrew as well as the Greek, completing it in 405.¹⁷ His work, known as the Vulgate, became the basis for future translations to English within the Roman Catholic Church, including versions such as the Douay Rheims and its successors. The Vulgate translates נִשְׁקֶה-בֵּר as *adprehendite disciplinam*,¹⁸ or embrace discipline.

After the Vulgate, almost a millennium passed before English translations began to emerge. John Wycliffe (c. 1320's – 1384) rendered the Vulgate into English around 1382. His version of נִשְׁקֶה-בֵּר is “take ye lore,”¹⁹ the meaning of which also is not clear.

William Tyndale (c.1494 – 1536) did his translation into English from the Greek in 1525, but his work included only the Torah, the Book of Jonah and the New Testament. His work brought him condemnation for heresy, for which he was strangled and burned at the stake.²⁰

The first complete printed edition of the Bible in English is credited to Miles Coverdale (c. 1488 – 1568). This edition also is critical as it marks the first appearance of “kysse the sonne”²¹ (kiss the son) (certainly inferring Jesus and perhaps the source for Gesenius' and later writers' interpretations) as a translation for נִשְׁקֶה-בֵּר. This

¹⁷ www.jewishencyclopedia.com

¹⁸ *Vulgate*, The Latin Bible, translation of St. Jerome, 4th cent. C.E.

¹⁹ www.wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/wycliffe.

²⁰ Encyclopedia Britannica, cited on www.bible-researcher.com

²¹ *Biblia*, The Bible / that is the holy Scripture of the Olde and New Testaments, faithfully and truly translated into Englishe, MDXXXV.

rendering was carried forward in the Great Bible (1539/1541), in the Geneva Bible (1560), and as “kiss ye the sonne” (emphasis added) in the Bishop’s Bible (1568).

The Douay-Rheims translation was the first English language Bible used by the Roman Catholic Church. The New Testament portion was published in 1582 and the Hebrew Bible part in 1609. This version followed the Vulgate of St. Jerome and so rendered נִשְׁקוּ-בֵר as “embrace discipline.”²²

The year 1611 saw the publication of the King James Version (KJV), which was the product of forty-seven men appointed by James I of England. It is also known as the Authorized Version, and was based primarily on the Bishop’s Bible. Accordingly, it utilizes “kisse the Sonne”²³ for נִשְׁקוּ-בֵר. Almost 300 years later, in 1901, this translation was still being maintained, as it appears in the American Standard Version (ASV), an authorized revision of the KJV and its 1885 Revised Version. The Revised Standard Version (RSV), published in 1952, preserves most of the wording of the Authorized Version, however נִשְׁקוּ-בֵר becomes “kiss his feet,”²⁴ (again most likely inferring Jesus) or reflecting the homage paid by a subject to a sovereign, earthly or divine. This is borne out by the modification found in the New English Bible, where it is rendered as “kiss the king,”²⁵ while in a footnote indicating that the Hebrew is obscure but most likely means “kiss the mighty one.”²⁶ The Jerusalem Bible, 1966, maintains its Roman Catholic heritage by following the RSV with “kiss his feet,” and

²² www.redegg.org/bible.php/Douay-Rheims.

²³ *King James Version*, Facsimile of first Impression of the Original 1611 Edition.

²⁴ www.redegg.org/bible.php/RSV.

²⁵ *The New English Bible*, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, 1970.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *The Jerusalem Bible*, Doubleday and Co., Inc., Garden City, NY, 1966.

also by its footnote which says that the correct Hebrew is “kiss the son.”²⁷ This is also the choice for the New International Version, 1984.²⁸ The New American Bible, 1970, gives us נִשְׁקֶה-בֶּרֶךְ as “bow down in homage.”²⁹ The Good News Bible (Today’s English Version) offers a similar translation with “bow down to him,”³⁰ but adds a footnote telling us that the Hebrew is unclear and citing other possible translations: “kiss his feet,” “kiss the Son” and “kiss the mighty one.”³¹

Another variation of נִשְׁקֶה-בֶּרֶךְ is “kiss the chosen one.” This appears in a 1927 edition edited by J. M. Powis,³² and corresponds with the choice of Robert Young in his *Literal Translation* originally published in 1862.³³ Today’s New International Version³⁴ uses “kiss his son,” (clearly Jesus) while the New American Standard Bible chooses “do homage to the son,”³⁵ which emulates the rendering by Isaac Lesser in his 1854 work,³⁶ as does the International Inductive Study Bible.³⁷ The latter presents a footnote saying that literally it means ‘kiss,’ and noting that some ancient versions say ‘do homage purely’ or ‘lay hold of instruction.’

²⁸ www.BibleGateway.com

²⁹ *The New American Bible*, (St. Joseph Edition), Catholic Book Publishing Co., New York, 1970.

³⁰ *The Good News Bible*, Today’s English Version, American Bible Society, New York, 1976.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Smith, J. M. Powis, Ed., *The Old Testament, An American Translation*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1927.

³³ Young, Robert, *Young’s Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*, 1862.

³⁴ *The New International Version*, 1984.

³⁵ *The New American Standard Bible*, Creation House, Inc., Carol Stream, IL., 1973

³⁶ Lesser, Isaac, *The 24 Books of the Holy Scriptures*, Philadelphia, 1854.

³⁷ *The International Inductive Study Bible*, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, OR, 1992.

³⁸ *The Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha*, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press.

Some additional variants of translations for נִשְׁקֶה-בֶּרֶךְ are: “pay glad homage to the king,”³⁸ offered by *The Revised English Bible*, a revision of the *New English Bible*; “kiss the rod,”³⁹ with a footnote that states the Hebrew should mean ‘purity’ or ‘son;’ and “embrace purity.”⁴⁰

Commentaries on 2:12 –

In his work published in 1917, Charles A. Briggs translates נִשְׁקֶה-בֶּרֶךְ as “Kiss sincerely.”⁴¹ He indicates that this is a kissing of the hands in worship, in purity and fidelity. Briggs posits that translations such as “kiss the son” or “lay hold of instruction” are either based on misinterpretation because of Syriac and/or Aramaic influences, or that the writers of the Septuagint possessed a different text. John Calvin (1509-1564) says of Psalm 2:12 that David is urging kings and rulers to submit to the yoke of God’s kingdom, continuing “All this ... contains a prophecy concerning the future kingdom of Christ.”⁴²

Matthew Henry (1662-1714) interprets 2:12 as requiring all to love Jesus Christ sincerely, and, as a token of that love, to “kiss his feet.”⁴³ This is to be a kiss of loyalty

³⁹ *The Holy Bible*, Sheed & Ward, New York, 1944. 1989.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Briggs, Charles Augustus and Emilie Grace, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Book of Psalms*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1917, p.12.

⁴² Calvin, John, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, Translated by Rev. James Anderson, cited on www.ccel.org.

⁴³ Henry, Matthew, *Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible*, cited on www.christianity.com.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Wesley, John, *Notes on the Bible*, cited on www.wesley.nnu.edu/John_Wesley/notes/psalms

showing acceptance of his yoke.⁴⁴ Similarly, John Wesley (1703-1791) writes, “Kiss – in token of your subjection and adoration; ... a sign among the eastern nations. The son – The son of God.”⁴⁵ John Richardson, Bishop of Ardagh, is quoted by Charles Haddon Spurgeon, 19th century British preacher, as saying, “Kiss (is) a sign of love among equals ... of subjection in inferiors,”⁴⁶ (with biblical citations). He also quotes John Donne, Dean of St. Paul, “Kiss the Son ... that is, embrace him,”⁴⁷ and Thomas Adams, “Kiss the Son ... to make peace with the Father, kiss the Son.”⁴⁸

The latter is picked up by A. F. Kirkpatrick, editor of *The Book of Psalms* in the Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges. In an extensive footnote to Ps. 2:12 which also picks up much of the BDB on the root **נָשַׁק**, he writes of Jerome’s inconsistency for translating **נִשְׁקֶה-בֶּרַךְ** as “*Worship purely* (adore pure) in his Psalter, though he had written *Worship the son* (adore filium) in his Commentary.”⁴⁹ He goes on to quote Jerome from his treatise *against Ruffinus*, which, I believe, is important to quote here as it gives some insight into the thought process of this important translation. He cites, “Why am I to blame, if I have given different translations of an ambiguous word? (emphasis added) and while in my short commentary where there is an opportunity for discussion I had said *Worship the son*, in the text itself, to avoid all appearance of forced interpretation, and to leave no opening for Jewish cavils, (emphasis added) I have said, *Worship purely*, or *choicely*; as Aquila also and Symmachus have translated

⁴⁶ Spurgeon, C.H., *Treasury of David*, cited on www.biblebb.com.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Kirkpatrick, A. F., D.D., Ed., *The Book of Psalms*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1927, vol.35a, p. 12.

it.”⁵⁰ Perhaps Sigal, quoted back on page 1, was not too far off the mark when he said some translations had been invented.

Kirkpatrick also makes an excellent point when he says, “It is easier to shew that the rendering of *Kiss the Son* is untenable, than to decide what rendering should be adopted ... no rendering is free from difficulty, and it may be doubted whether the text is sound.”⁵¹ He continues, however, that the uncertainty of meaning does not affect the “Messianic interpretation”⁵² of the Psalm, a clearly Christian interpretation, as pointed out by the Oxford Bible Commentary, “The first Christians interpreted this psalm as messianic prophecy ... the older critical scholars connected it with an Israelite king.

Jewish Commentators on 2:12 –

According to A. J. Rosenberg, Ibn Ezra and Radak suggest “kiss the son,” while Rashi, says, “Arm yourself with purity,” avoiding the Christian interpretation of that phrase.⁵³ In a separate appendix, Rosenberg includes Radak’s point by point refutation of Christian arguments or “proofs” regarding this psalm.⁵⁴

Among contemporary commentators, Freehof translates נִשְׁקֶה-בֶּרַךְ as ‘do homage in purity,’ and clearly states that the KJV has “mistranslated”⁵⁵ this phrase. He points out that neither the Targum nor early Christian commentators use ‘kiss the son’ inferring Jesus. He also focuses on בֶּרַךְ being Aramaic. He points out that it is used

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Rosenberg, A. J., ed., *The Book of Psalms*, Vol. 1, The Judaica Press Inc., New York, 1991, p. 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. clxvii – clxviii.

⁵⁵ Freehof, Solomon B, D.D., *The Book of Psalms*, a Commentary, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Cincinnati, 1938, p.15.

only one other time in the *Tanakh*, Proverbs 31:2, which is late Hebrew and “influenced by Aramaic,”⁵⁶ which is not the case with Psalm 2, and therefore it must be Aramaic in the Psalm.

Hirsch renders the phrase, “Gird yourselves with purity,”⁵⁷ primarily using a linguistic approach. He cites נשק being used in the sense of *gird* in Gen. 41:40 and similarly in Ps. 78:9. Mentioning that our נשקו may be the imperative form of *Kal*, he is quick to point out that would be with an exception in the spelling, i.e., a *patach* instead of a *chirik*, or, he suggests, it may be the *Pi-el* with the *dagesh* omitted. He derives purity for בר from בָּרַר (see Gesenius, p.2 above).⁵⁸

Finally, Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, following Rashi, translate נשקו-בר as “Bestir yourself with pure heart.”⁵⁹ Purity follows the context of verse 11, עֲבֹדוּ אֶת-ה' בְּיִרְאָה וּבְגִילוֹ בְּרָעָה “Serve Adonai in awe, and rejoice with trembling,”⁶⁰ is similar in perspective to Psalm 73:1, and is the meaning ascribed to it by St. Jerome over sixteen centuries ago and by Symmachus before him.

Whether Christian translations were first based on mistranslation, misinterpretation or different texts, whether originally deliberate or accidental, whether invented or unplanned, whether perpetuated by artifice or pure theology, perhaps the one only thing that is now clear is that, indeed, the true and original meaning of

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Hirsch, Samson Raphael, *The Psalms*, Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem/New York, 1978, p.14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Rozenberg, Martin S. and Zlotowitz, Bernard M., *The Book of Psalms*, A New Translation and Commentary, Jason Aronson, Northvale, New Jersey, 1999, p. 7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

נֶשֶׁקוֹ-בֵּר is definitely obscure, unclear, clearly uncertain and, most likely, lost to us forever.

The word לְמַנְצֵה appears fifty-five times in the Book of Psalms and also in Habakkuk.⁶¹ The JPS *Tanakh* states that the meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain, but invariably translates it as “For the leader.”⁶² The *New English Bible* is also consistent; it unfailingly omits any translation at all for לְמַנְצֵה.⁶³ If only it were that simple to explain or understand, but the meaning of לְמַנְצֵה is certainly as complicated as that of נִשְׁקוּ-בַר.

The root נָצַח (alternatively נִצַּח or נִצְחָה) can mean to overcome, conquer or excel, as well as to perpetuate.⁶⁴ As a noun, it can mean eternity or success; as an adverb, eternally or perpetually.⁶⁵ But Tregelles’ translation of Gesenius clearly, and I believe correctly, identifies this form of the root as a participle, “The opinion is wholly to be rejected, of those who would take מְנַצֵּחַ not as the part(iciple), but as the infinitive in the Syriac form.”⁶⁶

The BDB offers the possibilities of conquer or victorious, then of overseer or director (in the pi-el),⁶⁷ mentioning the option of musical director or choirmaster and explains the eschatological sense of the Septuagint as referring to “the end of age.”⁶⁸

⁶¹ Evan-Shoshan, *op-cit.*, p. 777.

⁶² *Tanakh*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1996.

⁶³ *The New English Bible*, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, 1970.

⁶⁴ Alcalay, R., *op. cit.*, Vol. 1

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Gesenius, *op. cit.*, p.562.

⁶⁷ BDB, *op. cit.*, p.663.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.664.

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible lists **לְמַנְצִיחַ** under its music heading. They translate it as "To the Choirmaster,"⁶⁹ while admitting that the term choirmaster is "alien" to ancient tradition, and while citing that the root can mean to excel, or lead, or conquer. In addition, it suggests the possibility of 'head of musicians,' 'master of ceremonies' or 'to the triumph-maker.'

The Targum translates **לְמַנְצִיחַ** as "**לְשַׁבְּחָהּ**,"⁷⁰ i.e., 'to' or 'for' 'praise' or 'commend'. The Septuagint renders it as *εἰς τὸ τέλος*, and translates it as "for the end."⁷¹ The Vulgate says *ad finem*⁷² or 'in the end' or 'forever.' John Wycliffe provides us no less than eight variations on a theme: "to the victorie," "to the overcomere," "into the ende," "to victorie," "to overcome," "for victorie," "to the overcoming" and "to victorye."⁷³ Miles Coverdale might be the original source for the New English Bible, as his seems to be the first translation that omits any treatment for **לְמַנְצִיחַ**.

The Great Bible gives us "to the chanter" and "to him that excelleth" (in music, etc.), and the latter is carried forward to the Geneva Bible. The Bishop's Bible, however, says, "to the chief musician," and Douay-Rheims makes it, "unto the end." The KJV, interestingly, does not follow Douay-Rheims, but rather, picks up "to the chief musician."

Briggs, along with others before and since, attributes musical connotation to **לְמַנְצִיחַ**, perhaps, in part, to its first appearance at the beginning of Psalm 4, adjoining

⁶⁹ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Abingdon Press, Nashville & New York, 1962, p. 460.

⁷⁰ www.spertus.edu/Bibleworks/Targum.

⁷¹ The Septuagint Version, *op. cit.*, p.700.

⁷² *Vulgate*, The Latin Bible, *op. cit.*

⁷³ www.wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/wycliffe/

בְּנִינֹת, when he says, “by the fact that לְמַנְצֵחַ, in the sense of director or choir master...”⁷⁴ Rabbi Avrohom Davis, in an appendix to the *Metsudah Tehillim*, writes, regarding לְמַנְצֵחַ, that it “has caused much speculation ... (but) there can be little doubt ... that this ... is a direction to the precentor or leader of the Temple choir.”⁷⁵ While I will not argue that the root נָנַח has musical meaning, nor that there might be a musical nature to the entire opening line, the mere juxtaposition of בְּנִינֹת to לְמַנְצֵחַ should not ascribe a solely musical translation to the latter, and I believe that there is room here for doubt as to the correct meaning of לְמַנְצֵחַ (see pp. 15 & 16 below).

Most modern editions of the Bible, of those that translate לְמַנְצֵחַ, employ some variation of ‘director,’ ‘chief,’ ‘leader,’ and ‘musical,’ ‘choir,’ etc. For example, the Anchor Bible translates it as “for the director.”⁷⁶ In similar fashion, most commentators do likewise. John Calvin wrote that it means, “chief master or president of the band,” or “chief singer or leader of the music who had the charge of setting the psalms to tunes.”⁷⁷

Rosenberg’s translation is “To the conductor.”⁷⁸ In a footnote, he cites Radak, who, regarding לְמַנְצֵחַ, says there are three kinds of praise, which means “that the conductor would give the music to the musicians and the singers, and would himself

⁷⁴ Briggs, Charles, *op. cit.*, p. lxxiv.

⁷⁵ Davis, Avrohom, *The Metsudah Tehillim*, KTAV Publishing House, Hoboken, NJ, 1997. p. 307.

⁷⁶ *The Anchor Bible*, Volume 16, Doubleday & Co., Inc., Garden City, NY, 1965.

⁷⁷ Calvin, John, *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ Rosenberg, A. J., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

lead the music.”⁷⁹ Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, citing the Targum (“to praise”), the Septuagint (“to the end”) and the Vulgate (“forever”), also agree with Radak and render it as “For the Music Director.”⁸⁰

As I mentioned earlier, I was taken by Tregelles’ point that the word form of **לְמַנְצָה** is a participle. The quotation above (see p. 12), “The opinion is wholly to be rejected, of those who would take **מְנַצֵּחַ** not as the part(ici)ple, but as the infinitive in the Syriac form,” continues, “this is prevented by the (definite) article included in the form **לְמַנְצָה** (for **לְהַמְנִיחַ**),”⁸¹ i.e., for (or to) the one who is **מְנַצֵּחַ**. Based on this and on the Septuagint’s rendering of ‘for the end’ (as it was closest in time to the original Hebrew), I wanted to translate **לְמַנְצָה** as ‘for the One Who is being Eternal.’

In his commentary on the Book of Psalms, Rabbi Samson Rahphael Hirsch says that **נִצָּח** means ‘victory,’ as a noun, or ‘to make victory possible,’ and renders **לְמַנְצָה בְּנִינֹת** as “To Him Who grants victory through music’s art.”⁸² He points out that in II Kings 3:15, “God is the **מְנַצֵּחַ** who gives man the strength to become master over all his afflictions.”⁸³ Further, he cites Pesachim 119a, “**לְמַנְצָה מְזִמֵּר לְדוֹד וְאִמּוֹ**”⁸⁴ ‘Sing unto Him Who rejoices when His children emerge victorious from affliction caused them through His Divine decree.’”⁸⁴ In addition, Midrash

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Rozenberg, Martin S. and Zlotowitz, Bernard M., *op. cit.*, p.17.

⁸¹ Gesenius, *op. cit.*, p.562.

⁸² Hirsch, Samson Raphael, *op. cit.*, p.19.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Tehillim suggests that it may be read as “To Him who lets Himself be won over by His creatures.”⁸⁵

Based on the Septuagint being the closest in time to the original Hebrew and rendering לְמַנְצָה as ‘for the end,’ and based on Tregelles correctly pointing out that לְמַנְצָה is an active participle, and based on Hirsch and Midrash Tehillim, I submit that we may reasonably conclude that God is the מַנְצֵה, and, further, that we may reasonably translate לְמַנְצָה, like Hirsch, as ‘to Him Who grants victory,’ or as ‘for the One Who is being Eternal (or Creating Eternity).

⁸⁵ Braude, William G., *The Midrash on Psalms*, Yale Judaica Series, Vol. XIII: 1, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1959, p. 70.

Another word of now obscure meaning, סִלָּה, like לְמַנְצָה, occurs only in Psalms (71 times) and Habakkuk (3 times). סִלָּה is commonly understood to mean, “pause, silence, interlude or elevation of the voice,”⁸⁶ and is most likely a “term which had a meaning in the musical nomenclature ... though what that meaning may have been is now a matter of pure conjecture.”⁸⁷ Harper’s suggests that “like ‘amen’ or ‘hallelujah’ ... it may have been a cry of worshippers at the close of the liturgy ... or at a specified point in it.”⁸⁸ Further, they put forward that it might have been a signal to the singers or musicians to “lift up”⁸⁹ (from מִלְלָה)⁹⁰ their respective voices or instruments with increased volume. Tregelles went so far as to say that its meaning had been “much discussed and tortured by the conjecture and blunders of interpreters,”⁹¹ yet, based on the Septuagint’s *διαψαλμα*, or interlude, he tells us that most likely it means a musical rest or silence.

Briggs tells us that there are two traditions, the Alexandrian and the Palestinian. In the former, סִלָּה is an interlude, a lifting up of voices, a place where “closing

⁸⁶ Alcala, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 1775.

⁸⁷ Smith, William, LL.D., *A Dictionary of the Bible*, The John C. Winston Company, Philadelphia, 1884, p. 602.

⁸⁸ Miller, Madeleine S., and Miller, J. Lane, *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, Harper & Brothers, Publishers, New York, 1956.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Briggs, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ Gesenius, *op. cit.*, p. 588.

benedictions might be sung.”⁹² In the latter, it represents the “last word of the doxology, ‘forever.’”⁹³ This dual tradition, according to Briggs, “satisfies all the conditions of the problem (with סֶלָה), and is in accord with the actual position occupied by Selah in the Psalms.”⁹⁴ Curiously, the Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, citing the Septuagint’s ‘interlude,’ goes on to state that it is probably a direction for the conductor that “now a signal of cymbals should interrupt the even flow of chant.”⁹⁵

The Vulgate renders it diapsalma, or pause. Many translations, beginning with Coverdale’s merely write Sela or Selah. Some write Pause, some ignore it and, as with לְמַנְצִיחַ, merely omit it.

All we know for certain is that סֶלָה may be a musical direction to the chanters or to the musicians; it may be a direction to interrupt or pause in the chanting, or it may be a cue to raise the voices. Additionally, it may be a cue to bring forward a basket (סֶל) containing an offering, or it may be a doxology.⁹⁶ Once again, we are uncertain.

⁹² Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. lxxxiv.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, *op. cit.*, p. 460.

⁹⁶ Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

After the complexities of נִשְׁקוּ-בֵּר and לְמַנְיָהּ, we might hope for אָמֵן to be simpler, but it is not. In addition to being songs, besides being poetry, psalms are also prayers.⁹⁷ When a prayer, blessing or benediction is recited, those present respond with אָמֵן upon its completion. These psalms are prayers,⁹⁸ yet אָמֵן only appears at the end of each book. Shouldn't it be at the conclusion of each psalm? Briggs suggests that these doxologies were indeed used after each of the psalms.⁹⁹

The word אָמֵן shows up either singly or as אָמֵן אָמֵן at the end of each of the first four books of the Book of Psalms. Why not the fifth book; what were the redactors thinking? If the redactors of the Book of Psalms divided it into five parts to parallel the Torah, then all the more reason for אָמֵן or אָמֵן אָמֵן to be at the end of each of the five books to be analogous to חֹק חֹק וְיִתְחַזֵּק.

“R. Eleazar said in the name of R. Jose b. Zimra: Amen is used in three ways: as an assent to truth, as an oath, and as showing acceptance.”¹⁰⁰ The root אָמֵן can mean to support or confirm.¹⁰¹ As an adverb, it can be ‘verily’ or ‘truly.’¹⁰² It can also mean “to be firm, true, reliable (*Niph'al*),”¹⁰³ “literally, ‘true;’ and, used as a substantive, ‘that which is true,’ ‘truth,’”¹⁰⁴ or a word “whose root suggests ‘so be it.’”¹⁰⁵ The latter

⁹⁷ Kirkpatrick, A. F., *op. cit.*, p. 424.

⁹⁸ International Inductive Study Bible, *op. cit.*, p. 876.

⁹⁹ Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. lxxxiii.

¹⁰⁰ Braude, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹⁰¹ BDB. *op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁰³ Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

¹⁰⁴ Smith, William, *A Dictionary of the Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁵ Miller, Madeleine S., and Miller, J. Lane, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, *op. cit.*

follows the Septuagint, *γενοιτο γενοιτο*, and this continues forward into the Geneva Bible. The Vulgate renders it as '*fiat*,' let it be done, which is picked up by Wycliffe, "be it doon."¹⁰⁶ Most translations just write 'Amen,' some say 'so be it,' one uses, "Even so, even so."¹⁰⁷

In Hebrew texts, the *amen* is counted as part of the verses, however, some say the "doxology is of course no part of the Psalm, but stands ... to mark the close of (the) Book."¹⁰⁸ Amen is the response of the congregation to the prayer or blessing which has just been recited.¹⁰⁹ It is the 'truth of all truths' that Jews have clung to through the centuries.¹¹⁰

It may be that *amen* is an acronym for "*ayl melech neeman*, 'God is a faithful king.'"¹¹¹ Midrash Tehillim offers, "When Amen is repeated, one is for this world and the other is for the world-to-come. This is intimated in the words, 'Blessed is the Lord for evermore. Amen, & Amen.'"¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ Miller, Madeleine S., and Miller, J. Lane, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁶ Wycliffe, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁷ Moffat, James, *The Old Testament, A New Translation*, George H. Doran Co., New York, 1924.

¹⁰⁸ Kirkpatrick, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

¹⁰⁹ Freehof, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹¹⁰ Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 505.

¹¹¹ Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *op. cit.*, p.251.

¹¹² Braude, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

The word מְשֻׁבֵּל can mean “intelligent ... wise ... enlightened ... a didactic psalm.”¹¹³ The primary meaning for the root שָׁבַל (or שִׁבַּל), according to the BDB, is “to be prudent.”¹¹⁴ It adds ‘look’ (in Aramaic), ‘understand’, ‘make wise’ and ‘teach’, but note “meanings hard to classify.”¹¹⁵ Further, the BDB says that מְשֻׁבֵּל can mean a contemplative poem, in the *hiphil*. Similarly, Tregelles, in his translation of Gesenius, indicates that it can mean “to be prudent ... to look at ... to turn the mind to ... to be understanding ... to teach.”¹¹⁶ However, he also suggests that it can mean a song or poem, but adds “the origin of this signification is doubtful.”¹¹⁷

The word מְשֻׁבֵּל occurs a total of thirty-one times in the *Tanakh*, including sixteen times in the Book of Psalms, thirteen of which are within the “title” of the Psalm. Outside of Psalms, the translations of מְשֻׁבֵּל commonly follow the general meanings above. For example, the word appears in I Sam. 18:14, where the Targum offers מַעֲלָה¹¹⁸ or success, the Septuagint, I Kings 18:14, gives us *suníwn*,¹¹⁹ understand, be aware of, take notice of or observe, while the Vulgate renders it *prudenter* and

¹¹³ Alcaly, R., *op. cit.*, p. 1530.

¹¹⁴ BDB, *op. cit.*, p. 968.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Gesenius, *op. cit.*, p. 790.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ www.sptus.edu/Bibleworks/Targum.

¹¹⁹ The Septuagint.

prudens,¹²⁰ wisely or discreetly, I Sam. 18:15. The Geneva Bible uses ‘wisely,’¹²¹ as does the English Revised Version,¹²² while Robert Young’s Literal Translation makes it “acting wisely.”¹²³ The King James Version translates it as ‘wisely,’ the Darby Bible as ‘prospered,’¹²⁴ Douay-Rheims as ‘wisely’ and ‘prudent’¹²⁵ and the Revised Standard Version as ‘success.’¹²⁶

Where **מְשֻׁבֵּל** becomes problematic is in the “titles” of the Psalms. I have placed the quotation marks around titles since, in the Masoretic text, the word **מְשֻׁבֵּל**, like **לְמִנְצָה**, is part of the first verse of each Psalm in which it appears. In some translations both of these words disappear altogether, while in others they are changed to a superscription or title. It is in this arena that there is a divergence of opinion as to the meaning of the term.

Psalm 32 is the first of the Psalms to include **מְשֻׁבֵּל** at the beginning. Note that there are differences in the numbering of the Psalms. Most translations today number the Psalms according to the Hebrew Bible, however some follow the numbering of the Septuagint and the Vulgate. In those two translations, some Psalms were joined together and others were divided, so that Psalm 32 appears as Psalm 31 in editions that

¹²⁰ Vulgate.

¹²¹ [www.thedcl.org/bible/Geneva Bible](http://www.thedcl.org/bible/Geneva%20Bible).

¹²² [www.thedcl.org/bible/English Revised Version](http://www.thedcl.org/bible/English%20Revised%20Version).

¹²³ [www.thedcl.org/bible/Young’s Literal Translation](http://www.thedcl.org/bible/Young's%20Literal%20Translation).

¹²⁴ [www.spertus.edu/Bibleworks/Darby Bible](http://www.spertus.edu/Bibleworks/Darby%20Bible).

¹²⁵ www.spertus.edu/Bibleworks/Douay-Rheims.

¹²⁶ www.spertus.edu/Bibleworks/RSV.

are based on them, such as Douay-Rheims, the Knox Bible and the Confraternity edition.

Many contemporary editions, such as the New American Standard Bible, God's Word Translation, the Bible in Basic English, the English Revised Version and the

Revised Standard Version, simply write ‘Maskil.’¹³⁹ The English Standard Version does the same, but adds the footnote “probably a musical or liturgical term.”¹⁴⁰ Similarly, the New International Version footnotes ‘maskil’ as “probably a literary or musical term.”¹⁴¹ The New King James Version translates it as “a contemplation,”¹⁴² which the World English Bible extends to “a contemplative psalm.”¹⁴³ Finally, the Jerusalem Bible writes “Poem,” adding in a footnote, “a didactic poem,”¹⁴⁴ and the JPS *Tanakh* gives us a note for מִשְׁכִּיל which says “meaning uncertain.”¹⁴⁵ (See also the commentary of Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, p. 29 below).

Commentaries on מִשְׁכִּיל --

Writing about Psalm 32, C. H. Spurgeon says, “*Maschil* is a new title to us, and indicates that this is an instructive or didactic Psalm.”¹⁴⁶ He notes that term *Maschil* is ‘prefixed’ to thirteen Psalms and has not been translated, rather it is written out in English letters. Following the Geneva Bible, however, he includes a margin note “to give instruction,”¹⁴⁷ which, he points out, “agrees remarkably with the contents of the thirty-second Psalm, (which) is preeminently didactic.”¹⁴⁸ The Jamieson-Fausset-

¹³⁹ www.biblos.com.

¹⁴⁰ www.biblegateway.com.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ www.biblos.com.

¹⁴⁴ *The Jerusalem Bible, op. cit.*, p.813.

¹⁴⁵ *Tanakh, JPS, op. cit.*, p. 1447.

¹⁴⁶ www.biblebb.com/files/SPURGEON/TOD/chstp32.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Brown Bible Commentary agrees, stating, “Maschil-literally, ‘giving instruction.’”¹⁴⁹

Rev. A. C. Jennings, writing in 1884, says that מִשְׁכִּיל, when used as a title, generally means “a didactic poem.”¹⁵⁰ This he bases on the Septuagint, but quickly points out that while this interpretation is applicable to Psalms 32 and 78, it is “hardly appropriate to the others, and especially not to”¹⁵¹ Psalm 142. He rejects מִשְׁכִּיל as a musical reference and concludes that it “must refer rather to the style of the composition ... and that the interpretation ‘instructive composition’ is probably the fundamental meaning.”¹⁵² He adds, however, “but in what technical signification this was applied to the various compositions so entitled ... it is impossible to determine.”¹⁵³

Thirty-three years later, Briggs suggests that “*Maskil ... indicates a collection of meditations made in the late Persian period.*”¹⁵⁴ This is based on his view of the redaction of the Psalms and on מִשְׁכִּיל being “formed by the prefix מ from שָׁכַל in the Hiph(il), *consider, contemplate*, and ... therefore, probably a *meditation, meditative poem.*”¹⁵⁵ He cites Ewald as defining מִשְׁכִּיל as “*song with cheerful music,*” although no basis for that is offered. Further, he indicates that this is followed by many moderns, “so Kirk(patrick) ‘a cunning psalm.’”¹⁵⁶ On the other hand, he points out that this does “not suit the internal character of many of these Psalms.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁹ www.biblos.com.

¹⁵⁰ Jennings, Rev. A. C., *The Psalms*, MacMillan and Co., London, 1884, p. 4.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. lx.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. lxi.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Kirkpatrick mentions Ewald's explanation, "a skilful psalm,"¹⁵⁸ apparently derived from a margin note 'in a skilful psalm' in the Revised Version's translation of מִשְׁכִּיל in Psalm 42:7, "sing ye praises *with understanding*."¹⁵⁹ Kirkpatrick continues that this might have indicated something other than the "ordinary *mizmor*,"¹⁶⁰ something more definite, a "musical setting of a specially delicate and artistic character, 'a *cunning* psalm.'"¹⁶¹

The *New Bible Commentary* tells us that the Book of Psalms contains words "which now defy understanding,"¹⁶² including the word מִשְׁכִּיל. Nonetheless, it adds that, with varying degrees of certainty, those words all "bear on the cultic use of the psalms."¹⁶³ The *New Bible Commentary* then offers that מִשְׁכִּיל may mean 'didactic,' but why it is present in those particular thirteen psalms which do contain it, is "not clear."¹⁶⁴

Artur Weiser does not translate מִשְׁכִּיל, but suggests that, while its meaning is unclear, it is most likely the label of a specific form or style (based on Jennings?) of hymn. He mentions that Luther renders it as 'instruction' based on the Hebrew *hiskil*, i.e., that which can be grasped. Further, Weiser offers that "the translation 'didactic

¹⁵⁸ Kirkpatrick, *op. cit.*, p.xix.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. xx

¹⁶² Wenham, G. J., Motyer, J. A., Carson, D. A. and France, R. T., *New Bible Commentary*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England and Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1994, p.486.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

poem,' ... hardly corresponds with the content of the thirteen different psalms which have the term *maskil* in their title."¹⁶⁵

Robert Alter, in his recent translation and commentary, first renders מְשֻׁבֵּל, within the text of Psalm 14:2, as "discerning."¹⁶⁶ In his notes to Psalm 32:1, he states that מְשֻׁבֵּל is "clearly (emphasis added) a category of song,"¹⁶⁷ even though he goes on to maintain that its precise nature is unknown. Curiously, he tells us that, based on Amos 5:13, this "would appear to be a 'joyous song.'"¹⁶⁸ However, since Amos is telling us that the מְשֻׁבֵּל will be silent during those evil times, could this be a misinterpretation of Amos, or has Alter merely picked up on Ewald's 'cheerful music' interpretation?

Next, in the context of Psalm 41:2, Alter interprets מְשֻׁבֵּל as "looks to,"¹⁶⁹ stating that while "*maskil* ... more commonly refers to understanding, (it) can mean to see or look."¹⁷⁰ While Gesenius mentions 'look' as a possibility in the *hiphil*,¹⁷¹ it is quite apparent from Alter's notes, however, that Alter is making his judgment based on the *hitpa-el* form of the verb which is not present in the Hebrew text. Alter continues to offer his third translation, 'joyous song,' for Psalm 42:1 and Psalm 47:8, and repeats the

¹⁶⁵ Weiser, Artur, *The Psalms*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1962, p. 281.

¹⁶⁶ Alter, Robert, *The Book of Psalms*, A Translation with Commentary, W. W. Norton & Co., New York & London, 2007, p. 40.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Gesenius, *op. cit.*, p.790.

) inference that this is “drawn from the way it is used in Amos 5:13,”¹⁷² an inference I cannot agree with (see p.27 above).

The *Metsudah Tehillim* translates מְשֻׁבֵּל as “an instruction,”¹⁷³ but, in an appendix, adds that scholars have had some excursions with the word, suggesting that it represents a ‘skillful’ Psalm, possibly describing the musical setting, inserting, almost playfully, “if we really knew something of this musical setting.”¹⁷⁴ It goes on to note that other scholars, “more plausibly,”¹⁷⁵ view this in a didactic setting, a “*musar*”¹⁷⁶ or moral lesson Psalm.

Freehof says that the meaning of מְשֻׁבֵּל is doubtful, yet calls it a “technical”¹⁷⁷ description of the Psalm. He continues by citing Ibn Ezra as a source of interpreting מְשֻׁבֵּל as a Psalm of instruction based on the word אֲשַׁבֵּלְךָ, I will instruct you, in verse 8 of the same Psalm. In like manner, the Soncino commentary points out that מְשֻׁבֵּל is understood to indicate a “didactic poem”¹⁷⁸ based on its correspondence to אֲשַׁבֵּלְךָ in verse 8. Hirsch agrees with this, adding “it is stated in Pesachim 117a that those Psalms (with מְשֻׁבֵּל as part of their beginning) have as their content an ‘instructive lecture’ or ‘explanation.’”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Davis, Avrohom, *The Metsudah Tehillim*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Freehof, *op. cit.*, p.80.

¹⁷⁸ Cohen, A., *The Psalms*, The Soncino Press, London, 1945, p. 32.

¹⁷⁹ Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

A. J. Rosenberg quotes Rashi's citation of the same part of the Babylonian *Talmud* (Pes. 117a), "The Sages said ... Every Psalm in which 'maskil' is mentioned was said through (*a meturgeman*) an interpreter."¹⁸⁰ In Midrash Tehillim, Braude tells us that מְשֻׁכֵּל should be regarded in light of Prov. 15:24, לְמַלְאָה לְמִשְׁכָּל, אֶרֶץ חַיִּים, the way of life is above for the wise, i.e., "when a man looks up to heaven"¹⁸¹ he shows his wisdom by praying. Braude continues, "Thus also *To the Eternal God*: (read that as לְמִנְצָה) of the sons of Korach, *Maschil* (Ps. 44:1) means that when the sons of Korach looked up to heaven, they escaped."¹⁸² He clarifies this in an endnote, "The word *maschil* 'wise,' taken as though spelled not with a *sin* but with a *samek*, is thus given the meaning of 'look.' 'He who looks up' is he who prays."¹⁸³

Rozenberg and Zlotowitz list the various meanings we have encountered from other commentators: didactic psalm, meditation, skillful psalm, then add "musical instrument."¹⁸⁴ This last interpretation is from *Meiri*. His explanation arises from the ability of a musical instrument "to enlighten the human intellect ... the chords of the *maskil* focused the mind upon what was being said."¹⁸⁵ Nonetheless, Rozenberg and Zlotowitz make it clear that the meaning of מְשֻׁכֵּל is obscure.

Of the various translations and interpretations that we have encountered for מְשֻׁכֵּל, I must reject out of hand that of 'didactic' or 'instruction.' The Psalmist(s) and the redactors of the Psalms had available a specific Hebrew word to convey that

¹⁸⁰ Rosenberg, A. J., *op. cit.*, p.110.

¹⁸¹ Braude, William G., *op. cit.*, Vol.1, p.402

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Braude, William G., *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p.468.

¹⁸⁴ Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

¹⁸⁵ Feuer, Avrohom Chaim, *Tehillim*, ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications, Brooklyn, NY, 1987, p. 384.

meaning and intent, namely, לְלַמֵּד, which appears in Psalm 60:1, “to instruct”¹⁸⁶ or “to teach.”¹⁸⁷ Since I must presuppose that their intent was to communicate clearly and not to obfuscate, I must conclude that they would have chosen לְלַמֵּד rather than מְשַׁבֵּיל to label an instructive or didactic Psalm.

While we will never know with any degree of certainty what was originally meant by מְשַׁבֵּיל, nevertheless I believe our best clue is that the word is in the *hif-il*, the causative sense of the Hebrew. Thus, I believe that ‘causes (to have) understanding,’ or ‘gives understanding’ are reasonable translations. With the definite article ה prefixed, yielding הַמְשַׁבֵּיל, as in Amos 5:13, I would translate that as ‘the one who causes understanding,’ i.e., God. That sense of מְשַׁבֵּיל, especially where it is proximate in the verse to לְמַנְצָה, appeals to my sense of the Psalms. So, for example, Psalm 42:1, לְמַנְצָה מְשַׁבֵּיל לְבָנֵי-קֹרַח, I would translate as ‘To the Eternal God Who causes understanding, for the sons of Korach.’

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

¹⁸⁷ Davis, Avrohom, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

עלמה – Isaiah 7:14

Chapter seven, verse fourteen of Isaiah reads in its entirety, לִכֹּן יִהְיֶה אֲדָרְנִי, הָיָה הָעַלְמָה הַזֶּה וְיִוְלְדָת בֶּן וְקָרָאת שְׁמוֹ עִמָּנוּ אֵל. This verse has been lifted completely out of context and used by Christian missionaries as ‘proof’ that the prophet Isaiah predicted the birth of Jesus over seven hundred years later. Further, this verse has been used as ‘proof’ that Jesus would be born of a virgin mother. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The critical word in this verse is **עַלְמָה** which simply means **אִשָּׁה צְעִירָה**¹⁸⁸, a young woman.¹⁸⁹ If only it were that simple. Let us explore that word, in particular in the context of chapter 7 of Isaiah, as well as in other locations in the *Tanakh*. By necessity, we will endeavor to do the same with the word **בְּתוּלָה**.

עַלְמָה appears only seven times in the *Tanakh*, three times as **הָעַלְמָה** (Gen. 24:43, Ex. 2:8, and Is. 7:14), once as **בְּעַלְמָה** (Prov. 30:19), twice as **עַלְמוֹת** (Ps. 68:26 and Song of Songs 1:3) and once as **וְעַלְמוֹת** (Song of Songs 6:8)¹⁹⁰ The BDB is very clear; its definition is “young woman (ripe sexually; maid or newly married).”¹⁹¹ It is equally clear with **בְּתוּלָה**, stating “virgin.”¹⁹² Tregelles is equally specific for **בְּתוּלָה**, “a virgin,”¹⁹³ although curiously, he adds “specially the virgin Mary.”¹⁹⁴ However, for

¹⁸⁸ Evan-Shoshan, Avraham, *New Concordance*, *op. cit.*, p. 881.

¹⁸⁹ Alcalay, R., *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary*, *op. cit.*, p. 1910.

¹⁹⁰ Evan-Shoshan, Avraham, *op. cit.*

¹⁹¹ BDB, *op. cit.*, p. 761.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ Gesenius, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

עַלְמָה he writes, “a girl of marriageable age,”¹⁹⁵ then he tells us that the Septuagint renders it (in Ps. 68:26) as “νεανίς,”¹⁹⁶ a young woman. (Note that Tregelles is incorrect – it should be Ps. 67:26, as νεανίδων) He continues, “the notion of unspotted virginity is not that which this word conveys, for which the proper word is בְּתוּלָה ... the LXX (in Is. 7:14) have incorrectly (emphasis added) rendered it as παρθενός,”¹⁹⁷ virgin.

Virgin is only one of the translations for עַלְמָה; Bagster renders it as “damsel”¹⁹⁸ for Gen. 24:43, the same translation that he uses for בְּתוּלָה in Deut. 22:23.¹⁹⁹ The Vulgate gives us virgo for both עַלְמָה and בְּתוּלָה.²⁰⁰ Tyndale seems to get it backwards by offering “damsel (and) mayde”²⁰¹ for בְּתוּלָה in Gen. 24:16, and “virgyn”²⁰² for עַלְמָה at Gen. 24:43. Luther’s Bible translates both as *Jungfrau*,²⁰³ a virgin, as does the Geneva Bible with “virgine;”²⁰⁴ and each of them uses ‘virgin’ for Is. 7:14. The Douay-Rheims edition translates both עַלְמָה and בְּתוּלָה as virgin,²⁰⁵ as does the King James Version.²⁰⁶ The English Revised Version offers maiden for עַלְמָה in Gen. 24:43 and

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 634.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ Bagster, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

²⁰⁰ *Vulgate op. cit.*

²⁰¹ Mombert, The Rev. J. I., *William Tyndale's Five Books of Moses called The Pentateuch*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, Ill., 1967, p. 70 – 71.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁰³ [www.biblegateway.com/Luther Bibel](http://www.biblegateway.com/Luther/Bibel).

²⁰⁴ www.thedcl.org/bible/gb.

²⁰⁵ www.jesus.org.uk/multilingual-onlinebible/douay-rheims

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

virgin for the remaining citations.²⁰⁷ The American Standard Version follows the same pattern,²⁰⁸ and all four use ‘virgin’ for Is. 7:14.

Among modern publications the Anchor Bible gets it right, translating בְּתוּלָה as virgin²⁰⁹ in Gen. 24:16 and עַלְמָה as young woman²¹⁰ for Gen.24:43. In addition to matching those two, the Oxford Annotated Bible (1965) offers young woman²¹¹ for Is. 7:14 as well, adding a footnote which tells us that the ‘sign’ mentioned in that verse is one of assurance to King Ahaz (not a foretelling of the birth of Jesus?) and justifying its translation of עַלְמָה by citing other biblical passages where young woman is a similarly appropriate translation. Unfortunately, thirty-six years later it back pedals by appending a footnote to young woman in Is. 7:14 which says, “Greek – virgin”²¹² and then offering two possibilities for the identity of the young woman, concluding that “early Christian tradition understood the woman to be the mother of Jesus.”²¹³

The Jerusalem Bible yields seemingly appropriate distinctions for virgin and girl in Genesis, then gives us “the maiden is with child”²¹⁴ for Is. 7:14, correctly, in my opinion, translating הָרְהָ in the present tense rather than the future tense and apparently pointing to Isaiah’s words being current rather than for 750 years in the future. Then its footnote cites the Greek use of virgin as “being more explicit (emphasis added) than

²⁰⁷ www.thedcl.org/bible/erv

²⁰⁸ www.redegg.org

²⁰⁹ *The Anchor Bible*, op. cit., p. 175.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ May, Herbert G. and Metzger, Bruce M., *The Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, Revised Standard Version, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 1965, p. 831.

²¹² Coogan, Michael D., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, New RSV, 3rd Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 2001.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ *The Jerusalem Bible*, op. cit., p. 1153.

the Hebrew,”²¹⁵ further adding that the Septuagint “reading is, however, an important witness to an early **Jewish** (emphasis added) interpretation, an interpretation adopted by the evangelist: Mt. 1:23 accepts the text as a prophecy of the virginal conception of Jesus.”²¹⁶ The New International Version gives us virgin²¹⁷ for עַלְמָה in Is. 7:14, while the Good News Bible/Today’s English Version offers young woman,²¹⁸ then includes a footnote which states, “the Hebrew word here ... is not the particular term for ‘virgin,’ but refers to any young woman of marriageable age. The Revised Standard Version translates עַלְמָה as “young woman,”²¹⁹ but adds a footnote, “or virgin.”²²⁰ The use of ‘virgin’ in Mt 1.23 reflects a Greek translation ... made some 500 years after Isaiah.”²²¹ The *New English Bible* hits the mark with virgin²²² for בְּתוּלָה in Gen. 24:16, and young woman²²³ for עַלְמָה in Gen. 24:43 and Is. 7:14. They also get נַעֲרָה correctly, “young woman is.”²²⁴

In 1917, the Jewish Publication Society used virgin²²⁵ for בְּתוּלָה in Gen. 24:16, maiden²²⁶ for עַלְמָה in Gen. 24:43 and young woman²²⁷ in Is. 7:14. That was continued in its 1955 edition, but in 1999 the translation of Gen. 24:43 was changed to “the young

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1155.

²¹⁷ www.redegg.org

²¹⁸ *Good News Bible, op. cit.*, p. 693.

²¹⁹ *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, New York, Toronto & Edinburgh, 1952, p. 716.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *The New English Bible*, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Oxford & Cambridge, 1970, p. 24.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 817.

²²⁵ *The Holy Scriptures, According to the Masoretic Text*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1917, p. 26.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

woman,”²²⁸ maintaining the other words as they had been. ArtScroll, in Gen. 24:16 gives us “maiden” and “virgin,”²²⁹ and “young woman”²³⁰ for Gen. 24:43, as does the JPS *Torah Commentary*.²³¹

Commentaries on Isaiah 7:14 --

In many Christian writings this verse has come to be known as the Immanuel (also spelled Emmanuel) prophecy. In his 1884 *Dictionary of the Bible*, William Smith writes, “Immanuel ... *God with us*, the title applied by the apostle Matthew to the Messiah, born of the Virgin ... because Jesus was God united with man, and showed that God was dwelling with men.”²³²

In contrast, the Funk and Wagnalls dictionary defines Immanuel as “the symbolical name (of) the child whose birth was promised ... to Ahaz ... not ... as the name of an individual, but in its literal sense.”²³³ While, at first, this might be taken as objective and non-Christological, in reality it can be viewed as a response to objections raised about Mt. 1:21 and 25 where Joseph is directed to call Mary’s son Jesus,²³⁴ or to Lk. 1:31 where Mary is similarly directed.²³⁵ In neither Gospel is Jesus given the name Immanuel. This view of the Funk and Wagnall entry is perhaps confirmed by the

²²⁸ *The Holy Scriptures*, According to the Masoretic Text, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1999, p. 45

²²⁹ Herczeg, Yisrael Isser Zvi, *The Torah*, with Rashi’s commentary, the Sapirstein Edition, ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications, Ltd., Brooklyn, NY, 2000., vol. 1, p. 251.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

²³¹ Sarna, Nahum M., *The JPS Torah Commentary*, Genesis, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1989, pp. 165, 167.

²³² Smith, William, LL.D., *A Dictionary of the Bible*, *op. cit.*, p.264.

²³³ Jacobus, M. W., Lane, E. C., and Zenos, A. C., *Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Bible Dictionary*, The Blakiston Co., Philadelphia, 1936.

²³⁴ *Good News Bible*, *op. cit.*, (N. T. p. 4).

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture, which, under the heading *Emmanuel Prophecy*, states, “The sign is the Word Incarnate, conceived and born of a Virgin Mother, receiving from her the symbolic name of Emmanuel.”²³⁶ They, too, strive to answer an unwritten objection, namely the translation of **עַלְמָה** as virgin, “the Heb. word here translated ‘virgin’ is not the technical term, *betulah*, but its **practical** (emphasis added) equivalent, *almah*, which means an unmarried maiden of marriageable age, **presumed** (emphasis added) to be a virgin by the strict moral code of the Hebrews.”²³⁷

Von Rad offers a more objective analysis when, regarding Immanuel, he writes, “A prophetic symbolic name (which) indicates salvation in the near future,”²³⁸ which, he correctly reminds us “is spoken to Ahaz.”²³⁹ He adds that when Is. 7:14 is viewed in conjunction with Is. 7:3 and Is. 8:1-4 we see parallels that “might suggest that we should think of the ‘young woman’ of Is. 7.14 as the prophet’s wife”²⁴⁰ (see Rashi and Radak below). Harper’s *Bible Dictionary* also gives us an objective rendering of the name Immanuel, “it was to be a sign to him,”²⁴¹ meaning Ahaz who was mentioned immediately prior. It continues, “in this historical situation the mother is unnamed and remains unknown. She is not called a virgin in the Hebrew but a young woman, and a miraculous conception or birth is not indicated. The boy does nothing; he is not the

²³⁶ Orchard, B., Sutcliffe, E. F., *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, New York & Edinburgh, 1953, p. 546.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ Von Rad, Gerhard, *The Message of the Prophets*, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1962, p. 143.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

saviour ... (his) significance is in his name.”²⁴² Further, they state, “the Immanuel prediction was not intended by Isaiah as a Messianic prophecy.”²⁴³

The *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* is true to its name regarding עַלְמָה; it takes an interpretive approach, telling us that a review of the occurrence of the word in the Hebrew Bible “does not remove the possibility of the meaning ‘virgin.’”²⁴⁴ It goes on to cite examples that ‘substantiate’ this view. For example, regarding עַלְמָה in Gen. 24:43 it states, “from the context, it is certain that this עַלְמָה is a virgin. To be a bride of Abraham’s son would be inconceivable had she not been a virgin.”²⁴⁵ It applies similar ‘logic’ to its use in Ex. 2:8 where Moses’ sister is usually translated ‘girl,’ “While there is no indication that she was not a virgin, the text does not directly affirm that she was,”²⁴⁶ then concludes that “in none of these references is the meaning ‘virgin’ precluded, although in none is it specifically affirmed.”²⁴⁷

Some commentators are straightforward in stating that Isaiah’s words were intended only for his time. For example, the Rev. J. Skinner offers that “it would appear ... that the idea of a miraculous conception was not present to Isaiah’s mind at this time, since a prediction of such astounding import must surely have been clothed in unambiguous language.”²⁴⁸ He goes on to say, “Immanuel, then, is a ‘sign’ to Ahaz, or rather to the house of David of which he is the representative.”²⁴⁹ Other commentators try to have it both ways, i.e., that Isaiah’s words are both to Ahaz and predicting Jesus.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, op. cit.*, p. 788.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ Skinner, J., *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, Cambridge: at the University Press, 1930, p. 59.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.62.

This includes the *New Bible Commentary* which writes, “as a straight prophecy of Christ ... it may seem too remote to speak to Ahaz,”²⁵⁰ but, “God may have unveiled the distant scene by way of the near.”²⁵¹ Clearly, they are trying to straddle the fence, having Isaiah speak to Ahaz and simultaneously predict Jesus. Similarly, writing nearly eighty years ago, George Adam Smith says, “a child ... shall shortly be born (to this unnamed mother) described vaguely as *a* or *the young woman of marriageable age*.”²⁵² He continues that Isaiah has spoken similarly “more than once to measure the near future.”²⁵³ But, he adds, “why call a Child *God-with-us* who is not going to act greatly or to be highly honoured, (and) even if it were too fine a point, to identify Immanuel with the promised Messiah of David’s house ... the moral effect of the sign would remain the same.”²⁵⁴

In the same spirit, the *Jerome Commentary*²⁵⁵ seems to be saying that it knows **נערה** in Is. 7:14 means young woman, however it believes, **as a matter of faith**, that it means more. This is a point to which we will return (see p. 46 below) as I believe it may contain the quintessence of this entire discussion. The commentators correctly point out that the debate of ‘young woman’ vs. ‘virgin’ continues unabated. They agree that Isaiah “does not use the technical word for ‘virgin’ (*betula*) but ... (*alma*) that signifies a young woman of marriageable age, whether a virgin or not.”²⁵⁶ They point out that “the child **about to be born** (emphasis added) ... would see the continuing

²⁵⁰ Wenham, G.J., Motyer, J.A., Carson, D.A. and France, R.T., *New Bible Commentary*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England and Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1994.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² Smith, George Adam, *The Book of Isaiah*, Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., London, 1928, p. 113.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.114-115.

²⁵⁵ Brown, R. E., Fitzmyer, J. A., Murphy, R. E., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1968, p. 270.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

presence of God among his people.”²⁵⁷ Then they add, however, that “the solemnity of the oracle and the name ‘Emmanuel’ lend credence to the opinion that Isaiah’s perspective does not stop at (this) birth.”²⁵⁸ Finally, they seem to attempt some fence-straddling by concluding, “this does not mean, of course, that Isaiah foresaw the fulfillment of this prophecy in Christ, but he expressed the hope that Christ perfectly realized.”²⁵⁹

Jewish Commentaries on Isaiah 7:14 –

A. S. Hartom writes, **עֲלָמָה הִיא אִשָּׁה צְעִירָה בֵּין פְּנוּיָהּ בֵּין נְשׁוּאָהּ** “**עֲלָמָה**,²⁶⁰ literally, between unmarried and married, i.e., the young woman can be married or not; here, he tells us, she is married. Radak says that an **עֲלָמָה** can be either a virgin or not, and that this **עֲלָמָה** is either the wife of Isaiah or the wife of Ahaz.”²⁶¹ Rashi says it refers to Isaiah’s wife.²⁶² Ibn Ezra apparently accepts Rashi’s explanation, and questions “how can Christians say that this child is Jesus who was born many years later?”²⁶³ Regarding **עֲלָמָה**, Slotki tells us that “the contention that the word must necessarily connote ‘virgin’ is unwarranted.”²⁶⁴ Besides Isaiah’s or Ahaz’ wife, he continues, “a woman of the Royal Family, or any woman in Judah may have been the

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ Hartom, A. S., *The Book of Isaiah*, Yavneh Publishing House Ltd., Tel-Aviv, 1965, p. 35. (Hebrew)

²⁶¹ *The Book of Isaiah, Mikra’ot G’dolat*, Vol. 5 M. M. Press, Inc., 1981 (Hebrew), p. 67.

²⁶² Scherman, Nosson, *Tanach*, the Stone Edition, ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications, Ltd., Brooklyn, NY, 1996, p. 965.

²⁶³ Freehof, Solomon B., *Book of Isaiah*, a Commentary, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, New York, 1972, p. 53.

²⁶⁴ Slotki, I. W., *Isaiah*, The Soncino Press, London & Bournemouth, 1949, p.35.

young woman of the text.”²⁶⁵ Concerning Immanuel, the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* says this name “does not appear at all in the talmudic or midrashic literature,”²⁶⁶ and may not be “a proper name but a simple statement to the effect that ‘God is with us.’”²⁶⁷

Sarna explains that בְּתוּלָה, “like its cognates Akkadian *batultu*, Ugaritic *btlt*, Arabic *batul*, Syriac *bethulta*, does not by itself, without further definition, exclusively express virginity in the physical sense understood by the English word.”²⁶⁸ Rather, he tells us that it is primarily a chronological term, that “denotes a sexually mature young girl of marriageable age, whether married or not.”²⁶⁹ Moreover, “when Akkadian texts wish to stress the preservation of bodily virginal integrity, they employ the phrase *sa zikaram la idu*, ‘who has not known a man,’”²⁷⁰ almost the exact phrase found in Gen. 24:16.

Gerald Sigal puts it this way, “In diluting Judaism so that it could meet the beliefs of the pagan world, the evangelists adopted a number of grotesque distortions of biblical belief. One of these is that a virgin has become pregnant, not by a man, but of the ‘Holy Spirit,’ and she has given birth to the Messiah.”²⁷¹ He adds, “Judaism and Christianity (are) forever incompatible, for Christians proceed to claim that this child, born of the union between God and a virgin, was conceived for the purpose of bringing Judaism to an end.”²⁷²

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Second Edition, Vol. 9, Thomson Gale, Detroit, New York etc., 2007, p. 738.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ Sarna, Nahum M., *op. cit.*, p. 165.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ Sigal, Gerald, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 20-21.

Quoting Arnold J. Toynbee, Ben Zion Bokser cautions us not to dismiss as naïve belief in the miraculous elements in Jesus' career as "they are to be seen as symbolic statements of deep spiritual significance. But we must beware against taking them as literal descriptions of reality."²⁷³ That includes "the portrayal of super-human spiritual nature in the figure of a hero whose mother is human but whose father is divine (the birth story that is told of Jesus, Augustus, Alexander, Plato, and every Pharaoh of Egypt since, at least, the beginning of the Fifth Dynasty)."²⁷⁴ He adds, regarding Christianity, "This new belief represented a break with Judaism. At the center of Judaism is a law, a way of life. For Christianity Jesus himself is the way of life."²⁷⁵ Finally, Orlinsky discusses the second great age of bible translation, beginning around 400 C.E., which saw the "**Christianizing of the Jewish versions and the Hebrew text** (emphasis added) from which they derived."²⁷⁶ Orlinsky goes on to add, "thus new meaning and nuances were read into such Hebrew and Greek-Septuagint words and phrases as ... *ha-almah*, *he parthenos*, *harah* and *we-yoledet* in Isa 7:14, and *nashqu-bar* in Psa 2:12, as well as into numerous alleged 'Jesus' passages."²⁷⁷

Conclusions –

There seems to be uncertainty, or at least inconsistency of usage in many English translations of **עַלְמָה** and **בְּתוּלָה**, so I believe it is important to define some

²⁷³ Bokser, Ben Zion, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

²⁷⁶ Orlinsky, Harry M., *Bible History*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1991, p.xii.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. xii-xiii..

English words before we proceed. Damsel – “a young unmarried woman, a maiden.”²⁷⁸ Maiden -- (shortened form: maid) the preferred definition denotes, “a girl or young unmarried woman ... a virgin.”²⁷⁹ Girl -- “a female child; hence, any young unmarried woman.”²⁸⁰ Prophet -- the premier meaning is “a person who speaks for God,”²⁸¹ the secondary meaning is “a religious teacher or leader regarded as, or claiming to be, divinely inspired,”²⁸² the third meaning is “a spokesman for some cause, group, movement, etc.,”²⁸³ and the fourth definition is “a person who predicts future events.”²⁸⁴

Orlinsky, in his book *Ancient Israel*, points out that, although its original meaning is uncertain, the word “*nabi* in the Bible meant approximately ‘spokesman.’”²⁸⁵ He cites Ex. 7:11 where that word is used by God to tell Moses that his brother Aaron would speak on his behalf. The Septuagint renders it “*prophetes*, ‘declarer’ or ‘interpreter.’”²⁸⁶ This is the source of the word ‘prophet’ in English, which he points out, “at least until the time of Queen Elizabeth (I), meant simply ‘forthteller,’ or ‘preacher.’”²⁸⁷ He adds that the meaning ‘foretelling’ or ‘predicting’ is a later change in meaning for ‘prophet,’ and concludes, “The prophet spoke for God, and interpreted His words and will to his fellow Israelites.”²⁸⁸

²⁷⁸ Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged, The Publishers Guild, Inc., New York, 1968, p. 460.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1086.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 772.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.1443.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁵ Orlinsky, Harry M., *Ancient Israel*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London, 1954, p. 143

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Unfortunately, when most people hear the word ‘prophet,’ it is that later meaning that they think of rather than the earlier. It is that older meaning which is the Jewish traditional view of the Prophet, i.e., God’s spokesperson to the Jewish people with messages for them and for their time.

The *Oxford Companion to the Bible* states, “it (is) probable that Immanuel was a son of Isaiah.”²⁸⁹ Moreover, it adds “the traditional Christian interpretation that the ‘young woman’ is an intentional reference to Mary, the mother of Jesus ... does not do justice to the immediate prophecy, which required fulfillment in the eighth century B.C.E.”²⁹⁰ However, the idea of a virgin birth was an “early ... strongly held belief,”²⁹¹ which became a “preeminent statement of faith and the ultimate test of belief in biblical inerrancy.”²⁹² Despite the fact that עַלְמָה “means simply ‘young woman,’ without any implication of virginity, ... Matthew used a Greek Bible, so he naturally reinterpreted Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy referring to the virgin birth of Jesus.”²⁹³ Whether reasonable or not, “for the evangelist, Isaiah’s “original meaning was superseded by the identification of Jesus as Immanuel.”²⁹⁴

There appears to be confusion and/or inconsistency on the part of Jewish translators of עַלְמָה, who sometimes use the traditional ‘young woman,’ yet at other times use words like ‘maid’ or ‘maiden’ which may imply virginity. We have seen עַלְמָה translated into the Greek as παρθενος, yet we don’t know whether that word

²⁸⁹ Coogan, Michael D., and Metzger, Bruce M., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1993, p. 300.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 790.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

always meant physical virginity as we understand it today (see Sarna's comment, p. 40 above, regarding 'virgin' in other ancient languages), or whether it had other meanings in ancient Greek. In fact, Liddell and Scott, in their *Greek-English Lexicon*, point out three instances in ancient Greek literature (once each in the *Iliad*, in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and in Aristophanes' *Clouds*) where *παρθενος* is used to mean a young woman who is not a virgin.²⁹⁵ To further complicate matters, we have no idea why the writers of the Septuagint sometimes used *παρθενος* (as in Is. 7:14) and sometimes used *νεανίς* (as in Ps. 68:26) as translations for עַלְמָה.

We have seen Immanuel (עִמָּנוּ אֵל) referred to as a symbolic name. As a name, what makes Immanuel any more symbolic than other biblical names that contain a statement of faith or a reference to God, for example, Michael (מִכָּאֵל) or Gavriel (גַּבְרִיאֵל)? We have been told, by Christian sources, that Is. 7:14 predicts the birth of Jesus. This verse also tells us that the child will be called Immanuel, yet nowhere in the Gospels is Jesus given that name.

Without listing them, the *Oxford Commentary* points out that there are 29 different issues "which have divided ... scholars in their interpretation of (Is. 7:14)."²⁹⁶ Focusing on the Greek *παρθενος*, which was followed in Mt. 1:23, it points out that this

²⁹⁵ Liddell, H. G., and Scott, R., compilers, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised and augmented by Jones, H. S., and McKenzie, R., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1978, p. 1939.

²⁹⁶ Barton, John, and Muddiman, John, ed., *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, p. 445.

“has been of enormous importance in the Christian interpretative tradition,”²⁹⁷ yet we have seen the problems with the translation of that word. It goes on to say that if the passage “is seen as a contemporary memoir ... (or) if historical-critical criteria are to be paramount this should be regarded as a *mis*-interpretation.”²⁹⁸ But, “if a reader-response approach is accepted it is presumably a perfectly proper way to read the text.”²⁹⁹

The controversy over Is. 7:14 goes back to the very roots of Christianity. The Apostles’ Creed states that Jesus was “conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary. This formulation of faith ... is based on Mt. 1:18-25 and Lk. 1:26-2:7.”³⁰⁰ The strength and intensity of this creed are underscored by the following passages: “because textual interpolation or corruption is ruled out, this miracle must be accepted as a valid element in the apostolic witness,”³⁰¹ and further by “the two Evangelists affirm this miracle flatly as a matter of history ... they simply state it as an event of indisputable reality.”³⁰² Nonetheless this ‘reality’ has been disputed virtually since its inception. Justin Martyr (100-165 C.E.) wrote a piece entitled *Dialogue with Trypho*, which debates alleged proofs of Christianity contained in the Hebrew Bible. It is “a Greek record of a supposed dialogue with a Jew ... apparently ... a literary device, purporting to be a dialogue with the famous Mishnaic sage Rabbi Tarfon.”³⁰³

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ Tenney, Merrill C., *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1963, p. 882.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² *Ibid.*

³⁰³ Schiffman, Lawrence H., *Texts and Traditions*, Ktav Publishing House, Inc., Hoboken, NJ, 1998, p. 418.

As we have pointed out, the Christian viewpoint that Is. 7:14 is a foretelling of Jesus and his birth by a virgin mother has numerous flaws. For example: a. Why would Isaiah speak to Ahaz about an event some 750 years in the future? b. While the concept of miraculous pregnancy does exist in Judaism, Sarah and Hannah for example; the concept of a deity fathering, with a human woman, a god-child in human form is not accepted. In Gen. 6:1-4 we read of “divine beings” or “fallen ones” consorting with human women.³⁰⁴ This is immediately followed by an expression of God’s anger and the story of the Flood.³⁰⁵ (See Sarna’s *JPS Commentary* on Genesis for further study.) Celestial-terrestrial intermarriage is found in Greek and Roman pagan myths, notwithstanding denials that “the oldest Christianity strictly refrained from everything polytheistic and heathen.”³⁰⁶ c. If Mary was to name her son Immanuel, why didn’t she?

Notwithstanding any flaws of logic or deficient exegetical proofs, the bottom line is that belief in the Immanuel Prophecy and belief in the Virgin Birth are not matters of logic, but rather matters of faith, to wit, “Today, as in the time of Jesus’ birth, Mary is the embodiment of one of the greatest and still unexplained miracles of the Bible.”³⁰⁷ Just as arguments of logic are hard pressed to overcome emotional arguments, so too, logic is powerless when it comes to matters of faith. The differences of Jewish and Christian interpretation regarding Is. 7:14 will never be resolved. However, there is no doubt that the Jewish interpretations are correct.

³⁰⁴ Sarna, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

³⁰⁶ Tenney, Merrill C., *op. cit.*, p. 883.

³⁰⁷ Deen, Edith, *All of The Women of The Bible*, Harper & Row, New York and Evanston, 1955, p. 158.

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