

Isaiah 9:6 Explained: A Theophoric Approach

Abstract

Working through the grammar and syntax, I present the case that Isaiah 9:6 is the birth announcement of a historical child. After carefully analyzing the name given to the child and the major interpretive options, I make a case that the name is theophoric. Like the named children of Isaiah 7 and 8, the sign-child of Isaiah 9 prophesies what God, not the child, will do. Although I argue for Hezekiah as the original fulfillment, I also see Isaiah 9:6 as a messianic prophecy of the true and better Hezekiah through whom God will bring eternal deliverance and peace.

Introduction

Paul D. Wegner called Isaiah 9:6¹ “one of the most difficult problems in the study of the Old Testament.”² To get an initial handle on the complexities of this text, let’s begin briefly by comparing the Hebrew to a typical translation.

Isaiah 9:6 (BHS³)

כִּי־יֵלֵד יִלְד־לָנוּ בֶן נָתַן־לָנוּ וְנָתַתִּי הַמְּשָׁרָה עַל־שִׁכְמֹו וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ פֶּלֶא יוֹעֵץ אֵל
גִּבּוֹר אֲבִיעַד שֶׁר־שָׁלוֹם:

Isaiah 9:6 (ESV)

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Curiosities abound in the differences between these two. The first two clauses in English, “For to us a child is born” and “to us a son is given,” employ the present tense while the Hebrew uses the perfect tense, i.e. “to us a child has been born.”⁴ This has a significant bearing on whether we take the prophecy as a statement about a child already born in Isaiah’s time or someone yet to come (or both).

¹ Throughout I’ll refer to Isaiah 9:6 based on the versification used in English translations. Hebrew Bibles shift the count by one, so the same verse is Isaiah 9:5.

² Paul D. Wegner, “A Re-Examination of Isaiah lx 1-6,” *Vetus Testamentum* 42, no. 1 (1992): 103.

³ BHS is the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, the standard Hebrew text based on the Leningrad Codex, a medieval Masoretic text.

⁴ In Hebrew the perfect tense roughly maps onto English past tense and the imperfect tense to future tense.

The ESV renders the phrase, וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ (*vayikra sh'mo*), as “and his name shall be called,” but the words literally mean “and he called his name” where the “he” is unspecified. This leaves room for the possibility of identifying the subject of the verb in the subsequent phrase, i.e. “And the wonderful counselor, the mighty God called his name...” as many Jewish translations take it. Questions further abound regarding אֱלֹהֵי גִבּוֹר (*el gibbor*), which finds translations as disparate as the traditional “Mighty God”⁵ to “divine warrior”⁶ to “in battle God-like”⁷ to “Mighty chief”⁸ to “Godlike hero,”⁹ to Luther’s truncated “Held.”¹⁰ Another phrase that elicits a multiplicity of translations is אָבִי עֶד (*aviad*). Although most versions read “Eternal Father,”¹¹ others render the word, “Father-Forever,”¹² “Father for all time,”¹³ “Father of perpetuity,”¹⁴ “Father of the Eternal Age,”¹⁵ and “Father of Future.”¹⁶

Translators from a range of backgrounds struggle with these two phrases. Some refuse to translate them at all, preferring clunky transliterations.¹⁷ Still, as I will show below, there’s a better way forward. If we understand that the child had a theophoric name—a name that is not about him, but about God—our problems dissipate like morning fog before the rising sun. Taking the four pairs of words this way yields a two-part sentence name. As we’ll see this last approach is not only the best contextual option, but it also allows us to take the Hebrew vocabulary, grammar, and syntax at face value, rather than succumbing to strained translations and interpretational gymnastics. In the end, we’re left with a text literally rendered and hermeneutically robust.

⁵ See NRSVUE, ESV, NASB20, NIV, NET, LSB, NLT, NKJ, ASV, KJV.

⁶ See translations by Robert Alter, James Moffat, and Duncan Heaster. Also see *Westminster Commentary*, *Cambridge Bible Commentary*, *New Century Bible Commentary*, and *The Daily Study Bible*.

⁷ See *New English Bible*.

⁸ See Ibn Ezra.

⁹ See *An American Testament*.

¹⁰ “Held” means “hero” in German. In the Luther Bible (1545), he translated the phrase as “und er heit Wunderbar, Rat, Kraft, Held, Ewig -Vater, Friedefrst,” separating power (Kraft = *El*) and hero (Held = *Gibbor*) whereas in the 1912 revision we read, “er heit Wunderbar, Rat, Held, Ewig-Vater Friedefrst,” which reduced *el gibbor* to “Held” (hero).

¹¹ See fn 4 above.

¹² See *New American Bible Revised Edition* and *An American Testament*.

¹³ See *New English Bible* and James Moffatt’s translation.

¹⁴ See Ibn Ezra.

¹⁵ See Duncan Heaster’s *New European Version*.

¹⁶ See *Word Biblical Commentary*.

¹⁷ See Jewish Publication Society translation of 1917, the *Koren Jerusalem Bible*, and the *Complete Jewish Bible*.

Called or Will Call His Name?

Nearly all the major Christian versions translate וַיִּקְרָא (*vayikra*), “he has called,” as “he will be called.” This takes an active past tense verb as a passive future tense.¹⁸ What is going on here? Since parents typically give names at birth or shortly thereafter, it wouldn’t make sense to suggest the child was already born (as the beginning of Isa 9:6 clearly states), but then say he was not yet named. Additionally, וַיִּקְרָא (*vayikra*) is a vav-conversive plus imperfect construction that continues the same timing sequence of the preceding perfect tense verbs.¹⁹ If the word were passive (niphal binyan) we would read וַיִּקְרָא (*vayikarey*) instead of וַיִּקְרָא (*vayikra*). Although some have suggested an emendation of the Masoretic vowels to make this change, Hugh Williamson notes, “there is no overriding need to prefer it.”²⁰

Translators may justify rendering the perfect tense as imperfect due to the idiom called a prophetic past tense (*perfectum propheticum*). Wilhelm Gesenius notes the possibility that a prophet “so transports himself in imagination into the future that he describes the future event as if it had been already seen or heard by him.”²¹ Bruce Waltke recognizes the phenomenon, calling it an accidental perfective in which “a speaker vividly and dramatically represents a future situation both as complete and independent.”²² Still, it’s up to the interpreter to determine if Isaiah employs this idiom or not. The verbs of verse 6 seem quite clear: “a child has been born for us ... and the government was on his shoulder ... and he has called his name...” When Isaiah uttered this prophecy, the child had already been born and named and the government rested on his shoulders. This is the straightforward reading of the grammar and therefore should be our starting point.²³

¹⁸ In the Dead Sea Scrolls, 1QIsa^a 8.24 reads “וּקְרָא,” the vav-conversed form of “קָרָא,” translated “he will call,” an active future tense. This reading is implausible considering the unambiguous past tense of the two initial clauses that began verse 6: “a child has been born...a son has been given.”

¹⁹ “Here the Hebrew begins to use imperfect verb forms with the conjunction often rendered “and.” These verbs continue the tense of the perfect verb forms used in the previous lines. They refer to a state or situation that now exists, so they may be rendered with the present tense in English. Some translations continue to use a perfect tense here (so NJB, NJPSV, FRCL), which is better.” Graham S. Ogden, and Jan Sterk, *A Handbook on Isaiah, UBS Translator’s Handbooks* (New York: United Bible Societies, 2011).

²⁰ H. G. M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1-27*, vol. 2, *International Critical Commentary*, ed. G. I. Davies and C. M. Tuckett (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 371.

²¹ Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), §106n.

²² Bruce K. Waltke and Michael P. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §30.5.1e.

²³ John Goldingay takes a “both-and” position, recognizing that Isaiah was speaking by faith of what God would do in the future, but also seeing the birth of the son to the king as having already happened by the time of the prophecy. John Goldingay, *Isaiah for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 42.

Hezekiah as the Referent

One of the generally accepted principles of hermeneutics is to first ask the question, “What did this text mean in its original context?” before asking, “What does this text mean to us today?” When we examine the immediate context of Isa 9:6, we move beyond the birth announcement of a child with an exalted name to a larger prophecy of breaking the yoke of an oppressor (v4) and the ushering in of a lasting peace for the throne of David (v7).

Isaiah lived in a tumultuous time. He saw the northern kingdom—the nation of Israel—uprooted from her land and carried off by the powerful and cruel Assyrian Empire. He prophesied about a child whose birth had signaled the coming freedom God would bring from the yoke of Assyria. As Jewish interpreters have long pointed out, Hezekiah nicely fits this expectation.²⁴ In the shadow of this looming storm, Hezekiah became king and instituted major religious reforms,²⁵ removing idolatry and turning the people to Yahweh. The author of Kings gave him high marks: “He trusted in Yahweh, the God of Israel. After him there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah nor among those who were before him” (2 Kgs 18:5).²⁶

Then, during Hezekiah’s reign, Sennacherib sent a large army against Judea and laid siege to Jerusalem. Hezekiah appropriately responded to the threatening Assyrian army by tearing his clothes, covering himself with sackcloth, and entering the temple to pray (2 Kings 19:1). He sent word to Isaiah, requesting prayer for the dire situation. Ultimately God brought miraculous deliverance, killing 185,000 Assyrians, which precipitated a retreat. There had not been such an acute military deliverance since the destruction of Pharaoh’s army in the sea. Indeed, Hezekiah’s birth did signal God’s coming deliverance.

In opposition to Hezekiah as the referent for Isa 9:6, Christian interpreters have pointed out that Hezekiah did not fulfill this prophecy *en toto*. Specifically, Hezekiah did not usher in “an endless peace” with justice and righteousness “from this time onward and forevermore” (Isa. 9:7). But, as John Roberts points out, the problem only persists if we ignore prophetic hyperbole. Here’s what he says:

²⁴ Jewish authors include Rashi, A. E. Kimchi, Abravanel, Malbim, and Luzzatto.

²⁵ See 2 Kings 18:3-7.

²⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

If Hezekiah was the new king idealized in this oracle, how could Isaiah claim he would reign forever? How could Isaiah so ignore Israel's long historical experience as to expect no new source of oppression would ever arise? The language, as is typical of royal ideology, is hyperbolic, and perhaps neither Isaiah nor his original audience would have pushed it to its limits, beyond its conventional frames of reference, but the language itself invites such exploitation. If one accepts God's providential direction of history, it is hard to complain about the exegetical development this exploitation produced.²⁷

Evangelical scholar Ben Witherington III likewise sees a reference to both Hezekiah and a future deliverer. He writes, "[T]he use of the deliberately hyperbolic language that the prophet knew would not be fulfilled in Hezekiah left open the door quite deliberately to look for an eschatological fulfillment later."²⁸ Thus, even if Isaiah's prophecy had an original referent, it left the door open for a true and better Hezekiah, who would not just defeat Assyria, but all evil, and not just for a generation, but forever. For this reason, it makes sense to take a "both-and" approach to Isa 9:6.

Who Called His Name?

Before going on to consider the actual name given to the child, we must consider the subject of the word וַיִּקְרָא (*vayikra*), "and he called." Jewish interpreters have and continue to take אֵל גִּבּוֹר (*el gibbor*), "Mighty God," as the subject of this verb. Here are a few examples of this rendering:

Targum Jonathan (2nd century)

And his name has been called from before the One Who Causes Wonderful Counsel, God the Warrior, the Eternally Existing One—the Messiah who will increase peace upon us in his days.²⁹

Shlomo Yitzchaki (11th century)

The Holy One, blessed be He, Who gives wondrous counsel, is a mighty God and

²⁷ J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, vol. 23A, *Hermeneia*, ed. Peter Machinist (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 153.

²⁸ Ben Witherington III, *Isaiah Old and New* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 95-6, 99-100. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ggjhbz.7>.

²⁹ *Translation of Targum Onkelos and Jonathan*, trans. Eidon Clem (Altamonte Springs, FL: OakTree Software, 2015).

an everlasting Father, called Hezekiah's name, "the prince of peace," since peace and truth will be in his days.³⁰

Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi (16th century)

"For a child is born to us." A son will be born and this is Hezekiah. Though Ahaz is an evildoer, his son Hezekiah will be a righteous king. He will be strong in his service of the Holy One. He will study Torah and the Holy One will call him, "eternal father, peaceful ruler." In his days there will be peace and truth.³¹

The Stone Edition of the Tanach (20th century)

The Wondrous Adviser, Mighty God, Eternal Father, called his name Sar-shalom [Prince of Peace]³²

Although sometimes Christian commentators blithely accuse Jewish scholars of avoiding the implications of calling the child "Mighty God" and "Eternal Father," the grammar does allow multiple options here. The main question is whether Isaiah specified the subject of the verb *vayikra* (וַיִּקְרָא) or not. If he has, then the subject must be *el gibbor* (אֵל גִּבּוֹר). If he has not, then the subject must be indefinite (i.e. "he" or "one"). What's more, the Masoretic punctuation of the Hebrew suggests the translation, "and the Wonderful Adviser, the Mighty God called his name, 'Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'"³³

However, Keil and Delitzsch point out problems with this view on both grammatical and contextual grounds. They write:

[I]t is impossible to conceive for what precise reason such a periphrastic description of God should be employed in connection with the naming of this child, as is not only altogether different from Isaiah's usual custom, but altogether unparalleled in itself, especially without the definite article. The

³⁰ Shlomo Yitzchaki, *Complete Tanach with Rashi*, trans. A. J. Rosenberg (Chicago, IL: Davka Corp, 1998).

https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Isaiah.9.5.2?lang=bi&with=About&lang2=en.

³¹ Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi, *Tze'edah Ure'edah: A Critical Translation into English*, trans. Morris M. Faierstein (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).

https://www.sefaria.org/Tze'edah_Ure'edah%2C_Haftarot%2C_Yitro.31?lang=bi&with=About&lang2=en.

³² Square brackets in original. *The Stone Edition of the Tanach*, ed. Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz (Brooklyn, NY: Artscroll, 1996).

³³ *Net Bible, Full Notes Edition*, ed. W. Hall Harris III James Davis, and Michael H. Burer, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019), 1266.

names of God should at least have been defined thus, הַיּוֹעֵץ פֶּלֶא הַגִּבּוֹר, so as to distinguish them from the two names of the child.”³⁴

Thus, though the Masoretic markings favor the Jewish translation, the grammar doesn’t favor taking “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God” as the subject. It’s certainly not impossible, but it is a strained reading without parallels in Isaiah and without justification in the immediate context. Let’s consider another possibility.

His Name Has Been Called

Instead of taking אֵל גִּבּוֹר (*el gibbor*) as the subject, we can posit an indefinite subject for וַיִּקְרָא (*vayikra*): “one has called.” Examples of this outside of Isaiah 9:6 include Gen 11:9; 25:26; Exod 15:23; and 2 Sam 2:16. The phenomenon appears in Gesenius (§144d) and Joüon and Muraoka (§155e), both of which include our text as examples. However, the translation “one has called his name” is awkward in English due to our lack of a generic pronoun like *on* in French or *man* in German. Accordingly, most translations employ the passive construction: “his name has been called,” omitting the subject.³⁵ This is apparently also how those who produced the Septuagint (LXX) took the Hebrew text, employing a passive rather than an active verb.³⁶ In conclusion, the translation “his name has been called” works best in English.

Mighty Hero

Now we broach the question of how to render אֵל גִּבּוֹר *el gibbor*. As I’ve already noted, a few translations prefer “mighty hero.” But this reading is problematic since it takes the two words in reverse order. Although in English we typically put an adjective before the noun it modifies, in Hebrew the noun comes first and then any adjectives that act upon it. Taking the phrase as גִּבּוֹר אֵל (*gibbor el*) makes “mighty” the noun and “God” the adjective. Now since the inner meaning of אֵל (*el*) is “strong” or “mighty,” and גִּבּוֹר *gibbor* means “warrior” or “hero,” we can see how translators end up with “mighty warrior” or “divine hero.” Robert Alter offers the following explanation:

The most challenging epithet in this sequence is ‘*el gibor* [*sic*], which appears to say “warrior-god.” The prophet would be violating all biblical usage if he called the Davidic king “God,” and that term is best construed here as some sort of

³⁴ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 249-50.

³⁵ As mentioned above, the Hebrew is not actually passive.

³⁶ The LXX reads “καὶ καλεῖται τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ” (*kai kaleitai to onoma autou*), which means “and his name is called.”

intensifier. In fact, the two words could conceivably be a scribal reversal of *gibor* 'el, in which case the second word would clearly function as a suffix of intensification as it occasionally does elsewhere in the Bible.³⁷

Please note that Alter's motive for reversing the two words is that the text, as it stands, would violate all biblical usage by calling the Davidic king "God." But Alter is incorrect. We have another biblical usage calling the Davidic king "God" in Psalm 45:6. We must allow the text to determine interpretation. Changing translation for the sake of theology is allowing the tail to wag the dog.

Another reason to doubt "divine warrior" as a translation is that "Wherever 'el gibbôr occurs elsewhere in the Bible there is no doubt that the term refers to God (10:21; cf. also Deut. 10:17; Jer. 32:18)," notes John Oswalt.³⁸ Keil and Delitzsch likewise see Isa 10:21 as the rock upon which these translations suffer shipwreck.³⁹ "A remnant will return," says Isa 10:21, "the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God." The previous verse makes it clear that "mighty God" refers to none other than "Yahweh, the holy one of Israel." Without counter examples elsewhere in the Bible, we lack the basis to defy the traditional ordering of "God" as the noun and "mighty" or "warrior" as the adjective.⁴⁰

Mighty God-Man

Did Isaiah foresee a human child who would also be the mighty God? Did he suddenly get "a glimpse of the fact that in the fullness of the Godhead there is a plurality of Persons," as Edward Young thought?⁴¹ Although apologists seeking to prove the deity of Christ routinely push for this reading, other evangelical scholars have expressed doubts about such a bold interpretation.⁴² Even Keil and Delitzsch, after zealously batting away Jewish alternatives, admit Isaiah's language would not have suggested an incarnate deity in its original context.⁴³ Still, it would not be anachronistic to regard a

³⁷ Rober Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: Prophets, Nevi'im*, vol. 2, 3 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019), 651.

³⁸ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39, Nicot* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 247.

³⁹ Delitzsch, 252.

⁴⁰ The אֱלֵי גִבּוֹרִים (*eley gibborim*) of Ezek 32.21 although morphologically suggestive of a plural form of *el gibbor*, is not a suitable parallel to Isa 9:6 since אֱלֵי (*eley*) is the plural of אֵיל (*ayil*), meaning "chief" not אֵל (*el*). Thus, the translation "mighty chiefs" or "warrior rulers" takes *eley* as the noun and *gibborim* as the adjective and does not actually reverse them.

⁴¹ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-18*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 338.

⁴² Translator's note A on Isa 9:6 in the NET states, "[I]t is unlikely that Isaiah or his audience would have understood the title in such a bold way." *Net Bible, Full Notes Edition*, 1267.

⁴³ "The Messiah is the corporeal presence of this mighty God; for He is with Him, He is in Him, and in Him He is with Israel. The expression did not preclude the fact that the Messiah would be God and man in one person; but it did not penetrate to this depth, so far as the Old Testament consciousness was concerned." Delitzsch, 253.

king as a deity in the context of the ancient Near East. We find such exalted language in parallels from Egypt and Assyria in their accession oracles (proclamations given at the time a new king ascends the throne).

Taking their cue from the Egyptian practices of bestowing divine throne names upon the Pharaoh's accession to the throne, G. von Rad and A. Alt envisioned a similar practice in Jerusalem. Although quite influential, Wegner has pointed out several major problems with this way of looking at our text: (1) the announcement is to the people in Isa 9:6, not the king; (2) Isa 9:6 does not use adoption language nor call the child God's son; (3) יָלֵד (*yeled*), "child," is never used in accession oracles; (4) the Egyptian parallels have five titles not four as in Isa 9:6; (5) Egyptians employ a different structure for accession oracles than Isa 9:6; and (6) we have no evidence elsewhere that Judean kings imitated the Egyptian custom of bestowing divine titles.⁴⁴

Another possibility, argued by R. A. Carlson, is to see the names as anti-Assyrian polemic.⁴⁵ Keeping in mind that Assyria was constantly threatening Judah in the lifetime of Isaiah and that the child born was to signal deliverance, it would be no surprise that Isaiah would cast the child as a deliberate counter-Assyrian hero. Still, as Oswalt points out, "[T]he Hebrews did not believe this [that their kings were gods]. They denied that the king was anything more than the representative of God."⁴⁶ Owing to a lack of parallels within Israel and Isaiah's own penchant for strict monotheism,⁴⁷ interpreting Isa 9:6 as presenting a God-man is *ad hoc* at best and outright eisegesis at worst. Furthermore, as I've already noted, the grammar of the passage indicates a historical child who was already born. Thus, if Isaiah meant to teach the deity of the child, we'd have two God-men: Hezekiah and Jesus.

Far from a courtly scene of coronation, Wegner makes the case that our text is really a birth announcement in form. Birth announcements have (1) a declaration of the birth, (2) an announcement of the child's name, (3) an explanation of what the name means, and (4) a further prophecy about the child's future.⁴⁸ These elements are all present in Isa 9:6, making it a much better candidate for a birth announcement than an accession or coronation oracle. As a result, we should not expect divine titles given to the king like

⁴⁴ See Wegner 104-5.

⁴⁵ See R. A. Carlson, "The Anti-Assyrian Character of the Oracle in Is. ix, 1-6," *Vetus Testamentum*, no. 24 (1974).

⁴⁶ Oswalt, 246.

⁴⁷ Isa 43:10-11; 44:6, 8; 45:5-6, 18, 21-22; 46:9. Deut 17:14-20 lays out the expectations for an Israelite king, many of which limit his power and restrict his exaltation, making deification untenable.

⁴⁸ Wegner 108.

when the Pharaohs or Assyrian kings ascended the throne; instead, we ought to look for names that somehow relate to the child's career. We will delve more into this when we broach the topic of theophoric names.

Mighty God's Agent

Another possibility is to retain the traditional translation of "mighty God" and see the child as God's agent who bears the title. In fact, the Bible calls Moses⁴⁹ and the judges⁵⁰ of Israel אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*), "god(s)," due to their role in representing God. Likewise, as I've already mentioned, the court poet called the Davidic King "god" in Ps 45:6. Additionally, the word אֵל (*el*), "god," refers to representatives of Yahweh whether divine (Ps 82:1, 6) or human (John 10:34ff).⁵¹ Thus, Isa 9:6 could be another case in which a deputized human acting as God's agent is referred to as God. The NET nicely explains:

[H]aving 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. ...When the king's enemies oppose him on the battlefield, they are, as it were, fighting against God himself.⁵²

Raymond Brown admits that this "may have been looked on simply as a royal title."⁵³ Likewise Williamson sees this possibility as "perfectly acceptable," though he prefers the theophoric approach.⁵⁴ Even the incarnation-affirming Keil and Delitzsch recognize that calling the child אֵל גִּבּוֹר (*el gibbor*) is "nothing further...than this, that the Messiah would be the image of God as no other man ever had been (cf., *El*, Ps. 82:1), and that He

⁴⁹ See Exod 4:16; 7:1. The word "God" can apply to "any person characterized by greatness or power: mighty one, great one, judge," s.v. "אֱלֹהִים" in *Kohlenberger/Mounce Concise Hebrew-Aramaic Dictionary of the Old Testament*.. The BDAG concurs, adding that a God is "that which is nontranscendent but considered worthy of special reverence or respect... of humans θεοί (as אֱלֹהִים) J[ohn] 10:34f (Ps 81:6; humans are called θ. in the OT also Ex 7:1; 22:27," s.v. "θεός" in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.

⁵⁰ See Exod 21:6; 22:8-9. The BDB includes the definition, "rulers, judges, either as divine representatives at sacred places or as reflecting divine majesty and power," s.v. "אֱלֹהִים" in *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*

⁵¹ Thayer points this out in his lexicon: "Hebraistically, equivalent to God's representative or vicegerent, of magistrates and judges, John 10:34f after Ps. 81:6 (Ps. 82:6)" s.v. "θεός" in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

⁵² *Net Bible, Full Notes Edition*, 1267.

⁵³ Raymond E. Brown, *Jesus: God and Man*, ed. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 25.

⁵⁴ Williamson, 397.

would have God dwelling within Him (cf., Jer. 33:16)."⁵⁵ Edward L. Curtis similarly points out that had Isaiah meant to teach that the child would be an incarnation of Yahweh, he would have "further unfolded and made central this thought" throughout his book.⁵⁶ He likewise sees Isa 9:6 not as teaching "the incarnation of a deity" but as a case "not foreign to Hebrew usage to apply divine names to men of exalted position," citing Exod 21:6 and Ps 82:6 as parallels.⁵⁷

Notwithstanding the lexical and scholarly support for this view, not to mention my own previous position⁵⁸ on Isa 9:6, I'm no longer convinced that this is the best explanation. It's certainly possible to call people "Gods" because they are his agents, but it is also rare. We'll come to my current view shortly, but for now, let's approach the second controversial title.

Eternal Father

The word אָבִיָּעַד (*aviad*), "Eternal Father," is another recognizable appellative for Yahweh. As I mentioned in the introduction, translators have occasionally watered down the phrase, unwilling to accept that a human could receive such a title. But humans who pioneer an activity or invent something new are fathers.⁵⁹ Walking in someone's footsteps is metaphorically recognizing him as one's father.⁶⁰ Caring for others like a father is yet another way to think about it.⁶¹ Perhaps the child is a father in one of these figurative senses.

If we follow Jerome and translate אָבִיָּעַד (*aviad*) as *Pater futuri saeculi*, "Father of the future age," we can reconfigure the title, "Eternal Father," from eternal without beginning to eternal with a beginning but without an end. However, notes Williamson, "There is no parallel to calling the king 'Father,' rather the king is more usually designated as God's son."⁶² Although we find Yahweh referred to as "Father" twice in

⁵⁵ Delitzsch, 253. See also fn 40 above.

⁵⁶ Edward L. Curtis, "The Prophecy Concerning the Child of the Four Names: Isaiah lx., 6, 7," *The Old and New Testament Student* 11, no. 6 (1890): 339.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Sean Finnegan, "Jesus Is God: Exploring the Notion of Representational Deity" (paper presented at the One God Seminar, Seattle, WA2008), <https://restitutio.org/2016/01/11/explanations-to-verses-commonly-used-to-teach-that-jesus-is-god/>.

⁵⁹ Jabal was the father of those who live in tents and have livestock (Gen 4:20) and Jubal was the father of those who play the lyre and the pipe (Gen 4:21).

⁶⁰ Jesus told his critics, "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires" (John 8:44).

⁶¹ Job called himself "a father to the needy" (Job 29:16) and Isaiah prophesied that Eliakim would be "a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Isa 22:21).

⁶² Williamson, 397.

Isaiah (Isa 63:16; 64:7), and several more times throughout the Old Testament,⁶³ the Messiah is not so called. Even in the New Testament we don't see the title applied to Jesus. Although not impossible to be taken as Jesus's fatherly role to play in the age to come, the most natural way to take אֲבִיָּאד (*aviad*) is as a reference to Yahweh. In conclusion, both "mighty God" and "eternal Father" most naturally refer to Yahweh and not the child. If this is so, why is the child named with such divine designations?

A Theophoric Name

Finally, we are ready to consider the solution to our translation and interpretation woes. Israelites were fond of naming their kids with theophoric names (names that "carry God"). William Holladay explains:

Israelite personal names were in general of two sorts. Some of them were *descriptive* names... But most Israelite personal names were *theophoric*; that is, they involve a name or title or designation of God, with a verb or adjective or noun which expresses a theological affirmation. Thus "Hezekiah" is a name which means "Yah (= Yahweh) is my strength," and "Isaiah" is a name which means "Yah (= Yahweh) has brought salvation." It is obvious that Isaiah is not called "Yahweh"; he bears a name which says something *about* Yahweh.⁶⁴

As Holladay demonstrates, when translating a theophoric name, it is customary to supplement the literal phrase with the verb, "to be." Hezekiah = "Yah (is) my strength"; Isaiah = "Yah (is) salvation." Similarly, Elijah means "My God (is) Yah" and Eliab, "My God (is the) Father." Theophoric names are not about the child; they are about the God of the parents. When we imagine Elijah's mother calling him for dinner, she's literally saying "My God (is) Yah(weh), it's time for dinner." The child's name served to remind her who her God was. Similarly, these other names spoke of God's strength, salvation, and fatherhood.

To interpret the named child of Isa 9:6 correctly, we must look at the previously named children in Isa 7 and 8. In chapter 7 the boy is called "Immanuel," meaning "God (is) with us" (Isa 7:14). This was a historical child who signaled prophecy. Isaiah said, "For before the boy knows to reject evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be abandoned" (Isa 7:16). In Isa 8:1 we encounter "Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz,"

⁶³ For references to Yahweh as father to the people see Deut 32:6; Ps 103:13; Prov 3:12; Jer 3:4; 31:9; Mal 1:6; 2:10. For Yahweh as father to the messiah see 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chron 17:13; 28:6; Ps 89:27.

⁶⁴ William L. Holladay, *Isaiah: Scroll of Prophetic Heritage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 108.

or “The spoil speeds, the prey hastens.”⁶⁵ This child has a two-sentence name with an attached prophecy: “For before the boy calls, ‘my father’ or ‘my mother,’ the strength of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off before the king of Assyria” (Isa 8:4). Both children’s sign names did not describe them nor what they would do, but what God would do for his people. Immanuel is a statement of faith. The name means God has not abandoned his people; they can confidently say, “God is with us” (Isa 8:10). Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz does not mean that the child would become a warrior to sack Damascus and seize her spoils, but that God would bring about the despoiling of Judah’s enemy.

When we encounter a third sign-named child in as many chapters, we are on solid contextual grounds to see this new, longer name in the same light. Isaiah prophecies that this child has the government upon his shoulder, sits on the throne of David, and will establish a lasting period of justice and righteousness (Isa 9:5, 7). This child bears the name “Pele-Yoets-El-Gibbor-Aviad-Sar-Shalom.” The name describes his parents’ God, the mighty God, the eternal Father.

Although this perspective has not yet won the day, it is well attested in a surprising breadth of resources. Already in 1867, Samuel David Luzzatto put forward this position.⁶⁶ The Jewish Publication Society concurred in their 2014 study Bible:

Semitic names often consist of sentences that describe God ... These names do not describe that person who holds them but the god whom the parents worship.

⁶⁵ See NRSVUE fn on Isa 8:1.

⁶⁶ והנה המכוון במאמר פלא יועץ וגו' הוא כי האל הגבור שהוא אבי עד ואדון השלום, הוא יועץ וגוזר לעשות פלא לישראל כי בזמן ממלכת הילד הנולד היום, ואח"כ מפרש למרבה המשנה וגו'. ולפי הפירוש הזה לא לחנם האריך כאן בתארי האל, כי כוונת הנביא לרמוז כי בבוא הפלא שהאל יועץ וגוזר עתה, יודע שהוא אל גבור ובעל היכולת ושהוא אב לעד, ולא יפר בריתו עם בניו בני ישראל, ולא ישכח את ברית אבותם. ושהוא אדון השלום ואוהב השלום, ולא יאהב העריצים אשר כל חפצם לנתוש ולנתוץ ולהאביד ולהרוס, אבל הוא משפילם עד עפר, ונותן שלום בארץ, כמו שראינו בכל הדורות. Chat GPT translation: "And behold, the intention in the phrase 'Wonderful Counselor' and so on is that the mighty God, who is the Eternal Father and the Prince of Peace, is the Counselor and decrees to perform a wonder for Israel at the time of the reign of the child born today. Afterwards, it is explained as 'to increase the dominion' and so on. According to this interpretation, it is not in vain that the prophet elaborates on the attributes of God here, for the prophet's intention is to hint that when the wonder that God now advises and decrees comes about, it will be known that He is the Mighty God and possesses the ability and that He is the Eternal Father. He will not break His covenant with His sons, the children of Israel, nor forget the covenant of their ancestors. He is the Prince of Peace and loves peace, and He will not favor the oppressors whose every desire is to tear apart, destroy, and obliterate, but He will humble them to the dust and grant peace to the land, as we have seen throughout the generations." Samuel David Luzzatto, *Shi'ur Komah* (Padua, IT: Antonio Bianchi, 1867). Accessible at [Sefaria](#) and the [National Library of Israel](#).

Similarly, the name given to the child in this v. does not describe that child or attribute divinity to him, but describes God's actions.⁶⁷

The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV) footnote on Isa. 9:6 says, "As in many Israelite personal names, the deity, not the person named, is being described."⁶⁸ Additional scholars advocating the view also include Holladay (1978), Wegner (1992), Goldingay (1999, 2015), and Williamson (2018).

Even so, Keil and Delitzsch eschew "such a sesquipedalian name," calling it "unskillful," and arguing that it would be impractical "to be uttered in one breath."⁶⁹ But this is to take the idea too literally. No one is going to actually call the child by this name. John Goldingay helpfully explains:

So he has that complicated name, "An-extraordinary-counselor-is-the-warrior-God, the-everlasting-Father-is-an-officer-for-well-being." Like earlier names in Isaiah (God-is-with-us, Remains-Will-Return, Plunder-hurries-loot-rushes), the name is a sentence. None of these names are the person's everyday name—as when the New Testament says that Jesus will be called Immanuel, "God [is] with us," without meaning this expression is Jesus' name. Rather, the person somehow stands for whatever the "name" says. God gives him a sign of the truth of the expression attached to him. The names don't mean that the person *is* God with us, or *is* the remains, or *is* the plunder, and likewise this new name doesn't mean the child *is* what the name says. Rather he is a sign and guarantee of it. It's as if he goes around bearing a billboard with that message and with the reminder that God commissioned the billboard.⁷⁰

Still, there's the question of identifying Yahweh as שָׁר־שָׁלוֹם (*sar shalom*). Since most of our translations render the phrase "Prince of Peace," and the common meaning of a prince is someone inferior to the king, we turn away from labeling God with this title. Although HALOT mentions "representative of the king, official" for the first definition

⁶⁷ *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, Second ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 784.

⁶⁸ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Carol A. Newsom Marc Z. Brettler, Pheme Perkins, Third ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 991.

⁶⁹ Delitzsch, 249.

⁷⁰ Goldingay, 42-3.

their second is “person of note, commander.”⁷¹ The BDB glosses “chieftain, chief, ruler, official, captain, prince” as their first entry.⁷² Wegner adds: “The book of Isaiah also appears to use the word *sar* in the general sense of “ruler.””⁷³ Still, we must ask, is it reasonable to think of Yahweh as a שָׂר (sar)? We find the phrase שָׂר־הַצָּבָא (*sar-hatsava*), “prince of hosts,” in Daniel 8:11 and שָׂר־שָׂרִים (*sar-sarim*), “prince of princes,” in verse 25, where both refer to God.⁷⁴ The *UBS Translators’ Handbook* recommends “God, the chief of the heavenly army” for verse 11 and “the greatest of all kings” for verse 25.⁷⁵ The handbook discourages using “prince,” since “the English word ‘prince’ does not mean the ruler himself but rather the son of the ruler, while the Hebrew term always designates a ruler, not at all implying son of a ruler.”⁷⁶ I suggest applying this same logic to Isa 9:6. Rather than translating שָׂר־שְׁלוֹם (*sar shalom*) as “Prince of Peace,” we can render it, “Ruler of Peace” or “Ruler who brings peace.”

Translating the Name Sentences

Now that I’ve laid out the case for the theophoric approach, let’s consider translation possibilities. Wegner writes, “the whole name should be divided into two parallel units each containing one theophoric element.”⁷⁷ This makes sense considering the structure of Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which translates two parallel name sentences: “The spoil speeds, the prey hastens.” Here are a few options for translating the name.

Jewish Publication Society (1917)

Wonderful in counsel is God the Mighty, the Everlasting Father, the Ruler of peace⁷⁸

William Holladay (1978)

Planner of wonders; God the war hero (is) Father forever; prince of well-being⁷⁹

⁷¹ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

⁷² See s.v. “שָׂר” in *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*

⁷³ Wegner 112.

⁷⁴ Keil and Delitzsch say the *sar* of Dan 8:11 refers to “the God of heaven and the King of Israel, the Prince of princes, as He is called in v. 25,” Delitzsch, 297.

⁷⁵ René and John Ellington Péter-Contesse, *A Handbook on Daniel, Ubs Translator’s Handbooks* (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1993).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Wegner 110-1.

⁷⁸ The main text transliterates “Pele-joez-el-gibbor-/Abi-ad-sar-shalom,” while the footnote translates as indicated above. *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text: A New Translation* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1917), 575.

⁷⁹ Holladay, 109.

New Jewish Publication Society (1985)

The Mighty God is planning grace; The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler⁸⁰

John Goldingay (1999)

One who plans a wonder is the warrior God; the father for ever is a commander who brings peace⁸¹

John Goldingay (2015)

An-extraordinary-counselor-is-the-warrior-God, the-everlasting-Fathers-is-an-official-for-well-being⁸²

Hugh Williamson (2018)

A Wonderful Planner is the Mighty God, An Eternal Father is the Prince of Peace⁸³

My Translation (2024)

The warrior God is a miraculous strategist; the eternal Father is the ruler who brings peace⁸⁴

I prefer to translate אֵל גִּבּוֹר (*el gibbor*) as “warrior God” rather than “mighty God” because the context is martial, and גִּבּוֹר (*gibbor*) often refers to those fighting in war.⁸⁵ “Mighty God” is ambiguous, and easily decontextualized from the setting of Isa 9:6. After all, Isa 9:4-5 tells a great victory “as on the day of Midian” — a victory so complete that they burn “all the boots of the tramping warriors” in the fire.

The word פֶּלֶא (*pele*), though often translated “wonderful,” is actually the word for “miracle,” and יוֹעֵץ (*yoets*) is a participle meaning “adviser” or “planner.” Since the context is war, this “miracle of an adviser” or “miraculous planner” refers to military plans — what we call strategy, hence, “miraculous strategist.” Amazingly, the tactic God

⁸⁰ *Tanakh, the Holy Scriptures: The New Jps Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (4th: repr., Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 634.

⁸¹ John Goldingay, “The Compound Name in Isaiah 9:5(6),” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1999): 243.

⁸² Goldingay, *Isaiah for Everyone*, 40.

⁸³ Williamson, 355.

⁸⁴ An alternative is “The warrior God is planning a miracle; the eternal Father is the ruler of peace.”

⁸⁵ For גִּבּוֹר in a military context, see 1 Sam 17:51; 2 Sam 20:7; 2 Kgs 24:16; Isa 21:17; Jer 48:41; Eze 39:20; and Joel 2:7; 3:9.

employed in the time of Hezekiah was to send out an angel during the night who “struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians” (Isa 37:36). This was evidently the warrior God’s miraculous plan to remove the threat of Assyria from Jerusalem’s doorstep. Prophecies about the coming day of God when he sends Jesus Christ—the true and better Hezekiah—likewise foretell of an even greater victory over the nations.⁸⁶ In fact, just two chapters later we find a messianic prophecy of one who will “strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked” (Isa 11:4).

The next phrase, “The eternal Father,” needs little comment since God’s eternality and fatherhood are both noncontroversial and multiply attested. Literally translated, *שָׁר־שָׁלוֹם* (*sar-shalom*) is “Ruler of peace,” but I take the word pair as a genitive of product.⁸⁷ Williamson unpacks this meaning as “the one who is able to initiate and maintain Peace.”⁸⁸ That his actions in the time of Hezekiah brought peace is a matter of history. After a huge portion of the Assyrian army died, King Sennacherib went back to Nineveh, where his sons murdered him (Isa 37:37-38). For decades, Judah continued to live in her homeland. Thus, this child’s birth signaled the beginning of the end for Assyria. In fact, the empire itself eventually imploded, a fate that, at Hezekiah’s birth, must have seemed utterly unthinkable. Of course, the ultimate peace God will bring through his Messiah will far outshine what Hezekiah achieved.⁸⁹

Conclusion

We began by considering the phrase *וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ* (*vayikra sh’mo*). We noted that the tense is perfect, which justifies a past-tense interpretation of the child who had already been born by the time of the birth announcement. I presented the case for Hezekiah as the initial referent of Isa 9:6 based on the fact that Hezekiah’s life overlapped with Isaiah’s, that he sat on the throne of David (v7), and that his reign saw the miraculous deliverance from Assyria’s army. Furthermore, I noted that identifying the child of Isa 9:6 as Hezekiah does not preclude a true and better one to come. Although Isa 9:6 does not show up in the New Testament, I agree with the majority of Christians who recognize this text as a messianic prophecy, especially when combined with verse 7.

⁸⁶ See 2 Thess 2:8 and Rev 19:11-21 (cp. Dan 7:13-14).

⁸⁷ See Gesenius § 128q, which describes a genitive of “statements of the purpose for which something is intended.”

⁸⁸ Williamson, 401.

⁸⁹ Isaiah tells of a time when God will “judge between nations,” resulting in the conversion of the weapons of war into the tools of agriculture and a lasting era when “nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more” (Isa 2:4).

Next we puzzled over the subject for phrase וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ (*vayikra sh'mo.*) Two options are that the phrase פֶּלֶא יוֹעֵץ אֶל גִּבּוֹר (*pele yoets el gibbor*) functions as the subject or else the subject is indefinite. Although the Jewish interpreters overwhelmingly favor the former, the lack of definite articles and parallel constructions in Isaiah make me think the latter is more likely. Still, the Jewish approach to translation is a legitimate possibility. I explained how a passive voice makes sense in English since it hides the subject, and settled on “his name has been called,” as the best translation.

Then we looked at the phrase אֶל גִּבּוֹר (*el gibbor*) and considered the option of switching the order of the words and taking the first as the modifier of the second as in “mighty hero” or “divine warrior.” We explored the possibility that Isaiah was ascribing deity to the newborn child. We looked at the idea of Isaiah calling the boy “Mighty God” because he represented God. In the end we concluded that these all are less likely than taking God as the referent, especially in light of the identical phrase in Isa 10:21 where it unambiguously refers to Yahweh.

Moving on to אָבִיָּעַד (*aviad*), we considered the possibility that “father” could refer to someone who started something significant and “eternal” could merely designate a coming age. Once again, though these are both possible readings, they are strained and *ad hoc*, lacking any indication in the text to signal a non-straightforward reading. So, as with “Mighty God,” I also take “Eternal Father” as simple references to God and not the child.

Finally, we explored the notion of theophoric names. Leaning on two mainstream Bible translations and five scholars, from Luzzatto to Williamson, we saw that this lesser-known approach is quite attractive. Not only does it take the grammar at face value, it also explains how a human being could be named “Mighty God” and “Eternal Father.” The name describes God and not the child who bears it.

Lastly, drawing on the work of the Jewish Publication Society, Goldingay, and Williamson, I proposed the translation: “The warrior God is a miraculous strategist; the eternal Father is the ruler who brings peace.” This rendering preserves the martial context of Isa 9:6 and glosses each word according to its most common definition. I added in the verb “is” twice as is customary when translating theophoric names. The result is a translation that recognizes God as the focus and not the child. This fits best in the immediate context, assuming Hezekiah is the original referent. After all, his greatest moment was not charging out ahead of a column of soldiers, but his entering the house

of Yahweh and praying for salvation. God took care of everything else. Likewise, the ultimate Son of David will have God's spirit influencing him: a spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and fear of God (Isa 11:2). The eternal Father will so direct his anointed that he will "not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear" (Isa 11:3). In his days God will bring about a *shalom* so deep that even the animals will become peaceful (Isa 11:6-8).

An advantage of this reading of Isa 9:6 is that it is compatible with the full range of christological positions Christians hold. Secondly, this approach nicely fits with the original meaning in Isaiah's day, and it works for the prophecy's ultimate referent in Christ Jesus. Additionally, it is the interpretation with the least amount of special pleading. Finally, it puts everything into the correct order, allowing exegesis to drive theology rather than the other way around.

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