# Maidenhood and Virginity
# in Ancient Israel

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Our interest in focusing on this topic stems primarily from the
famous "Immanuel Passage" in Isaiah 7:14. Much controversy, some
of it highly prejudicial, has arisen over the translation "young
woman" in the RSV and NEB. It is the purpose of this article to
examine the major terms used in the Hebrew Bible concerning maiden-
hood and virginity in ancient Israel so that objective and unbiased
conclusions may be reached by the serious student of the scriptures.

There are three Hebrew words which refer to a young woman in
ancient Israel. One of these is the word *na'arah*, variantly spelled
*na'ara*. This word is used over sixty times in the feminine gender
(the masculine form being used over ninety times). In the King James
Version it is translated "maid" or "maids" seven times,[1] "maiden"
or "maidens" fifteen times, [2] "damsel" or "damsels" thirty-four
times,[3] "young maidens" once,[4] and "young woman" once.[5] This
word carries no inherent connotation of virginity, although it may
refer to one who is a virgin. For instance, Rebekah is referred to as
a *na'ara* ("damsel," KJV; "maiden," RSV), a *bethulah* ("virgin"),
and an *'almah* ("virgin," KJV; "young woman," RSV).[6] Furthermore,
the word is used in apposition with *bethulah* or *bethuloth* four times

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[1] 2 Kings 5:2, 4; Esther 2:7, 9, 12; 4:4; Amos 2:7.

[2] Exodus 2:5; Ruth 2:8, 22, 23; 3:2, Esther 2:4, 8, 9 (twice) 13; 4:16; Job  1:5; Proverbs
9:3; 27:27; 31:15.

[3] Genesis 24:14, 16, 28, 55, 57, 61; 34:3 (twice), 12; Deuteronomy 22:15 (twice), 16, 19,
20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26 (twice), 27, 28, 29; Judges 19:3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9; Ruth 2:5, 6; 1 Samuel
25:42; 1 Kings 1:3,4.

[4] I Samuel 9:11.

[5] Ruth 4:12.

[6] Genesis 24:16, 43.

("young virgin" or "young virgins").[7] The verbal root of the Hebrew word *na'arah* is not used in the Old Testament and its etymology is unknown. It is evident, however, from the usage of the noun that the word is generic rather than specific in connotation. The question of virginity is not under consideration.

The second key word is *bethulah*, translated in the KJV "maid" or "maids" seven times,[8] "maiden" or "maidens" five times,[9] and "virgin" or "virgins" thirty-eight times.[10] The plural, *bethulim* (a feminine plural with a masculine termination), is translated "maid" twice[11] and "virginity" eight times.[12] The RSV renders *bethulah* "maiden" or "maidens" twelve times,[13] and in the remaining passages, "virgin" or "virgins" or "virginity." It is obvious, therefore, that the connotation of virginity is not inherent in this word, although it can be demonstrated that the word does sometimes specifically connote a virgin.

Several facts suggest that the word is frequently used in the same generic sense as the word *na'arah*. In the first place, the parallelistic structure of several passages in which "young man" or "young men" is made synonymous with *bethulah* or *bethuloth* makes it clear that nothing more than "young woman" or "young women" is connoted.[14] The RSV frequently translates "maiden" or "maidens." It should be noted that the KJV translates several of these passages in similar fashion. *Bethuloth* may also be used in synonymous construction with "women"[15] and in contrast to "elders."[16] Bethulah is also made parallel to "bride,"[17] although "bride" in this instance could refer to

[7] Judges 21:12; 1 Kings 1:2; Esther 2:2, 3.

[8] Exodus 22:16 (15 Hebrew); Job 31:1; Jeremiah 2:32; 51:22; Lamentations 5:11; Ezekiel 9:6; Zechariah 9:17.

[9] Judges 19:24; 2 Chronicles 36:17; Psalms 78:63; 148:12; Ezekiel 44:22.

[10] Genesis 24:16; Exodus 22:17 (16 Hebrew); Leviticus 21:3, 14; Deuteronomy 22:19, 23, 28; 32:25; Judges 21:12; 2 Samuel 13:2, 18; 1 Kings 1:2; 2 Kings 19:21; Esther 2:2, 3, 17,19; Psalm 45:14; Isaiah 23:4, 12; 37:22; 47:1; 62:5; Jeremiah 14:17; 18:13; 31:4, 13, 21; 46:11; Lamentations 1:4, 15, 18; 2:10, 13, 21; Joel 1:8; Amos 5:2; 8:13.

[11] Deuteronomy 22:14, 17.

[12] Leviticus 21:13; Deuteronomy 22:15, 17, 20; Judges 11:37, 38; Ezekiel 23:3, 8.

[13] Jeremiah 2:32; 31:13; 51:22; 1 Kings 1:2; Ezekiel 9:6; Psalms 78:63; 148:12; Lamentations 1:4, 18; 2:10, 21; Zechariah 9:17.

[14] Deuteronomy 32:25; 2 Chronicles 36:17; Jeremiah 31:13; 51:22; Ezekiel 9:6; Psalms 78:63; 148:12; Lamentations 1:18; 2:21; Isaiah 23:4; Amos 8:13; Zechariah 9:17.

[15] Lamentations 5:11.

[16] Lamentations 2:10.

[17] Jeremiah 2:32.

the virgin who has just come to the marriage altar. In the second place, there are references in which the additional phrase "whom no man had known," or something similar, is added to further define the word *bethulah*.[18] If the word always connoted a virgin, it would not be necessary to add that additional phrase.

However, there are other passages in which *bethulah* definitely means a virgin. Such is the case in those passages in which the priest is forbidden to marry a widow, divorcee, or one defiled, but is charged to marry only a virgin,[19] although KJV strangely translates "maidens" in Ezekiel. The same is true in passages referring to "the tokens of virginity,[20] as well as those in which a young woman bewails her virginity,[21] although KJV inconsistently translates these passages. In those passages stating laws concerning a betrothed woman,[22] it would seem likely that *bethulah* means a virgin. In the remaining passages the question of virginity is uncertain.

In those passages in which nations are called virgins[23] it appears that *bethulah* reverts to a possible Arabic or Assyrian root which means "sever, separate."[24] The nation under consideration is designated by God for some particular purpose, usually for destruction. Though the nation referred to has not yet been ravished by the enemy, such is soon to take place. In view of the fact that these nations may also be designated as harlotrous,[25] it is obvious that *bethulah* as a personification of the nations does not indicate moral or spiritual purity. Therefore, the idea of virginity from a sexual standpoint is not back of the word used in such connections.

The third Hebrew word to be considered is '*almah* which is the word used in Isaiah 7:14. That this word is also a generic term referring to a young woman can be ascertained by examining the way it is translated.

[18] Genesis 24:16; Judges 21:12.

[19] Leviticus 21:13, 14; Ezekiel 44:22.

[20] Deuteronomy 22:14, 15, l7 (twice), 20.

[21] Judges 11:37, 38; Joel 1:8.

[22] Exodus 22:16 (15 Hebrew); Deuteronomy 22:23,28.

[23] 2 Kings 19:21=Isaiah 37:22; Isaiah 23:12; 47:1; Jeremiah 14:17; 18:13; 31:4, 21; 46:11; Amos 5:2; Lamentations I: 15; 2: 13.

[24] Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (eds.,) *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), p. 143.

[25] Isaiah 1:21; Jeremiah 2:20; Hosea 2:5; Nahum 3:4; Revelation 17:5.

Since the word is only used seven times in the Old Testament, it is easy
to portray the usage in graphic form in five standard translations.

| Reference | KJV | ASV | NASB | RSV | NEB |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Genesis 24:43 | virgin | maiden | maiden | young woman | young woman |
| Exodus 2:8 | maid | maiden | girl | girl | girl |
| Psalm 68:26 (25) | damsels | damsels | maidens | maidens | girls |
| Proverbs 30:19 | maid | maiden | maid | maiden | girl |
| Song of Solomon 1:3 | virgins | virgins (maidens) | maidens (virgins) | maidens | maidens |
| Song of Solomon 6:8 | virgins | virgins (maidens) | maidens (virgins) | maidens | young women |
| Isaiah 7:14 | virgin | virgin (maiden) | virgin (maiden) | young woman (virgin) | young woman |

Note that of the thirty-five possibilities (7 passages x 5 translations)
"virgin" or "virgins" is used only eight times. Note also that no trans-
lation consistently translates the word "virgin" or "virgins" in all seven
occurrences. With four of the seven passages, none of the standard
translations renders the word "virgin" or "virgins." The words in
parentheses in the chart indicate alternative translations given in foot-
notes or marginal notes. Our translators recognize that the word *'almah*
is a generic term which does not inherently designate a virgin. If one
standard translation is to be rejected because it translates *'almah* "young
woman," or "maiden," then all the others will have to be rejected on
the same grounds.

The NIV, which was published after this article was first submitted
for publication, translates the word *'almah* in the above passages:
"maiden," "girl," "maidens," "maiden," "maidens," "virgins,"
and "virgin." Therefore, this newest of the standard translations
concurs in the judgment of former translators that the word *'almah*
does not inherently refer to a virgin.

John T. Willis in an excellent article entitled "The Meaning of Isaiah
7:14 and Its Application in Matthew 1:23"[26] has shown that the

[26] Restoration Quarterly, Vol: 21, No.1, 1978, pp. 1-18.

Immanuel in the prophecy was first of all a contemporary of Isaiah and
Ahaz and that Matthew applies the passage to Christ in a typical sense.
A careful study of that article and the literature referred to in the foot-
notes is highly recommended. For a further consideration of the varied
viewpoints in regard to Isaiah 7:14, see Hobart E. Freeman[27] and
J. Gresham Machen.[28] Machen is excellent in dealing with the authenticity
of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke and in dispelling the notion
that these borrowed from a supposed Jewish or pagan source about a
virgin birth. Both Machen and Freeman hold to the viewpoint that there
was no contemporary fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah's day. This
is not the viewpoint of this writer, who holds rather to the typical and
antitypical fulfilments as set forth in Willis' article referred to above.

It should be clear from this study that none of the three Hebrew
words always refers to a virgin. With the words *na'arah* and *'almah*
there is never any certainty which inheres in the words. With regard to
*bethulah*, three things have been ascertained: In some passages the
word does not inherently designate a virgin, while in other passages it
does definitely refer to a virgin. In the majority of passages, however,
the word is used in a generic sense. Whether anyone of these words
designates a virgin in a given passage will have to be determined from
the context in each case.

[27] *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968),
pp. 203-209.

[28] *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1930).