

an open letter
to a seminarian's letter rec'd. today

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DOWN WITH JEW-BASHING & CHRISTIAN-BASHING!

Dear _____,

Reference: Isaiah 7.14

I can understand your distress over what you were taught, by a church-bashing professor, was a fact, viz that "'the church'...[committed] a betrayal of the truth" in teaching that Isaiah 7.14 refers to a "virgin" (thus bridging to, making Isaiah a foreteller of, the virgin birth of Jesus). I promise to try to avoid putting too much on your plate, & think I can manage it, as you have a huge appetite for what used to be called (& I continue to use the phrase, as it's not been adequately replaced) "the things of God."

1 Our country's in an ugly mood of moral confusion (eg, who lied, Clarence or Anita?), & millions are getting some self-righteous relief by the will to bash & by doing it, flailing around in hope of hitting some -body/-people who (they feel) deserve it. Here the PC (politically correct) rules are strict as to what you can bash (whites, esp. white males; Christians, the church[es], the Bible) & what you can't ("people of color," women, Jews, homosexuals, Native Americans, etc.). Poor Columbus! He was white, male, Christian, Eurocentric, a man of his time in his sensitivities, everything PC-wrong with him!

2 MINOR INSTANCE: Pilgrim-bashing, especially around Thanksgiving Day. It's so common on Cape Cod that many engage in it ignorantly & need to be straightened out, as CCT columnist Burkes yesterday (letter here) admits I did her. Burkes, who is nonwhite, admits the error I called her on, but pleads "I don't ever 'bash' anybody." Even if she's never a conscious basher but sometimes an unconscious one, her behavior puts her in the category she abjures, viz those who "repeat those lies to our children." Truman's courting letters contain unflattering references to "niggers" & "Chinaman": would Burkes, a black, considers those allusions innocent because ignorant? Rather, is not ignorance a firm compotent in all prejudice? So she should say "I don't ever *consciously* 'bash' anybody." Of course she may plead that "bash" implies consciousness, but the victims of it would counter that, many of them adding that unconscious bashing is even more harmful & frightening....Every year here on Cape Cod we get the same old Pilgrim-bashing quip that "Plymouth Rock should have landed on the Pilgrims rather than the reverse."

3 MAJOR INSTANCES: Jew-bashing (antijudaism [against the way of life] & antisemitism [against the people]) & Christian-bashing (antichristianism [against the way of life & the people]). The latter has gained force since Shoa-Holocaust, many breast-beating Christians joining Jews & pagans in bashing this & that about Christianity, especially the New Testament & the classical Christian reading of the Old Testament. So much for the background & context of what I'm trying to say to you in this letter.

4 Ignorantly, or deliberately to make Christians look bad, the following "story" (bad sense) gets told about "virgin" in Is.7.14: The Hebrew means just "young woman," but the Christians narrowed it down to "virgin" so as to find ("plant" is the meaning) Jesus' virgin birth in Isaiah, the conjurer trick of putting the rabbit in the hat when you're not looking. How right Francis Bacon was that "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing"! But this "myth" (bad sense) is carried on a darker underwave than ignorance. The history of interpretation includes malice, ill-will, the desire to smear, as well as ignorance. Your

Columnist admits historical error

In response to Willis Elliott's Oct. 17 letter, I don't ever "bash" anybody. But he is correct that my Oct. 11 column confused the Pilgrims of the Plymouth Company with the intolerant Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, although the former was absorbed by the latter in 1691.

However, what motivated my article was that if we don't free ourselves from the lies we were taught about our history, and continue to repeat those lies to our children, we will never be rid of the intellectual slavery that prevents us from solving our social problems.

BETTY BURKES
Eastham

professor perverted you here, & you honestly transmit your acquired darkness as "I really consider this type of approach by 'the church' as a betrayal of the truth." Betrayal is indeed present, but you have mislocated it, following your professor (Christian or Jew, you don't say).

5 The Jews, not the Christians, are responsible for "virgin" in Is.7.14. Centuries before Jesus, great Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Bible into the Greek form that became the dominant text for Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews & virtually the official text for almost all Christians of the first four centuries AD/CE ("in the year of our Lord [Jesus]," & "Common Era": I use the two together): "The Christian Bible" (eg, Codex Sinaiticus, on prominent display in the British Library) is entirely in Greek, OT* as well as NT. *Septuagint (Lat.,70).

6 The force of this fact can be felt by stating it another way: The spiritual & intellectual formation of the early Christians (somewhat excepting, of course, those few who had a synagogue background) was not on the basis of the Hebrew-Aramaic Bible but on the LXX (so-called because [says Aristee's Letter] "seventy" Jewish scholars from Jerusalem made the translation). The story is repeated by Philo, the great 1st-c.AD/CE Jewish philosopher, & exists in the writings of virtually every early-church "father." One feature of the story is that all 70 (or 72, if six from each tribe) agreed on everything: so all agreed that (Heb.) *ʿalmah* should be translated not "young woman" but, more narrowly, "virgin" (Gk., παρθένης - *parthenos*, properly rendered as *virgo* in the Vulgate, till 1946 the official study-Bible for Roman Catholics).

7 What the data rule out is dogmatism, certainty on the right (such as in fundamentalism) or on the left (such as in what I call liberal-fundamentalism--your professor, eg)? If Is. wanted "virgin," why didn't he write the Heb. for it, viz *bethulah*? But if the LXX wanted the broader translation, why didn't it use νεανίς - *neanis*, "young woman" (esp. "unmarried young woman," & thus presumably, in that culture, a virgin; cp. our "maiden" [RHD²]; or damsel, girl)? How unaccommodating the ancients are where we want precision! Or were they precise in a different sense?...Under the pressures of Christian competition, the Jews abandoned the LXX & made fresh translations (Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion--all of which have "young woman" to replace the LXX's "virgin")....A further disincentive to dogmatism is the imperfections of the Hebrew & Greek texts available to us. Frequently the LXX rendering is preferred by translators, as making better sense--often the presumption being that a better Hebrew text lies behind the LXX, though now DDS (Dead Sea Scroll) Is. is casting this problem in a different light.

8 The authority of any sacred original or translation depends on how one views it vis-a-vis divine revelation. Shocking though the thought be to the children of Renaissance-Enlightenment, the pious may believe in an evolutionary disclosure doctrine, (here) the holy Spirit having more clearly disclosed "the Word" in the LXX than in the Hebrew. Old teacher of Hebrew & Greek that I am, I find that bit of piety hard to swallow, though not to conceive & even honor. But Greek was the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean world, cradle of Christianity & of the West; & the Greek Bible (at first, the LXX & some letters of Paul) was the literary medium of evangelism. The (Harper/94) CYCLOPAEDIA OF BIBLICAL, THEOL. & ECCL. LITERATURE, in its (our-size-page) ca.140 pp. art. "Septuagint," puts it well: "The language of the Sept. is the mould in which the thoughts and expressions of the apostles and evangelists are cast. In this version Divine Truth has taken the Greek language as its shrine, and adapted it to the things of God." The LXX is the mold of the Christian mind. For almost 60 years I've been firm about trying to surface Scripture's original texts & meanings, but I've never let myself be locked into meaning--then & locked out from meaning--now. "New occasions teach new duties," & in the Spirit also new meanings. Certainly Christian seminaries should teach Hebrew; as certainly, "The Old Testament" with Christian historical & contemporary understandings--not just "The Hebrew Bible" as a substitute for "The Old Testament."

9 Anachronism (prolepticism) is an ignorant support for dogmatism. Reading our hermeneutic style into the ancients makes them look bad because modern training feels "right" when put alongside earlier styles. Ancient Jewish & Christian styles of interpretation were more similar than different, but that fact does not serve the purpose of Jew-basher (who wants to "see" the Jews as distorting Scripture) or the Christian-basher (who wants to "see" the Christians as distorting Scripture). The generous spirit that biblical religion, Jewish & Christian, requires of us predisposes us to believe that in those early times each side was doing the best job it could with the tools it had, & neither side was more honest than the other....Why am I so concerned about this? (1) Because through the years it's made me heartsick to hear accusations of dirty Jew tricks & dirty Christian tricks (in the occasion of this letter, the dirty trick your professor pulled on the early Christians in accusing them of a dirty hermeneutic trick). (2) Because I'm concerned about the corrosion of faith from inauthentic acids (as your professor's influence on you). (3) Because I'm concerned that we promote better relations between Jews & Christians, & know that hauling out rusty old weapons from our interfaith conflict through the centuries impedes this progress. And (4) because the God of Truth & Love calls us both to mutuality of penitence, kindness, & eagerness to pursue the truth while we continue to make our necessarily separate witness to the One God.

10 How important is the virgin birth of Jesus.....

....in Christian doctrine? Not very. Half the Gospels don't mention it, & it's nowhere else in NT (though nothing in NT is incongruous with Mt.1 & L.1f). It's, in the Great Story, a substory of means, miracle, mystery, meaning, a substory exceedingly hard to account for if it has no factual basis. But it's much more a religious affirmation about Jesus than a theological explanation of him (as God-human, one parent from each side). Put this sign on it: "GOD AT WORK." The VB does not explain how Jesus could be what & who he was. Rather, the reverse: it's Jesus in his life, death, & resurrection that renders the VB credible....The VB is theologically not important enough for Christians to fight over as to whether it's to be taken literally or symbolically. It's different with the Incarnation. WHETHER God became a human being is infinitely more weighty than, if he did, HOW he did. So with the Resurrection/VB comparison: if I believe Jesus didn't stay dead, as I do, why would I boggle at believing the metaphysical affirmation we call the Incarnation & the historical affirmation we call the VB? (Why swallow the Incarnation & Resurrection & gag on the VB?) I believe, as the Creeds say, that Jesus was "born of the Virgin Mary" as an outward sign of the great cosmic-historical miracle of "Immanuel," that once God himself "shared our common lot" to restore to God our fallen humanity. But the VB, in comparison with Incarnation & Resurrection, is on a lower level, & not to be used (as Protestant fundamentalists do) as a test of faith.

....in biblical interpretation? Not very. The early Christian hermeneutical principle held that the OT, in which the NT is latent, is patent in the NT. All the talk about "virgin" in Is.7.14 was & is less important than the main tangency, which is Jesus' title as "God-with-us" (Heb., "Immanu-el"). Note again that the Incarnation (which the Christians saw, & Christians see, in the baby's name in Is.7.14) far outshines the itching-ears question of how, by what manner of birth. ...Beware of making too much of particular "prophecy"-"fulfillment" loops. The prophets were better as forth-tellers for God than as fore-tellers of the future. But because we are in the same great historical-spiritual movement as they, we can be enriched & encouraged by seeing-making connections. The NIV TOPICAL STUDY BIBLE (Zondervan/89) has 140 "Prophecy" notes, the one on our verse reading thus: "Though an initial fulfillment of the prophecy took place shortly after Isaiah uttered these words (Is.8:3-10), the true fulfillment of a virgin birth took place when the virgin Mary conceived Jesus, the true 'Immanuel,' through the power of the Holy Spirit (see especially Mt.1:18-23)." Here we have another Christian interpretive principle, the principle of nonexhaustion: an ancient prophecy may have both a near (then) & a far (later) fulfillment. Our doctrine of the Second Coming expresses it: Jesus is both "already" & "not yet" (fully) the Messiah. His Kingdom is both come & to come.

11 It's a paradox that the more we learn of the biblical world, the more we know how different it was from ours & how great the efforts we need to put forth to come close to understanding it & the artifacts, anepigraphic (nonliterary) & epigraphic (literary) it produced. To read Is.7.14 aright, we need to know of popular religion's vague expectation of a Wonder Child who upon birth would take over immediately to deliver the people from whatever woe they would be suffering (in the Is. context, delivering the city from external military threats). Did "virgin" better express the Wonder-World atmosphere than "young woman"? Does the Hebrew speak of a "pregnant maiden" or a "maiden who will conceive" (the Hebrew time-sense here undefined)? If the mythic air was supernatural, wasn't it natural to breath "pregnant virgin" into the text? What is vital is that we step back to get the big picture, feel the wider context, enter into the sense of awe & wonder over the present & impending working of God. It's hard to do. Heaven hung low over that world, the sky is high above ours....

12which brings me to another interpretive principle: As you can't truly communicate with a person unless you are aware of their mood, you can't interpret a passage of Scripture unless you enter its mood, feel with it. This is especially true of the Bible, which offers us far more of feelings through metaphors than it does of ideas through abstractions. (In this broad sense, it's far more poetry than prose.) Isaiah was Jesus' favorite book, & the NT is full of the Isaianic feel of the presence of God & of the future. Could anybody dream up more appropriate stories of Immanuel's arrival than the birth narratives of Mt. & L.? And if one discounts them, what put in their place to carry the feeling-freight of the Incarnation event? The Gospels' virgin-birth stories are childlike but far from childish. They have profound depths as well as a charming surface. And they carry more freight, do more business, than unreflective souls can imagine.

13 You are an exceptionally bright & very devout Christian who has not learned the biblical languages & needs the comfort of knowing that there are more helps over the hurdle of that deficiency than is the case with any other literature than the Bible. "Biblical aids" now include, in addition to refinements of reference books, stacks of computer software. Besides many great translations you can lay alongside one another as you study, there are books that put various versions & translations in columns (as 3rd-4th-c. Origen did in his HEXAPLA [parallel columns of Hebrew, Hebrew transliterated into Greek, & the four main Greek translations of the OT]). And books that column biblical materials: Kings-Chronicles, the three Gospels, the four Gospels. And concordances that give you, all in one place, dozens of versions & translations. And many kinds of commentaries & biblical-theological word-books. But suppose a Bible student doesn't want, can't afford, can't house thousands or even hundreds of books.

My advice then is to master the workings of some basic versions & translations. Let's look at a few on Is.7.14.

NIV (New International Version) I've already alluded to in study-Bible form, a form that appears every time a new version (meaning, in the English-Bible tradition) or translation (free from that tradition) is published. This translation & study-edition are good-scholarship conservative-Protestant. But at our verse, I'm distressed to discover no fn. (footnote) recognition, in either, of the "virgin" /"young woman" debate. Allowing only "virgin" violates the principle that the translator is to bring readers as close to the feeling-thinking meaning of the originals as possible. The NIV omission is not due to lack of assiduous scholarship. In our verse, it even notes a small DSS (Dead Sea Scrolls) variant.

REB (Revised English Bible) commits the reverse distortion: no "virgin" in text or mg. (margin)! Here it follows its predecessor, **NEB**.

Both **NRSV** & its predecessor, **RSV**, have "young woman" in text & "virgin" in mg....**TEV** (Today's English Version = Good News Bible) is as RSV/NRSV but adds this excellent note: "...not the particular [Hebrew] term for "virgin," but refers to any young woman of marriageable age. The use of "virgin" in Mt.1:23 reflects a Greek translation of the Old Testament, made some 500 years after Is." ...**RCC JB** (Jerusalem Bible) well has "maiden" in text, "virgin" in mg.