

WILL A BRIDE CIRCLE A GROOM, OR A DIVINE BABY FORM IN A VIRGIN'S WOMB?¹

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 "G-d manifest in the flesh". To Christians, if Jesus were not "G-d", 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 G-d'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 (Matt 1:18-25).² 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".³ 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 the head

¹ 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 (וְּ אֵי וְּ) – ***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)

² For a detailed analysis of Isaiah 7:14, see the essays, [*Isaiah 7:14 - PART 1: An Accurate Grammatical Analysis*](#) and [*Isaiah 7:14 - PART 2: Refutation of Christian Apologetics*](#)

³ 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.

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.⁴

In this essay, the third most commonly applied passage in defense of the "Virgin Birth", Jeremiah 31:21[22]⁵, is examined. 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 ^o NACH – Hebrew Bible]	ירמיהו לא, כא	עַד־מַתִּי תִתְחַמְקִין הַבַּת הַשׁוֹבֵבָה כִּי־בָרָא יְהוָה חֲדָשָׁה בְּאֶרֶץ נִקְבָּה תִּסְוֵב גְּבוּר:
Jewish Translation from the Hebrew	Jeremiah 31:21	How long will you hide, O backsliding daughter? For the L-rd 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" that will then be 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 G-d, 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. Christian missionaries also use for support an earlier

⁴ 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*

⁵ 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].

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

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 G-d'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^eqevah*), 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**⁷, is unusual as compared with the noun אִישׁ (*ish*), which is the common application. 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 G-d – 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 hold in her womb a male child. This child will be born and will turn into a mighty man, Jesus, claimed to be G-d 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, plus 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 passage⁸ Jeremiah 31:1-19 was selected by the

⁶ 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?*

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

Sages in the 2nd century B.C.E. as a substitute⁹ for the designated portion from the Torah that was to be read in public on the second day of **ROSH HaSHANAH**. 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 KIPUR**.

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 G-d. 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 scattered due to it falling into idolatry, will not hesitate nor waver in its people's **tshuvah** (return to G-d).

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 G-d portrayed in the Hebrew Bible as "Husband" of Israel (e.g., Is 50:1; Jer 31:31[32]; Hos 2:18), Jeremiah foretells that Israel will eventually repent and seek G-d.

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 L-rd their G-d and David their king; and they shall fear the L-rd and His goodness in the end of days.

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

Sidebar note: A 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 Rabbi begins the actual wedding ceremony. The bride will make either three or seven circles around the groom, depending on which particular tradition the respective families follow. There are various symbolisms associated with the circling as well as with the number of revolutions, the discussion of which is not relevant to the analysis.

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.

⁹ 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.

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. The case is similar with Genesis 3:15 – although it is referenced in the New Testament, 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 and missionaries not only misapply the meanings of key Hebrew words in this verse, they 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 G-d, 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 G-d 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 L-rd, **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** [בָּרַאתִיו] (*brativ*), **I formed him** [יָצַרְתִּיו] (*ytsartiv*), **I made him** [עָשִׂיתִיו] (*asitiv*) too.

Isaiah 45:7 – Who **forms** [יוֹצֵר] (*yotser*) light and **creates** [וּבֹרֵא] (*u'vore*) darkness, Who **makes** [עֹשֶׂה] (*oseh*) peace and **creates** [וּבֹרֵא] (*u'vore*) evil; I am the L-rd, Who makes all these.

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

Amos 4:13 – For behold, He **forms** [יוֹצֵר] (*yotser*) mountains and **creates** [וּבֹרֵא] (*u'vore*) the wind, and declares to man what his speech is; He **makes** [עֹשֶׂה] (*oseh*) dawn into darkness, and treads on the high places of the earth; the L-rd G-d 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 G-d, these verbs appear to be used interchangeably, as demonstrated in the following verses:

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

Genesis 2:7 - And the L-rd G-d formed [יָצַק] (*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 [יָצַק] *everything*, and Israel is the tribe of His inheritance; the L-rd of Hosts is His name." [See also Jeremiah 51:19.]

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

The reference to that which will be created is הַשְּׂדֵה הַחֲדָשָׁה (*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 G-d causes "a new thing" to occur, namely, Jeremiah 31:21[22] and this verse:

Isaiah 43:19 - Behold I am making a new thing [הַשְּׂדֵה הַחֲדָשָׁה] (*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, G-d 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 הַשְּׂדֵה הַחֲדָשָׁה 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 cases 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 הַשְּׂדֵה הַחֲדָשָׁה 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 לְסַבֵּב (lasov/lisbov), to encircle, to surround, to encompass, refers to a female's womb, not in a literal sense nor as a metaphor. The verb in Jeremiah 31:21[22], תִּסְבֵּב (t'sovev), [she] shall encircle, is a conjugation of the verb in the singular, 3rd-person, feminine, future tense. Clearly, the claim reads into the text something that is not present there.

- ✚ **Christian Claim:** The use of גִּבּוֹר 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 – "G-d" manifest in the flesh.
- ☆ **Jewish Response:** The nouns גִּבּוֹר and גִּבּוֹרִים appear in the Hebrew Bible (both in the singular and plural) a combined 66 times. None of the 66 applications assigns this noun to G-d, nor do any of the cases indicate some "familial" relationship of the man to G-d. 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 [גִּבּוֹר] will sin.

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

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

The theological problem that Christianity incurs by referring to Jesus as גִּבּוֹר 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 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 (Mt 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 authors of the New Testament. 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.