

THE SEPTUAGINT AND THE VIRGIN BIRTH



Matthew 1:23 "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'"

Two hundred and fifty years before the birth of Jesus, Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-243 B.C.) desired a copy of the Jewish Scriptures for his famous Library at Alexandria. According to tradition, the King employed seventy scribes from Jerusalem to translate the Hebrew writings into Greek; consequently, this translation became known as the Septuagint (or "70" in Greek). So great was the pervasiveness of the Hellenistic culture at that time around the Mediterranean, that the Septuagint became *the* most influential version of the Jewish Scriptures, so much

so that in Jesus' day the Greek translation was more widely read and better known than the Hebrew originals, even in Palestine, even in the Holy Land among Jews. This is apparent to us both from the Dead Sea scrolls and from the Christians Scriptures. For instance, every single time someone quotes the Old Testament in the New Testament, they quote the passage from the Septuagint translation and not the Hebrew original. And two of the most consequential places where this can be seen in the New Testament have been part of our Gospel readings this Advent.

Two weeks ago, for example, the Old Testament lesson was the prophet Isaiah seen comforting the Jewish people exiled in Babylon, who were longing to return to their homeland, longing to return to Jerusalem. There the prophet dreamt of a restoration of Israel, of a second great Exodus of the Jewish people to the Promised Land, a time when the Lord would gather them up in his arms like lambs and carry them in his bosom. A voice cries out, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain." In beautifully poetic language, the author of Isaiah fills the Jewish people in captivity with the hope of returning home.

In the Greek Septuagint of the scroll of Isaiah, there was a slight mistranslation that significantly altered the prophet's

image and can be seen reflected in the Gospel reading that we had two weeks ago. In the original Hebrew, the prepositional phrase "in the wilderness" modified "the way of the Lord," that is, the way of the Lord, the highway back to Jerusalem, would be out there in the wilderness, in the desert between their captivity in Babylon and their homeland in Judea. In the Greek Septuagint, however, that phrase "in the wilderness" was mistranslated so as to modify not where the way of the Lord was to be found, but instead to modify where the voice was that was preparing the way, that 'voice crying out in the wilderness,' a phrase so familiar to us all at Christmas that we are often surprised to find that it is not there in the Book of Isaiah.

Because of the mistranslation and because the Septuagint version was so very popular, most of the Jews in Jesus' days, reading the Greek translation of their own Hebrew Scriptures, were looking for a voice to be crying out in the wilderness to bring them back to God. Whole communities, like the one at Qumran where the Dead Sea scrolls were found, moved out into the dessert to await the great day of the Lord, to be there when the voice appeared. And so, it is little wonder that we are told in the Gospel reading two weeks ago that people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were reported as going out to see and hear John the Baptist. It is no surprise that the Baptist crying out on Jordan's bank was perceived by

many as the one fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, that he was seen and understood as that 'voice crying out in the wilderness.'

In today's Gospel, Matthew quotes other verses from the Prophet Isaiah, "'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'" Matthews sees these verses as proof that Jesus' birth was also foretold by Isaiah and fulfills the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. The only problem is that Matthew is again quoting from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. For the Hebrew original, as you can see in our Old Testament reading in your bulletin this morning, says nothing about a 'virgin.' The original prophecy speaks only of an "almah" in Hebrew, which means a 'maiden', a 'young woman', who according to Isaiah would bear a son during the lifetime of King Ahaz. And this prophecy was thus generally thought by Jews to have been fulfilled in the birth of good King Hezekiah.

In the Greek Septuagint, however, this Hebrew word "almah" was mistranslated into the Greek word, "parthenos" or "virgin," a much stronger word with a different implication than Isaiah's original Hebrew. Moreover, Matthew goes on to suggest that this is now a Messianic prophecy, fulfilled in Jesus' birth. Early Christian writers often used Old Testament references as proof texts in their defense of Jesus, and this was because they were

writing at a time when Christianity was not being well-received in the Jewish synagogues. So, was Matthew overstepping the bounds of Scriptural proof here, and if so, why was he? Well, your answer to that question all depends upon your opinion of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. If you believe that stories of Jesus being born of a virgin were circulating in the early Church independent of this prophecy from Isaiah, then you can well understand Matthew's reading of the Greek Scriptures and seeing this as another Messianic prophecy Jesus fulfilled. Matthew in that case was likely attracted by the reference to a 'virgin' in the Greek version of the prophecy. --- Or was Matthew more attracted by the reference to the child being called "Emmanuel", that is, "God is with us," in which case the reference to the 'virgin' birth may have only been accidentally introduced with this mistranslation. For there is, indeed, scant biblical evidence for the Virgin Birth, other than Matthew and Luke's mention in the first chapters of their Gospels. In fact, there is no further mention of a virgin birth in the remainder of those two Gospels. And the Gospels of Mark and John do not ever refer to a virgin birth, nor does Paul in his numerous letters, or Peter in his early sermons recorded in Acts. There is no other clear passage in the whole of the New Testament asserting this idea. And in the writings of the early Church Fathers, the idea seems to grow only with the acceptance of the

Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and this doctrine only really becomes crucial in the Christological debates about the nature of the divinity of Jesus in the third and fourth centuries.

However, there are other Scriptural passages that suggest something peculiar about Jesus' birth. For instance, opponents of Jesus in Jerusalem confirm a dispute about Jesus' origins in repeated questions to him about his paternity: "Where is your father?" the crowd says at one point, "Abraham is our father . . . We are not born of fornication . . . We know who our father is," (Jn. 8.19, 39, 41) they cry. Perhaps it was well known that Jesus was an illegitimate child of some kind, that he was born out of wedlock, as the Scriptures confirm. There is a rumor among Jewish sources that can be traced back to at least 150 C.E. where Jesus' father was understood to be a particular Roman soldier who served briefly in the region. And there is also a peculiarity in the genealogy ascribed to Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. In that genealogical listing there are only four female ancestors of Jesus named besides his mother --- viz. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, and each of them is known to be a 'fallen woman' of one kind or another. Was the author of the Matthew's genealogy implying something about the only other woman mentioned there, Mary, the mother of Jesus?

So, what if we take this question about Jesus' origins to the extreme. What would it mean if Jesus was really a bastard

child, born out of wedlock, but to an unknown father? What difference would that make to us? It won't change Jesus' humble origins; indeed, it might even add to them. It won't change any of Jesus' teachings or parables or miracles. It won't change how Jesus interacted with others, with the poor, the sick, the lame, with women and Samaritans. It won't change the manner of Jesus' life or death, or the importance of his Resurrection. It might help us explain Jesus' affinity for calling God, "Abba," or "father," as in 'our Father in heaven,' while always calling his mother, only "woman."

But would it change the meaning of Christmas for us, however, and if so, why, or how? What is the story of Christmas other than that of our God's great love for us, for us fallen and sinful human beings that we are, and how that God's incarnate love can heal our wounded souls, calm our troubled waters, mend our broken hearts, and raise us up to God's own glory and likeness, that God has wrought for us a Savior and a Redeemer in Jesus of Nazareth. Come then, let us rejoice in that and be glad. AMEN.