

THE HOLY ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF BOSTON
His Eminence, Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

NATIVITY ENCYCLICAL
of
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Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Emmanuel
(Esaias 7:14)

My beloved Orthodox Christians:

It has become a custom in our increasingly secular society to attack or ridicule the Faith of the Christians. This phenomenon is evident especially around the season of Western Christmas, when newspaper articles and popular periodicals seem to try to outdo each other in publishing material that attempt to refute basic Christian tenants, such as belief in the miracles of Christ, the prophecies concerning His incarnate appearance among us, and especially His birth of the Virgin. This last teaching seems to vex them beyond words; they will embrace anything they can find that appears to refute this doctrine.

One of the arguments they use is that the Hebrew text of the Prophet Esaias which foretells our Saviour's birth of the Virgin does not actually support this Christian teaching. The Hebrew word *almah*, they say, does not mean "virgin;" it means "young woman."

But is this actually so?

On other occasions, I have mentioned an incident that took place many years ago. After his graduation, a fellow student of mine from the seminary I attended decided to continue his theological studies at Harvard University (which I feel, was a mistake). Among the various courses he attended was one on the Old Testament. When the professor came to the famous verse in the Prophet Esaias, he went to great lengths to demonstrate that the Hebrew text says "young woman."

At this point in the lecture, a young Jewish woman interrupted him and said, "I'm sorry, but you are wrong. Many of us Jews believe that the Messiah is to be born of a virgin. Proof of this is that when Jewish scholars in Alexandria translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek some three hundred years before the Common Era [that is, before Christ], they used the Greek word *parthénos*, which can only mean 'virgin,' not 'young woman.'" The professor, who claimed to be a Christian, was embarrassed by the words of his Jewish student and immediately went on to another topic.

More recently, yet another testimony concerning this important matter appeared in an article published in a Protestant periodical. This is what the article said:

The Septuagint is an authorized translation of the Bible into Greek, the work of Jewish scholars. Their translation of Is. 7:14 is an excellent one. In this translation, [almost three] hundred years before Christ, long before the Jewish bias against Christ, "seventy" Jewish scholars, translating for Jews and living twenty-two hundred years closer to the original Hebrew word *almah* than we do, translated it with "virgin" "*parthénos*". Whatever difficulties they may have experienced with the text and its historical setting, they were convinced that *almah* means "virgin." This "*parthénos*" was kept in their Bible and read there by the Jews for [almost four] centuries. Not until 130 A. D., a hundred years after Christ, did they change [its interpretation].

(*Christian News*, Nov. 28, 2011)

These are powerful and irrefutable arguments that bear witness to the truth of our Orthodox Christian beliefs.

We should not be surprised that our secular society rejects these teachings. Has this not always been the case?

But as for us, let us rejoice in the mighty deeds that God has wrought for our salvation. One of the most beautiful and instructive hymns of our Church that speaks of our Saviour's redemptive work is the Expostilation of Matins of the Nativity of Christ.

This is what it tells us:

From the heights our Saviour, Christ,
the Day-Spring of the East is come
To visit us; and we, who once
were in the shadow and the dark,
Behold, now we have found the truth;
for from a Holy Virgin,
The Lord hath been born today.

My beloved Christians: Christ is born, exalt Him!

Your fervent suppliant unto God,

✠ Ephraim, Metropolitan of Boston

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Nativity of Christ, 2011

Protocol Number 2914