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*THE VIRGIN BIRTH IN RELATION TO THE  
INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH VII. 14.*

IN common with all ancient writings, the Gospels contain many passages that are obscure and difficult of interpretation; their meaning is ambiguous, or eludes us altogether. The narrative of the birth of our Lord in Matthew i. 15-23 is not one of these; its meaning, so far as its main point and purpose is concerned, is clear as daylight, admits of no possibility of misunderstanding. It is accurately paraphrased in the clear and precise clauses of the Apostles' Creed which assert that Jesus Christ was "conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary."

This narrative closes with a reference to Isaiah vii. 14; the circumstances of the birth of Jesus Christ as just related were such as they were in order that "it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.'"

The absence from the narrative of ambiguity extends to this use of the passage from Isaiah, if we assume that this part of the Gospel was written from the first in Greek; in that case there is no reasonable doubt that the writer means us to find one point of the fulfilment in the fact that Mary, like the mother in the prophecy, in conceiving and giving birth to her child still remained *παρθένος*, virgin. If, however, the narrative goes back to an Aramaic source, some ambiguity and uncertainty arise; if the word represented in the Greek by *παρθένος* was in the source *בתולה*, as it is in

the Syriac version of Isaiah vii. 14, well and good ; the source was as unambiguous as the Gospel in its present Greek form. If, however, the word was, as in the Targum, **עלימתא**, the passage quoted contained no reference to virginity, for **עלימתא** is a word of wide meaning, applicable indeed to virgins, but applicable also to women who were not virgin, applicable even to women guilty of unchastity ; in the Targum of Judges, chap. 19, it is applied to the Levite's concubine who had proved unfaithful to him.

Be this as it may, the main point of the Gospel narrative is to assert that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin mother ; considerable ingenuity may be required to shew that this is the meaning of the genealogy that precedes the narrative, but no ingenuity can place any other meaning than this on the narrative itself.

When we pass from the interpretation of the narrative to consider its origin and to account for that being said which is there said, we immediately pass out of the clear and lucid into the doubtful and obscure ; we are in the region of controversy and face to face with one of the most keenly disputed questions connected with Christian creeds. It is not my purpose here to take side in that controversy, to attack or to defend the assertions of the Apostles' Creed which correspond so faithfully to the meaning of the narrative in the Gospel. I propose to discuss merely a detail ; but this detail, if it can be cleared up, leaves the way more open for arriving at a conclusion on the ultimate question.

There are two ways of explaining the narrative in St. Matthew i. 18-23 ; it may be (a) a record of objective historical fact, or (b) a record of belief that did not correspond to objective historical fact. To establish the probability of the first of these explanations it is necessary in the first place to meet various objections, which are excellently stated in the articles *Mary* and *Nativity* in the *Encyclopædia*

*Biblica*, and which are based in the main on apparently conflicting evidence, especially in other parts of the Gospels and in the Epistles of St. Paul ; and in the second place it is necessary to establish a probable line of transmission by which evidence of the fact may have passed from the persons concerned in the circumstances of the birth to the writer of the Gospel. If the fact cannot be established, then it is necessary to inquire how the belief arose. If, apart from assuming that the facts actually were as stated in the narrative, no probable cause for the belief can be found, a certain presumption in favour of the facts, some offset, whether sufficient or not, against the historical difficulties already alluded to, might not unreasonably be claimed.

To account for the belief that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin two causes have been assigned by those who deny the fact : (1) It has been traced to the direct and immediate influence, in the Christian circles where the story of the birth of Jesus arose, of *pagan* ideas of the generation of heroes by gods and their birth by women ; or (2) to the influence of Jewish beliefs, and in particular of a pre-Christian Jewish belief that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. Into the adequacy or correctness of the first of these causes I do not propose to inquire now. I confine myself to an examination of the second, and here indeed to a particular line of argument that has been advanced, viz., the significance of Isaiah vii. 14 as originally written or subsequently interpreted. And this after all is not so narrow a treatment of the subject as might at first sight appear. For in the presentation of this view Isaiah vii. 14 has been forced into great prominence and, as it seems to me, with good reason. Isaiah vii. 14 in the LXX is by far the most promising piece of evidence that has been adduced in favour of the theory that before the Birth and

Ministry of our Lord there was current among the Jews a belief that the Messiah would be born of a virgin, that, as Professor Gunkel <sup>1</sup> puts it, the Virgin Birth was already a part of Christological dogma. Archdeacon Allen <sup>2</sup> has, indeed, adduced in addition two passages of doubtful relevance from the book of Enoch and also Revelation xii. 1-5; and sixteen years ago Mr. F. P. Badham collected <sup>3</sup> afresh passages from the Rabbinic writings which used to play a part in Christian polemic against the Jews; but these are for the most part obscure in meaning, of doubtful date, and even in some cases of doubtful genuineness.

I will now give two quotations, allowing myself to italicise certain clauses, to shew the importance attached to the interpretation of Isaiah vii. 14 in this controversy. The first is from Professor Harnack: "Although Jesus had in principle abolished the methods of pedantry, the casuistic treatment of the law, and the subtleties of prophetic interpretation, yet the old Scholastic exegesis remained active in the Christian communities, above all, the unhistorical local method in the exposition of the Old Testament, both allegoristic and Haggadic. . . . The traditional view exercised its influence on the exposition of the Old Testament, as well as on the representations of the person, fate and deeds of Jesus, especially in those cases where the question was about the proof of the fulfilment of prophecy, that is, of the Messiahship of Jesus. Under the impression made by the history of Jesus it gave to many Old Testament passages a sense that was foreign to them, and, on the other hand, enriched the life of Jesus with new facts. . . . Examples of both in the New Testament are numerous. See above all Matthew

<sup>1</sup> H. Gunkel, *Zum religionsgeschichtliche Verständnis des N.T.* p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> *International Critical Commentary on Matthew*, p. 19; but see R. H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch*, p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> *Academy*, June 8, 1895, pp. 485-487.

i., ii. *Even the belief that Jesus was born of a virgin sprang from Isaiah vii. 14.*"<sup>1</sup>

I quote next from Archdeacon Allen, who agrees with Harnack that the belief in the virgin birth of the Messiah was current before, though he does not admit that it also created, the belief in the virgin birth of Jesus. He writes : "The opinion of Usener (*Encyc. Bibl.*, iii. 3350) that in the narrative of the supernatural birth 'we unquestionably enter the circle of pagan ideas' and that 'the idea is quite foreign to Judaism,' is to be decisively rejected if it be intended to carry with it the inference that this idea had not already been used in the interests of Jewish Messianic speculation before the Christian era. It is probably to be found in Isaiah vii. 14 and Micah v. 3, and *certainly* in the Alexandrian Jewish interpretation of Isaiah vii. 14 as represented in the LXX." And again : "The stories of the supernatural birth might therefore very well have originated in Palestine in the first half of the first century A.D. . . . The universal belief in the supernatural birth of gods and heroes *as represented in Judaism by, e.g., Isaiah vii. 14 LXX*, would have been quite sufficient to supply the central idea *without any recourse to non-Jewish forms of this speculation.*"

With these representative passages before us we can see that the crucial question is this : Did a current interpretation of Isaiah vii. 14 create the belief in the Virgin Birth of the Lord, or did that belief create the interpretation of Isaiah vii. 14 as a prophecy of a virgin birth ? There is no question, as Harnack has pointed out in the passage already quoted, that the facts of the life of, or beliefs about, Jesus created fresh Christian interpretations, alien to the intention of the original writers of Scripture, unknown to earlier

<sup>1</sup> *History of Dogma* (E. T.), i. pp. 99-100, with note 1 on p. 100. Just below, moreover, Harnack uses of Isaiah vii. 14 the expression that it is "a complete explanation" of the belief in the Virgin Birth of Jesus.

Jewish interpreters. The use of Psalm viii. in the Epistle to the Hebrews (c. ii.) may serve as an example; is the use of Isaiah vii. 14 in Matthew i. 23 another? In any case the mere use of Isaiah vii. 14 in Matthew i. 23 cannot suffice to *prove* that that passage had previously received from *Jewish* interpreters a Messianic interpretation. It must be matter of inquiry whether such an interpretation previously existed. And to this point I now turn.

In order to establish the theory that Isaiah vii. 14 created the belief in the Virgin Birth of our Lord, it is not of course necessary to shew that Isaiah vii. 14 *originally* referred to a virgin birth; Harnack, for example, who considers a previously existing *interpretation* of Isaiah vii. 14 a complete explanation of the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ, holds that that passage *originally* contained no such reference. All that is necessary is to prove that Isaiah vii. 14 bore this meaning to the Jews in the first century A.D. Failing direct evidence of what the *Jewish* interpretation of Isaiah vii. 14 in the first century A.D. was, a presumption that it was then understood of the Virgin Birth of the Messiah might be created by shewing that the passage had at some time previous borne that meaning. So far as I am aware there is no direct evidence; no Jewish source of the first century A.D. refers to Isaiah vii. 14 in such a way as to imply the interpretation placed on it. We must examine then (1) the meaning of the original passage; (2) any relevant references to it in the Old Testament; (3) the passage as translated in the LXX.

A few years ago it would have seemed like flogging a dead horse to criticise the view that Isaiah vii. 14 in Hebrew referred to birth by a virgin; a somewhat general agreement had been reached among Protestant scholars that, whatever the ambiguities of the passage, it certainly did not refer to an abnormal, or supernatural,

birth. But recently a modified form or variation of the traditional Christian interpretation of this passage has gained some favour; the traditional Christian interpretation saw in Isaiah vii. 14 an anticipation of the Virgin Birth of our Lord, a record of that event written seven centuries before it occurred; the modern theory to which I refer sees in that passage the reminiscence of an ancient myth.<sup>1</sup> The traditional interpretation endeavoured to illumine the obscurity of Isaiah vii. 14 by the light of future events; its modern counterpart by the light of beliefs already ancient in the eighth century B.C., when the passage was written, and, so it is asserted, familiar to Isaiah and his hearers.

“Had people only been acquainted with the range of ancient oriental conceptions (*den altorientalischen Vorstellungskreis*), no one would ever have questioned that the author of Isaiah vii. really intended to speak of the son of a virgin. The King-Redeemer everywhere appears (*Der Erlöserkönig erscheint allenthalben*) as the son of a virgin” (Jeremias, p. 47).

This is one of those sweeping statements in which a very little experience teaches us to look for the concealment of a weak case. The evidence adduced in support of the universal statement consists of the picture of the woman in Revelation xii., the belief that Dionysus was the son of the *ἱερὰ παρθένος* Demeter and Horus of Isis, and the symbolism in a representation of the zodiacal sign of the virgin on a door ornament of Notre Dame. Even if we were to admit that these facts suffice to prove that the King-Redeemer *everywhere* appears as the son of a virgin, and,

<sup>1</sup> H. Gressmann, *Der Ursprung der Israelitisch-jüdischen Eschatologie* (1905), pp. 272 ff.; A. Jeremias, *Babylonisches in N.T.* (1905), pp. 46 ff.; C. F. Burney, *The Sign of Immanuel in Journal of Theological Studies*, x. (1909), pp. 580-584; cf. G. H. Box, *The Book of Isaiah*, pp. 358 f. These recent exponents of the theory have failed to recall the similar theory of E. F. C. Rosenmüller in the second edition of his *Scholia* (1810), pp. 295-306.



*therefore*, for such is the implicit argument, was thus expected in Judæa in the eighth century B.C., it remains to consider whether Isaiah vii. in particular and as a matter of fact says anything whatever about the King-Redeemer; if not, the argument that the birth predicted in that chapter must be a birth from a virgin falls to the ground. The mythological method is excellent in itself and has served to illumine both the Old Testament and the New; but, like any other method, it is capable of being wrongly applied. In dissenting from Jeremias I must therefore be understood as dissenting, on this as on a former <sup>1</sup> occasion, not from the method but from a particular application of it.

With regard to the original meaning of Isaiah vii. 14 I shall content myself with indicating briefly the main grounds on which the theory that a supernatural birth was intended by Isaiah is based and what appears to me to be the inadequacy or uncertainty of these grounds; for a fuller discussion of details I must refer to my forthcoming commentary. The grounds, then, seem to be as follows:—

(1) The narrative implies that the sign must be miraculous;

(2) The statement that the child will eat “curds and honey” implies his divine character;

(3) The way in which Immanuel is addressed in viii. 8, “the outstretching of his wings shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel,” implies that he was to be “the guardian of his country now, its deliverer and governor hereafter,”<sup>2</sup> i.e. the King-Redeemer who, according to Jeremias, was everywhere expected to be born of a virgin.

The first of these grounds appears to me to rest on a misconception of what מָלְאִים means, or on a wrong inference from the narrative. A “sign” need not be, as Christian

<sup>1</sup> See EXPOSITOR, May and June, 1908, pp. 385-402, 530-546.

<sup>2</sup> S. R. Driver, *Isaiah: his Life and Times*, p. 42.

writers ever since Justin have claimed that it must, anything that we should term miraculous. And, as I read the narrative, there is not the slightest reason to infer that Isaiah, having promised Ahaz any miraculous sign he liked to ask, was still bound, after the king's refusal, to announce as the sign of God's own choosing something even more miraculous. For such an inference there might be some justification if the sign offered to Ahaz, but refused by him, and the sign thrust upon him against his will, had been intended to serve the same purpose; but they were not. The sign which was offered to Ahaz, which was at his choice to be as miraculous as he pleased, was to serve an *immediate* purpose; it was to convince the king then and there, and so lead him to accept at the moment the advice of the prophet and to follow immediately the course which Yahweh through His prophet revealed to him to be the right one. The sign actually announced, which was not of the king's choosing, but of Yahweh's, was to serve a *future* purpose; it was to remind king, court and people that Isaiah had spoken true, that his steadfast heart was justified and the trembling hearts of the king and court unjustified.

We need not say that the king's unbelief, or contumacy, made a miracle *impossible*, but, since no work, however mighty, was going to change the king's policy, it certainly did render a miracle *unnecessary*.

The statement that the child is to "eat curds and honey" is curiously used by some of the mythologists. It proves, so it is urged, that this child is divine; for "curds and honey" are mythologically "the food of the gods"; and whoso eats the food of the gods is a god. Yet at the same time it is held that "eating curds and honey" is in this passage a sign of a privation! Into a discussion of this curious combination I will not enter here, nor will I dispute that the phrase *may* be of mythological origin; but this

the conclusion of the chapter surely allows us to say that eating curds and honey was no necessary proof that the eater was a god, for surely not every survivor in Judah was to turn into a god; yet "curds and honey shall every one eat that is left in the midst of the land" (Isaiah vii. 22).

Certainly the strongest ground for believing that the child who was to be born was to be the deliverer of his people is to be found in the address to Immanuel in viii. 8*b*, if Immanuel really is addressed there. But the passage is ambiguous; it is not necessary to treat Immanuel as a vocative, and as a matter of fact the Greek translators understood it otherwise.

Against these doubtful and inadequate reasons, I set these:—

(1) Admittedly the passage makes no clear statement that a child will be borne by a virgin. We are asked by Jeremias to *infer* this because the Redeemer was *everywhere*<sup>1</sup> expected to be born of a virgin. But this *everywhere* is a general conclusion from an inadequate number of instances; as a matter of fact we have as yet no *proof* that such a belief was current in Judah in particular in the middle of the eighth century B.C.

But (2) even if this belief prevailed, the passage in Isaiah says absolutely nothing about either the virginity of the mother or the redeeming work of the child. And it would be a peculiarly vicious circular argument to assert that the child must be the Redeemer because His birth is miraculous, and that His birth must be miraculous because He is the Redeemer. Isaiah terms the mother עלמה, a term that was doubtless most often used of *unmarried* women, but at the same time was entirely neutral as to the virginity of those

<sup>1</sup> The argument is stated far more cautiously by Dr Burney, who claims, rightly enough of course, that *some* heroes, including heroes of Hebrew story (Isaac), were born in remarkable circumstances.

to whom it was applied. Had the prophet a virgin in mind, why did he fail to use the term בתולה ? If he was speaking of the Queen of Heaven why did he not call her מלכת השמים ? So again if the prophet was really thinking of a redeemer, why does he go out of his way to ignore the part he was to play in the redemption of which he speaks ? It would have been perfectly simple to say, Before the child shall know to refuse the evil, etc. . . . he shall reduce to ruins the land whose two kings thou abhorrest, *if* that was what the prophet meant ; but why does he use the passive voice in speaking of deliverance, thereby excluding every particular reference to the agent in deliverance, if he really predicts not only deliverance but also a Messianic deliverer ? I cannot help thinking that if we could approach Isaiah vii. without presuppositions we should no more think that Immanuel was to deliver Judah than that Hosea's son Jezreel was himself to take vengeance on the House of Jehu.

I conclude, then, that Isaiah vii. 14 made no allusion either to a Redeemer or to a Virgin Birth. Nevertheless, both these allusions were found in, or read into, this passage by the writer of Matthew i. 15-23 or his source. How much earlier was the passage so understood ?

There are really only two directions in which we may look for light on this question—a passage in the Book of Micah (v. 1 ff., E. V. *vs.* 2 ff.) and the translation of Isaiah vii. 14 in the Septuagint.

It is commonly assumed that the words עד עת יילדה ילדה, “until the time that she that shall give birth shall have given birth,” refer to and interpret Isaiah vii. 14. This is hardly certain ; indeed it seems more probable that, if the author of Micah v. 2 had any Scripture particularly in mind, it was the words כי ילד לנו in Isaiah ix. 5 rather than בן העלמה הרה וילדת בן that were running in his head, for he employs an assonance ילדה ילדה that recalls ילד ילד

of Isaiah ix. 5, but he fails to repeat the term העלמה characteristic of Isaiah vii. 14. However, if it be granted that Micah v. 2 refers to and interprets Isaiah vii. 14, how much follows? The child to be born is understood to be the coming Deliverer, but Micah is even more indefinite with regard to the mother than Isaiah vii. 14. Of course *if* the King-Deliverer *everywhere* appears as the son of a virgin, the Deliverer of Micah v. 2 is virgin-born; but if we are not prepared to admit a universal conclusion based on a few instances only, and examine Micah v. 2 without mythological prejudice, there is no hint there of virgin birth. Quite the reverse; no expression more colourless with regard to the mother could have been chosen. This sentence means—until his mother, whoever she may be, shall have borne him; it is merely a Hebrew alternative to using the passive voice—until he is born; cf. Ges.-Kautzsch, *Hebrew Grammar*, 144e. If Isaiah vii. 14 and Micah v. 2 both referred to a current belief that the Deliverer of Israel was to be born of a virgin, it is exceedingly strange that *both* passages should avoid using the appropriate term בתולה, *virgin*, of the mother.

We come now to the LXX translation of Isaiah vii. 14. And here attention has generally been turned almost exclusively on the rendering of the Hebrew העלמה by ἡ παρθένος. At first sight, if we look back from the use of Isaiah vii. 14 in Matthew i. 23 and keep our eyes fixed on the word παρθένος and away from other points in the translation, it may seem probable that the Greek translators were thinking of a virgin birth. For though it is indeed possible that even παρθένος was occasionally used loosely in Greek of persons not virgin, yet certainly παρθένος, unlike the Hebrew העלמה, was the most suitable word for any one to use who wanted to lay stress on the virginity of a woman.

But on closer examination it seems at least doubtful

whether the translators were thinking either of the Messiah or of the virginity of the mother of the child to be called Immanuel. Of the reasons alleged, and mentioned above, for believing that Immanuel was intended by Isaiah to be the Messiah, the third and strongest is inapplicable if we are considering the intention of the LXX. Whatever be the case with the Hebrew original, the LXX knows nothing of Judah as "Immanuel's land"—a description which, on one interpretation of the Hebrew text of viii. 8, was applied to Judah by Isaiah; the translation of viii. 8 in the LXX runs—*καὶ ἔσται ἡ παρεμβολὴ αὐτοῦ* (B+ὥστε πληρῶσαι) *τὰ πλάτη τῆς χώρας σου μεθ' ἡμῶν ὁ θεός*, "And his camp shall be the wide spaces of the land. God is with us." What the translators thought about Immanuel and His birth must, then, be gathered entirely from vii. 14–16. Did they understand, and did they wish to convey the idea, that the child was to be born of a virgin mother? I observe—

(1) That the Hebrew *הנה הרה* is ambiguous; it may mean that the future mother is already with child, or is about to be with child. *In the LXX this ambiguity disappears; the pregnancy of the virgin is not a present fact, it has yet to commence.* The Greek renders *הרה* by a future tense, *ἐν γαστρὶ λήμψεται* (B: *ἔξει*, *NAQ*); all, then, that the Greek translators need mean is that a woman *now* virgin will *hereafter*, in the ordinary course of nature losing her virginity, conceive; and this is obviously all that such a passage would convey to any one who came to it without prepossessions. But nothing supernatural, or abnormal, is implied in asserting that a woman virgin at the moment when the assertion is made will at some future moment become pregnant.

(2) *According to the best attested reading of Isaiah vii. 14 LXX the child Immanuel will receive His name from Ahaz, and therefore, presumably, in the intention of the translators,*

the child was to be the son of Ahaz as well as of the *παρθένος*: Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and *ΤΗΟΥ* shalt call His name Emmanuel—so run the words addressed to Ahaz, if *καλέσεις*, the reading of AB, as also of Aq. Symm. Theod., be correct. The variants are *καλέσει* N, *καλέσετε* Q, *καλέσ[ουσι]*ν Γ. These variants in the LXX may very probably be due to a change of interpretation. But it is difficult to believe that those translators who made Ahaz the person who was to confer the name on the child thought of this child as the Messiah, or of the child's mother as virgin at the time of the birth.

How in detail the Greek translators interpreted the passage which they had to translate must of course remain largely a matter of inference; but it is possible to account for their rendering by a Jewish interpretation, which, though certainly incorrect, was widely current later. The child, according to this interpretation, was to be Hezekiah; <sup>1</sup> it would agree with this that Ahaz, the father of Hezekiah, is, according to the LXX (A B *καλέσεις*), to give the child his name. This child, again, according to the Jewish interpretation, was to be the *firstborn* <sup>2</sup> of Ahaz, and, therefore, it would be natural to infer that down to the time that his mother conceived the child, i.e., down to the time of Isaiah's interview with Ahaz, the mother was *παρθένος*, virgin. This, then, may be the reason why the LXX, instead of translating *העלמה* by *νεάνις* as in Ex. ii. 8, Psalm lxxvii. (lxxviii.) 25, Cant. i. 3, vi. 7 (8), translated it *παρθένος* as in Genesis xxiv. 43, where the woman in question was also shortly to be married and therefore, inferentially, at the time virgin.

But as mythological considerations have been brought forward to explain the passage in the original Hebrew, so have they also been brought to explain the Greek transla-

<sup>1</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dial. cum Trypho*, c. 67. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Id. c. 84.

tion. For example, Professor Cheyne cannot otherwise explain the rendering than "as an allusion to a belief current among the translators' contemporaries." "It appears probable that in some of the early Jewish versions of the oriental myth of the Divine Redeemer (which has not, so far as we know as yet, been preserved) the mother of the Holy Child was called a 'virgin,' a term which was applied to "those heaven goddesses (e.g. Istar, Isis, Artemis) who were mothers, but not originally wives—in short 'virgins,' in the sense in which *παρθένος* was applied to the great mother-goddess of Asia Minor."<sup>1</sup> It may be added that women were called *παρθένος* who bare children as a result of intercourse with gods; in *Il. ii.* 512–514 Astyoche, the fruit of whose union with Ares was Ascalaphus and Ialmenes, is called *παρθένος αἰδοίη*, and Eudorus, the son of Polymele by Hermes, is called *παρθένιος* (*Il. xvi.* 179 f.).

It is *possible*, then, if *καλέσεις* is *not* the true text of the LXX in Isaiah vii. 14, that such beliefs as those referred to in the last paragraph may have influenced the translators in rendering *העלמה* by *ἡ παρθένος*, though even in this case the supposition is neither certain nor necessary; and it is altogether improbable, if *καλέσεις* is the true text, for in that case Ahaz was probably understood to be the father of the child and husband of her who before marriage was *παρθένος*. In any case Professor Cheyne seems to me altogether right in insisting that the translation of *העלמה* by *ἡ παρθένος* "is so far from accounting for the belief in the virgin birth of Christ that it requires to be explained itself" (*Bible Problems*, p. 193).

Consequently the Greek version of Isaiah vii. 14 is exceedingly untrustworthy *evidence* that a belief in the virgin birth of the Messiah was current in Jewish circles; if such beliefs can be otherwise proved to have existed, they *may*

<sup>1</sup> T. K. Cheyne, *Bible Problems*, 50–82.



be the explanation of the rendering, but that is a very different matter. So far I have been in the main questioning whether it is *certain*, as Archdeacon Allen asserts and Professor Harnack implies, that Isaiah vii. 14 was interpreted of the virgin birth of the Messiah before it was so interpreted of Jesus Christ. In the lack of clear evidence as to Jewish as distinct from Christian interpretation of the passage in the first century A.D. or earlier, the clear evidence which we do possess as to Jewish interpretation in the second century A.D. is worth a fresh examination. I confine myself to the new Greek translations made in that century, and the evidence of Justin Martyr in the dialogue with Trypho.

Of the new Greek versions of the second century Archdeacon Allen (p. 10) writes : " The fact that the later Greek translators substituted *veâvis* for *παρθένος* and that there are no traces of the supernatural birth of the Messiah in later Jewish literature, is due to anti-Christian polemic." This seems to me to say too much, or too little. I do not question that Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion may have enjoyed a certain controversial warmth and pleasantness of feeling when they substituted *veâvis* for *παρθένος* of the older versions ; but it is too much to say that anti-Christian polemic was the cause, or at least that it was the full cause, of the change. In part the change was due to the greater care of these translators, especially Aquila, for accuracy : *veâvis* is an accurate, *παρθένος* is an inaccurate, rendering of עלמה. We have no right, from the fact that the Jewish translators of the second century A.D. translated accurately where the LXX had translated loosely, to infer that other Jews abandoned a firmly established part of their Messianic doctrine because the Christians had adopted it. The absence of traces of the doctrine of the virgin birth from Rabbinic literature *may* be due to anti-Christian polemic ; but I know of no rigorous proof of this ; and another cause

of that absence is equally possible, even if equally unproved, viz., that the virgin birth as a matter of fact never formed any part of the Rabbinic Messianic speculation, or of Jewish Alexandrian exegesis either before or after the rise of Christianity.

In this connexion Justin's Dialogue seems to me worthy of careful attention. It is the earliest detailed account of Jewish interpretation of Isaiah vii. 14 that we possess. What that interpretation was I have already stated above, and I have suggested that it may have been a traditional interpretation running back to the time of the LXX translation of Isaiah and accounting for the rendering in that version of Isaiah vii. 14.

But I observe here further (1) that Justin uses in proof of the virgin birth of our Lord other passages as well as Isaiah vii. 14. For example in cc. 75, 76 he writes : "If, then, we know that God revealed Himself in so many forms . . . why should we be at a loss and incredulous that, according to the will of the Father of all things, it was possible for Him to be born man by (*διὰ*) the virgin, especially as we have such scriptures, from which it can be plainly perceived that this also happened according to the will of the Father ? For when Daniel speaks of 'one like unto a Son of Man' who received the everlasting kingdom, does he not hint at this very thing ? For in saying 'like unto a Son of Man' he indicates indeed that He appeared and became man, but he makes it plain that he was not of human seed. And the same thing he proclaimed in mystery when he speaks of this stone which was cut out without hands. For the expression 'it was cut out without hands' signified that it is not a work of man, but of the will of the Father and God of all things, who brought Him forth. And when Isaiah says, 'Who shall declare his generation ?' he shews that His descent could not be declared. Now

no one who is a man of men (*ἄνθρωπος ὢν ἐξ ἀνθρώπων*) has a descent that cannot be declared. And when Moses says that He washes His garment in the blood of the grape, does not this signify what I have now often told you is an obscure prediction, viz., that He had blood but not from men; just as not man, but God, has begotten the blood of the vine?" (compare also cc. 43, 67). Is it contended that pre-Christian Jewish exegesis discovered references to the miraculous birth of the Messiah in Daniel ii. 34, Isaiah liii. 8 and Genesis xlix. 11? If not, may we not most reasonably see in the interpretation of Isaiah vii. 14 of the virgin<sup>7</sup> birth an early example of *Christian* exegesis? for we know that Christians with great ingenuity found predictions of Christian facts (or beliefs) in predictions which, apart from their fulfilment, were admitted by the Christians themselves to be obscure, which, in other words, had never been understood by the Jews in the sense that Christian interpreters came to put upon them.

(2) In c. 68 *ad fin.* Justin asserts (a) that the LXX elders explained Isaiah vii. 14 of the virgin birth; (b) that Trypho's teachers, i.e. the Jewish Rabbis, denied the correctness of that interpretation; and (c) that the Rabbis were compelled to admit that the Christian interpretation of certain prophecies "which expressly prove that Christ was to suffer, to be worshipped, and to be called God" was correct, but that they disputed the validity of the references of these prophecies to Jesus.

It will probably be admitted that the first of these assertions rests purely and simply on the occurrence of the word *παρθένος* in Isaiah vii. 14. Justin had no access to a commentary of the translators on their version. But the second assertion is good evidence that the Rabbis, and indeed the Jews generally,<sup>1</sup> known to Justin, knew nothing of any

<sup>1</sup> Justin (c. 49) makes Trypho say, "We all expect that Christ will be a man (born) of men."

*Jewish* interpretation that explained Isaiah vii. 14 of the virgin birth of the Messiah. If by 150 A.D. no trace, apart from the ambiguous rendering of the LXX, of the interpretation among the Jews could be discovered by a keen Christian controversialist, it is a serious question whether only a couple of generations earlier it formed a well-established part of Rabbinic doctrine concerning the Messiah. It may be, therefore, that Isaiah vii. 14 is not a case in which the Jews met the Christian attack by corrupting the testimony of the Scripture, as, according to the charges laid against them by the Christians, they did, not only here but also elsewhere; they may have simply disputed the validity of the reference in Isaiah vii. 14 to Jesus. Christians interpreted the passage of the birth of Jesus, the Jews of the birth of Hezekiah; for the Christian interpretation the inaccurate rendering of עַלְמָה by παρθένος was crucial, for the Hebrew interpretation it was immaterial.

I conclude with a brief summary of my argument. It is asserted by Harnack that Isaiah vii. 14 is a complete explanation of the belief in the virgin birth of our Lord. I have shewn reasons for believing that this is too simple and easy a solution. Isaiah vii. 14 in its original meaning, as indeed Harnack admits, made no reference either to the Messiah or to a virgin birth; and this at least is certain—even a presumption that there is a reference to these things in that passage can only be created by proving such beliefs to have been current in Judah at the time; this proof is lacking. The Greek translation of Isaiah vii. 14, if the reading which A and B agree in supporting is false, might *possibly* be explained as referring to a virgin birth; but at best the theory that Isaiah vii. 14 in the Greek version makes reference to a belief in virgin birth rests on an uncertain and ambiguous interpretation of a badly attested form of the text. We have no other evidence that there was

in any purely Jewish circle any expectation that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. Neither the correction of *παρθένος* into *νεάνις* by Symmachus, Theodotion and Aquila, nor the line of argument in Justin is ground for asserting that such a belief prevailed; and Justin's dialogue rather suggests the reverse. Consequently the Christian belief that Jesus was born of a virgin rests either on fact or on the influence in early Christian circles of Gentile thought.

G. BUCHANAN GRAY.

*A MODERN EXPERT'S JUDGMENT ON THE OLD  
TESTAMENT HISTORICAL WRITINGS.*

FROM our own reading or from some other personal experience, we all know very well what a mass of depreciatory writing with regard to the historical books of the Old Testament has appeared in the more popular journalism of recent times. Even if no other fault-finding words about these books have reached our ears, we must at any rate have heard the shrill cry of the Anti-Semites: "Away with the Old Testament!" But what does modern scientific knowledge tell us about the character of Hebrew historical writing? Many of its representatives, it must be admitted, agree with that minimising depreciatory verdict. For instance, Hugo Winckler's *History of Israel* in two volumes contains incredibly harsh passages on the untrustworthiness of the Old Testament historical books. And even those scholars who approach the question in a more respectful and dignified manner, tell us that in these books we see only the presentation of a "philosophy of history." This is the conclusion of Hermann Schneider, "Privatdozent" at the University of Leipzig, in his book, *Two Essays on the History of Religion* (1909), p. 2, but as if he felt that in pronouncing this judgment he had done too much honour