

## WILL A BRIDE CIRCLE A GROOM, OR A DIVINE BABY FORM IN A VIRGIN'S WOMB?<sup>1</sup>

### I. INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the "Virgin Birth" is a foundational "building block" of Christian theology. The monumental significance of this doctrine stems from the fact that it "touches" the other important doctrinal elements of Christianity since it establishes the deity of Jesus and confirms his identity as "God manifest in the flesh". To Christians, if Jesus were not "God", then his sacrificial death for their sins would be a meaningless act, because an imperfect man could not have died for their sins – his death could not have appeased God's demand for justice following the so-called "Fall of Man" in the Garden of Eden. Consequently, it is evident that Christian theology would literally fall apart if the doctrine of the "Virgin Birth" were removed from it. This fact has served as the primary motivation for the unrelenting efforts by Christian apologists, for nearly 20 centuries, to develop arguments that aim to defend this doctrine. These efforts consisted primarily of locating so-called "proof texts" in the Christian "Old Testament" that could be used to support this important doctrine. Some sources cite as many as 10 such passages, three of which serve as the most common defenses of the "Virgin Birth" of Jesus.

The first and most widely used of these "proof text", Isaiah 7:14, was a natural choice since this verse is invoked, albeit incorrectly, by the author of the Gospel of Matthew in his account of the conception and birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25).<sup>2</sup> The next most popular passage, Genesis 3:15, required a some additional "work", since the authors of the New Testament never refer to it, nor quote it, in relation to the "Virgin Birth".<sup>3</sup> The alleged connection of Genesis 3:15 has with the "Virgin Birth" is based on a false premise; namely, that the account of Eve's seed striking

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<sup>1</sup> Transliterations of Hebrew terminology into the Latin alphabet will follow these guidelines:

- Transliterated terminology is shown in ***bold italicized*** font
- The accented syllable in transliterated terminology is shown in **SMALL CAPS** font
- Latin vowel-sounds, A – E – I – O – U, are used (not the English versions thereof!)
- Distinct Hebrew letter that have ambiguous Latin letter sounds are transliterated according to the following rules:
  - A vocalized letter א is transliterated as the equivalent Latin vowel
  - A vocalized letter י is transliterated as the equivalent Latin vowel with an added underscore
  - The letter ה is transliterated as "h"
  - The letter ח is transliterated as "ch"
  - The letter כ is transliterated as "k"
  - The letter ק is transliterated as "q"
  - A vocalized שְׁוָא (וְ) אֵיִשׁ – **SHVA NA** is transliterated as a superscripted "e" following the consonant
  - There is no "doubling" of letters in the transliterations to reflect the **dagesh** (emphasis)

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of Isaiah 7:14, see the essays, *Isaiah 7:14 - PART 1: An Accurate Grammatical Analysis* - [http://thejewishhome.org/counter/Isa714\\_1.pdf](http://thejewishhome.org/counter/Isa714_1.pdf) and *Isaiah 7:14 - PART 2: Refutation of Christian Apologetics* - [http://thejewishhome.org/counter/Isa714\\_2.pdf](http://thejewishhome.org/counter/Isa714_2.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> In the New American Standard Bible (NASB), both Luke 24:27 and Revelation 12:17 cross-reference this verse, though the connection with a "Virgin Birth" is elusive.

the head of the serpent's seed is a prophecy about Jesus, the "seed of a woman", defeating the "devil", of whom the serpent is a metaphor.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, the third most commonly applied passage in defense of the "Virgin Birth", Jeremiah 31:21[22], is examined.<sup>5</sup> A detailed analysis of this verse in its proper context and accurate translation demonstrates that there is no basis for its claimed connection to the "Virgin Birth".

## II. THE VERSE JEREMIAH 31:21[22]

The Hebrew text of the verse Jeremiah 31:21[22] along with its corresponding Jewish and King James Version translations are shown in Table II-1.

**Table II-1 – Jeremiah 31:21[22]**

Source	Passage Citation	Text
תנ"ך [T <sup>o</sup> NACH – Hebrew Bible]	ירמיהו לא, כא	עַד־מָתִי תִתְחַמְקִין הַבַּת הַשׁוֹבֵבָה כִּי־בָרָא יְהוָה חֲדָשָׁה בְּאֶרֶץ נִקְבָה תְּסוּבֵב גִּבּוֹר:
Jewish Translation from the Hebrew	Jeremiah 31:21	How long will you hide, O backsliding daughter? For the Lord has created a new thing [or, novelty] on the earth, a woman [or, female] shall encircle a man.
King James Version "Old Testament"	Jeremiah 31:22	How long wilt thou go about, O thou backsliding daughter? for the LORD hath created a new thing in the earth, A woman shall compass a man.

The two translations are reasonably consistent. The highlighted portion of the text is the focus of the analysis that follows.

## III. THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

By infusing a significant amount of Christology into their interpretations of Jeremiah 31, Christian missionaries assert that the coming of Jesus and the "New Covenant" are prophesied in the chapter. Specifically, the claim is that Jeremiah 31:21[22] speaks of something new that results from an act of creation by God, and is not the outcome of anything done by man; something that had never before been witnessed on earth – that a woman will conceive a child in an unusual manner. The assertion here is that the phrase "A woman shall compass a man" is a metaphor that figuratively describes a woman conceiving a male child, but not via sexual intercourse with a man. To support this claim, Christian missionaries also misapply

<sup>4</sup> The "seed of a woman" is claimed to imply a conception by a woman that did not involve her insemination by a mortal man. For a detailed analysis, see the essay, *Genesis 3:15 – The "Seed of A Woman": A Kernel of Deception* - <http://thejewishhome.org/counter/Gen315.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> In cases where verse numbers differ between the Hebrew Bible and the Christian "Old Testament", the citation shows the verse number in the Hebrew Bible followed by the verse number in the Christian "Old Testament" in brackets. Example: Jeremiah 31:21[22].

an earlier verse, Jeremiah 31:14[15], a verse that is "quoted" by the author of the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 2:18) as a prophecy that was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

Two main arguments are generally used to justify this interpretation. First, it is suggested that there are similarities between this alleged prophecy of the "Virgin Birth" and the earlier Isaiah 7:14. The claim is that both passages tell of a great and wondrous feat that will be caused at God's behest, that they refer to an unborn male child being in his mother's womb, and that they both allude to a man's dependence on a woman.

The other argument is based on speculations concerning the application of some Hebrew terminology in the verse. Specifically, it is claimed that the verb בָּרָא (*bara*), **[he] created**, was used ostensibly to denote a divine act of creating something out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) rather than making or forming something out of existing matter. It is also claimed that the use of the noun נְקִיבָה (*n<sup>e</sup>qevah*), **a [generic] female**, is an uncommon reference to **a woman** in the Hebrew Bible as compared with the noun אִשָּׁה (*ishah*), which is the common application. Accordingly, it must have been used here for a special reason. Similarly, the claim continues with the assertion that the use of the noun גִּבּוֹר (*gaver*) [a variant of the noun גִּבּוֹר (*gever*)], **a man**, is unusual as compared with the noun אִישׁ (*ish*), which is the common application.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, it must also have a special significance.

The Christian missionary argument combines these points and turns the verse into a prophecy that foretells the advent of a new creation by God – the "Virgin Birth", the miracle of an earthly woman who will conceive through an act of divine creation in which she maintains her virginity and holds in her womb a male child. This child will be born and will turn into a mighty man, Jesus, claimed to be God manifest in the flesh.

#### IV. THE JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

Chapters 30 and 31 in the Book of Jeremiah are messianic texts with oracles of consolation for Israel. They offer comfort and hope for the future via a prophetic theme of a national redemption and restoration for Israel, which envisions the return of the exiles to the Land of Israel. This heartening message of hope and encouragement to the Jewish people in their darkest times, as well as a message about the efficacy of repentance, are likely to be the reasons that a portion of this text found its way into the Jewish liturgy. The passage Jeremiah 31:1-19 was selected by the Sages in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. as a substitute for the designated

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<sup>6</sup> The failure of Matthew 2:18 as a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:14[15] is discussed in another essay, *Matthew 2: Is it False or Is it True?* - <http://thejewishhome.org/counter/Mt2FalseTrue.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Depending on the specific context of a passage, גִּבּוֹר can also mean **a hero, a [generic] male, a powerful man, a valiant man, a virile man**. Nothing in the context of Jeremiah 31:21[22] indicates that anything other than the meaning, **a man**, is called for.

portion from the Torah that was to be read in public on the second day of **ROSH haShANAH**.<sup>8,9</sup> It is a most appropriate theme for the start of the period of the ten days of awe and penitence that commence on **ROSH haShANAH** and end on **YOM KIPPUR**.

Though Jeremiah 31:21[22] is not part of the liturgical passage noted above, the verse is still part of the overall theme. According to one interpretation, it metaphorically points at the future reconciliation of Israel with God. In fact, it is the last verse in a passage that speaks of the restoration of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Jeremiah 31:1-19[2-20]; the restoration of the Kingdom of Judah is addressed in Jeremiah 31:23-25[24-26]). The Northern Kingdom of Israel, which was exiled and widely dispersed due to its falling into idolatry, will not hesitate nor waver in its people's **tshuvah** (return to God).

The same interpretation also follows from the literal reading of this verse. Whereas in courtship it is customary for a man to court a woman, the newly created phenomenon will see a role-reversal where a woman will court a man. With God often portrayed in the Hebrew Bible as "Husband" of Israel (e.g., Isaiah 50:1; Jeremiah 31:31[32]; Hosea 2:18), Jeremiah foretells that Israel will eventually repent and seek God.

The prophet Hosea describes a similar scenario:

**Hosea 3:4-5 – (4) For the people of Israel shall remain many days without a king, and without a nobleman, and without a sacrifice, and without a pillar, and without an ephod, and without teraphim; (5) Afterwards, shall the people of Israel return, and seek the Lord their God and David their king; and they shall fear the Lord and His goodness in the end of days.**

The reference to "the end of days" here points to the messianic era.

**An anecdotal note:** A well-known custom, the origin of which is commonly attributed to Jeremiah 31:21[22], is followed in traditional Jewish wedding ceremonies, where the bride circles (walks around) the groom under the חופה (**hUPAH**), **wedding canopy**, before the officiating Rabbi begins the formal wedding ceremony. The bride will make either three or seven circles around the groom, depending on which particular tradition the respective families follow, and various symbolisms are associated with the circling as well as with the number of revolutions. For example, in some traditions the circling symbolizes the shift in the bride's commitment priorities from her parents to her husband, and there are other symbolisms. In some traditions the 7 rounds recall the 7 times the *T'filin* strap is wrapped around a man's arm symbolically binding himself in love to God and, again, there are others. The tradition of 3 revolutions comes from Hosea 2:21-22 where God says to the Jewish

<sup>8</sup> In some Jewish editions this is Jeremiah 31:2-20, where Chapter 31 starts with what is normally Jeremiah 30:25. This is also the way the chapter is numbered in Christian Bibles.

<sup>9</sup> During the period in which the Land of Israel was under Greek occupation, the reading of Torah was prohibited by the then ruling Greek authorities. Following the defeat of the Greeks by the Maccabees, public reading of Torah was commenced, and the parallel readings from Prophets have remained part of the Jewish tradition ever since.

people: "I will betroth you to Me forever; and I will betroth you to Me with righteousness and with justice and with loving-kindness and with mercy; and I will betroth you to Me with faith". A man recites this passage at the beginning of the weekday morning service while wrapping the *T'filin* strap of the hand 3 times around the middle finger after donning the head *T'filin*.

## V. WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION?

The Christian interpretation of Jeremiah 31:21[22] as a so-called "proof text" for the "Virgin Birth" is riddled with serious flaws that are discussed below.

### A. Lack of support from the New Testament

The authors of the New Testament never refer to Jeremiah 31:21[22], which implies that its usage as a "proof text" came later on. This is similar to the case of Genesis 3:15 (which, unlike Jeremiah 31:21[22], is referenced in the New Testament), in that the "seed of a woman" argument was fashioned at a later time to defend the claim that the "Virgin Birth" is foretold in the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps, as the work of the Jewish polemicists started to take its toll, Christian theologians felt the need to bolster the foundations on which the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 was resting.

### B. Misapplication and misinterpretation of Hebrew terminology

An analysis of the Hebrew terminology and its proper usage in the Hebrew Bible reveals how, in fashioning their argument, Christian apologists not only misapply the meanings of key Hebrew words in this verse, they also read into them various ideas that the text does not contain.

- † **Christian Claim:** The Hebrew verb בָּרָא is used here for a special reason, which is to signal the advent of a future miracle from God, something that never occurred in past.
- ☆ **Jewish Response:** The verb בָּרָא is applied in the Hebrew Bible on 48 occasions. In all instances, the reference is to something that God created or formed, though it does not exclusively apply to *ex nihilo* creations, as the following examples demonstrate:

**Isaiah 43:1,7** – (1) And now, so said the Lord, your Creator [בֹּרְאֵךְ (*bora'acha*)], O Jacob, and the One Who formed you [יְיָצְרֶךָ (*yotsercha*)], O Israel, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, and I called by your name, you are Mine.

(7) Everyone that is called by My name, and from My glory I created him [בָּרָאתיו (*braTIV*)], I formed him [יִצְרֵתיו (*y'tsartIV*)], I made him [עָשִׂיתיו (*asitIV*)] too.

**Isaiah 45:7** – Who forms [יוֹצֵר (*yotSER*)] light and creates [וּבֹרֵא (*u'vORE*)] darkness, Who makes [לְשֵׁה (*OSEH*)] peace and creates [וּבֹרֵא (*u'vORE*)] evil; I am the Lord, Who makes all these.

**Isaiah 65:18** – But rejoice and exult forever [in] what I create [בִּרְאָה (VORE)], for behold I create [בִּרְאָה] Jerusalem a rejoicing and its people an exultation.

**Amos 4:13** – For behold, He forms [יִצְרָה] mountains and creates [וּבְרָא (U'VORE)] the wind, and declares to man what his speech is; He makes [לַעֲשֶׂה] dawn into darkness, and treads on the high places of the earth; the Lord God of Hosts is His Name.

Clearly, not all applications indicate and refer to *ex nihilo* creative acts. In fact, when something is the result of an act of God, these verbs appear to be used interchangeably, as demonstrated in the following verses:

**Genesis 1:27** - And God created [וַיִּבְרָא (va'yivRA)] man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

**Genesis 2:7** - And the Lord God formed [וַיִּצְרֶה (va'yitSER)] man of dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living soul.

The same idea is also demonstrated in the following verse:

**Jeremiah 10:16** - Not like these is Jacob's portion, for He is the One Who forms [וַיִּצְרֶה] everything, and Israel is the tribe of His inheritance; the Lord of Hosts is His name." [See also Jeremiah 51:19.]

Therefore, the claimed "special" reason for Jeremiah's use of the verb בָּרָא in Jeremiah 31:21[22] has no support in the Hebrew Bible.

The reference to that which will be created is הַדָּשָׁה (*hadashah*), the exact form of which appears in the Hebrew Bible on 20 occasions (3 times with the definite article and 17 times in the indefinite form). Although this term is applied as an adjective in most instances, it is also used in the Hebrew Bible as a noun, meaning **a new thing** or **a novelty**. The two cases of interest to the present analysis are those in which some action by God causes "a new thing" to occur, namely, Jeremiah 31:21[22] and this verse:

**Isaiah 43:19** - Behold I am making a new thing [וְעַתָּה יִצְרֶה (oseh hadashah)], now it will sprout, indeed you shall know it; I will also place a road in the desert, rivers in the wasteland.

Here, too, God will cause something to take place that has not existed in the past – plants will sprout in the desert, a road will pass through it, and rivers will flow in it.

‡ **Christian Claim:** The application of the uncommon noun נְקִיבָה to denote a woman carries a special significance – it refers to "a virgin".

- ✧ **Jewish Response:** This noun appears in the Hebrew Bible on 22 occasions, all of which are in the context of a **[generic] female**. A study of these 22 applications reveals that the noun is used in reference to "a woman" on 13 occasions, and in nine cases to "a female" of clean animals of the kind that could be used for sacrificial offerings. Consequently, the noun נְקִיָּה does not mean "a virgin". This idea is not present in the text; rather, the claimed "significance" has been read into it.
  
- ✝ **Christian Claim:** The use of **[she] shall compass**, since it speaks of "a virgin" who is pregnant, is a reference to her womb that contains the fetus.
  
- ✧ **Jewish Response:** The interpretation of "compassing" as a woman's womb holding a fetus is contrived since none of the 162 applications in the Hebrew Bible of the verb לָסַב\לְסַב (lasov/lisbov), **to encircle, to surround, to encompass**, refers to a female's womb, neither in a literal sense nor as a metaphor. The verb in Jeremiah 31:21[22], וְתִסְוֶה (ʿsovev), **[she] shall encircle**, is a conjugation of the verb in the singular, 3<sup>rd</sup>-person, feminine, future tense. Clearly, the Christian claim reads into the text a meaning that is not present in it.
  
- ✝ **Christian Claim:** The use of נָבִיִּם is unusual and indicates the future advent of "a special man", "a mighty man". Given the special significance attributed to the other elements in this verse, the reference here must be to the "mighty man" Jesus – "God" manifest in the flesh.
  
- ✧ **Jewish Response:** The nouns נָבִיִּם and נְבִיִּם appear in the Hebrew Bible (both in the singular and plural) a combined 66 times. None of the 66 applications assigns this noun to God, nor do any of the cases indicate some "familial" relationship of the man to God. Quite to the contrary, the usage generally describes a mortal man, such as shown by the following examples:

**Proverbs 28:31** - To be partial is not good, but for a piece of bread a man [נָבִיִּם] will sin.

**Job 14:10** - And a man [נָבִיִּם] will die and he is weakened; man perishes and where is he?

**Lamentations 3:39** - Why should a living man complain? A man [נָבִיִּם] for his sins!

The theological problem that Christianity incurs by referring to Jesus as נָבִיִּם is obvious: it renders him a mortal man and a sinner. Once again, the claim reads into the text something that is not there.

**Conclusion:** The correct reading and interpretation of the Hebrew text of Jeremiah 31:21[22] do not support the claims by Christian missionaries.

## **VI. SUMMARY**

Although Jeremiah 31:21[22] is not as widely used to support the "Virgin Birth" as is Isaiah 7:14, together with Genesis 3:15 it forms the primary "backup portfolio" of "proof texts" for the "Virgin Birth". It is noteworthy that, while the New Testament points to Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy fulfilled in the "Virgin Birth" of Jesus (Matthew 1:20-23), and refers to Genesis 3:15 for reasons unrelated to the "Virgin Birth", Jeremiah 31:21[22] is never invoked or alluded to by any of the New Testament authors. This fact alone weakens the argument, and it also shows this so-called "proof text" was designed *ex post facto* for defending this doctrine, as is also the case with Genesis 3:15.

The analysis of the Hebrew terminology clearly demonstrated that the Christian missionary claims about this verse are based on mistranslation, misinterpretation, and the imputation of meanings to the Hebrew text that simply do not exist within it.

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