

Some Thoughts on Isaiah 9:6

By Sean Finnegan

This time of year, the famous song Handel's Messiah gets a lot of airtime. In that masterpiece, verses are woven together into a beautiful tapestry depicting not only Jesus' life but also a number of prophecies about him from the Hebrew Scriptures. One of these texts is Isaiah 9:6.

Isaiah 9:6

For a child has been born to us, a son has been given to us. He shoulders responsibility and is called: Extraordinary Strategist, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Many people have seen this verse as *the proof-text of Jesus' divinity* in the Old Testament. Even though this verse has traditionally been argued in this direction, Christian thinkers are now starting to break new ground by taking into consideration the historical context of the prophecy. One resource that has discovered a new understanding of this verse is the NET Bible (New English Translation). This version was done by mainstream Christian scholars in 2006, and it contains tens of thousands of translators' footnotes. The first issue they brought out in reference to Isaiah 9:6 relates to translation not interpretation:

There is great debate over the syntactical structure of the verse. No subject is indicated for the verb "he called." If all the titles that follow are ones given to the king, then the subject of the verb must be indefinite, "one calls." However, some have suggested that one to three of the titles that follow refer to God, not the king. For example, the traditional punctuation of the Hebrew text suggests the translation, "and the Extraordinary Strategist, the Mighty God calls his name, 'Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'" (tn 16 from NET on Isaiah 9:6)

If this is true, then there is no issue at all with Isaiah 9:6 calling the child (Jesus) "Mighty God." In this case, it is the Mighty God who calls the child "Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Just a minor change in translation and the whole verse changes! An example of translating the verse this way can be found in the Stone Edition of the Tanakh.

"For a child has been born to us, a son has been given to us, and the dominion will rest on his shoulder; the Wondrous Adviser, Mighty God, Eternal Father, called his name Prince of Peace"

Even though this may be a valid translation, it is not preferred because it attributes to God a series of titles that are not found elsewhere in this configuration in Isaiah or the rest of the Bible. So, what if the Messiah really is prophesied to have the name "mighty God" conferred upon him? In order to interpret this correctly, we need some background on the words "el gibbor." Consider this second insight from the NET Bible.

(Gibbor) is probably an attributive adjective ("mighty God"), though one might translate "God is a warrior" or "God is mighty." Scholars have interpreted this title i[n] two ways. A number of them have argued that the title portrays the king as God's representative on the battlefield, whom God empowers in a supernatural way (see J. H. Hayes and S. A. Irvine, *Isaiah*, 181–82). They contend that this sense seems more likely in the original context of the prophecy. They would suggest that having read the NT, **we might in retrospect interpret this title as indicating the coming king's deity, but it is unlikely that Isaiah or his audience would have understood the title in such a bold way.** Ps 45:6 addresses the Davidic king as "God" because he ruled and fought as God's representative on earth. Ancient Near Eastern art and literature picture gods training kings for battle, bestowing special weapons, and intervening in battle... According to proponents of this view, Isa 9:6 probably envisions a similar kind of response when friends and foes alike look at the Davidic king in full battle regalia. When the king's enemies oppose him on the battlefield, they are, as it were, fighting against God himself. (tn 18 from NET on Isaiah 9:6)

Thus, if this child is called “mighty God,” this may mean that he is functioning as God’s representative (Messiah). I love the incredible honesty when they say, “it is unlikely that Isaiah or his audience would have understood the title in such a bold way [that the king is deity]”. I agree wholeheartedly with this assessment. The context of this verse is about winning the decisive military battle against the enemies of God’s people. The war is won because of this child who is God’s man on the battlefield to conquer evil. Thus, he is called God in a representational sense—he represents God. Moses and the judges of Israel were also called God in this same sense (Ex 4:14-16; 7:1-2; 21:5-6; 22:8-9; Ps 82:1, 6). In addition, in another place the Davidic King is called God in a secondary sense (Ps 45:6). But, what are we to make of the name “eternal father?”

This title [Eternal Father] must not be taken in an anachronistic Trinitarian sense. (To do so would be theologically problematic, for the “Son” is the messianic king and is distinct in his person from God the “Father.”) Rather, in its original context the title pictures the king as the protector of his people. For a similar use of “father” see Isa 22:21 and Job 29:16. This figurative, idiomatic use of “father” is not limited to the Bible. In a Phoenician inscription (ca. 850–800 B.C.) the ruler Kilamuwa declares: “To some I was a father, to others I was a mother.” In another inscription (ca. 800 B.C.) the ruler Azitawadda boasts that the god Baal made him “a father and a mother” to his people. (See ANET 499–500.) The use of “everlasting” might suggest the deity of the king (as the one who has total control over eternity), **but Isaiah and his audience may have understood the term as royal hyperbole emphasizing the king’s long reign or enduring dynasty** (for examples of such hyperbolic language used of the Davidic king, see 1 Kgs 1:31; Pss 21:4–6; 61:6–7; 72:5, 17). (tn 19 from NET Isaiah 9:6)

Jesus is the father of the coming age, the patriarch of the messianic era. This is a figurative usage of the word “father,” but it makes the most sense in light of the other Scriptures cited. It is remarkable, but we are in agreement with the Trinitarians on this point because they also do not believe Jesus is the Father. For both of us, Jesus is the Son of the Father.

So, this year when that wonderful chorus comes over the airwaves and the words “and he shall be called...Wonderful...Counselor...the Mighty God...the Everlasting Father...” are sung, be sure to remember that the key to Bible study is context. Isaiah 9:6 must be understood in its immediate context. The prophecy is of a child who will be born to win the victory of God over Israel’s enemies—a victory begun in his earthly ministry but which will come to completion when he returns to claim the entire world for God as His supreme representative.