

Is Jesus “the Mighty God” in Isaiah 9.6?

by Kermit Zarley (Servetus the Evangelical)

Most Christians claim that Jesus is God, and one of their primary biblical passages they cite for support is Isaiah 9.6. It reads, “For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.”

Hymns have always played a significant role in Christian worship. The translation “Mighty God” in Isaiah 9.6 has inspired many church hymns about Jesus. The one most memorable to Westerners is the final, heart-stirring ensemble in Handel’s magnificent *Messiah*. It is often performed by church choirs at Christmastime. But hymnology is no substitute for sound theology. When hymns reflect Christian theology, they should do so accurately and therefore scripturally.

Both Jews and Christians have always correctly interpreted Isaiah 9.1-7 as messianic. Christians have rightly applied all of the epithets in the second half of v. 6 to Jesus. The epithet translated “Mighty God” is *el gibbor* in the Hebrew text. But is “Mighty God” the correct translation of *el gibbor* here, so that it calls Jesus “God”?

El is the primitive Semitic root for “god.” It occurs 230 times in the Masoretic Text (MT) of the Old Testament (OT). Sometimes it identifies men. Many OT characters bore the word *el* in their names, such as Israel, only to signify that they belonged to God. Calling Messiah *el gibbor* is similar to calling him “Immanuel” in Isaiah 7.14, in which *el* is not intended to identify the Messiah as God but “God with us” (Matthew 1.23).

The Hebrew word *gibbor* occurs over 150 times in the MT in either its singular or plural form. In over half of these instances the New American Standard Bible renders it “mighty” or “mighty man” or “men.” In thirty-eight of them it is translated “warrior(s).” This evidence shows that *el gibbor* can be treated as an adjective or a substantive (noun) that designates men. Context and associated words are the determining factors.

The Greek Old Testament (Septuagint=LXX; 3rd century BCE) translates *el gibbor* in Isaiah 9.6 as *megales boules angelos*. The English word “angel” derives from *angelos*. But *angelos* often has the wider meaning of “messenger.” So, this expression in the LXX is usually translated, “messenger of mighty counsel,” not Mighty God. This is significant because these pre-Christian Jewish translators could not have been biased against the later, Christian interpretation, that is, that *el gibbor* identifies Jesus of Nazareth as “God.”

Jews and Christians have disagreed on the construction and therefore the application of these epithets in Isaiah 9.6. While the Targum on Isaiah and later rabbinical commentators, for example, Rashi and Kimchi, interpret the “child” as Messiah, they also interpret *el gibbor* as referring to God and not the Messiah, thereby avoiding calling Messiah “God.” Either they have applied only *el gibbor* to God and the other titles to Messiah or rendered all of them to God except “Prince of Peace.” Ibn Ezra avoided interpreting the “child” as Messiah by applying all the titles to King Hezekiah or his son.

Christian scholars have contended that both of these constructions are forced, thus charging these rabbis with bias. And since Matthew quotes Isaiah 9.1-2 and refers it to Jesus (Matthew 4.14-16; cf. Luke 1.79), many Christian scholars have insisted that its closeness to v. 6 suggests that all of those epithets should also be applied to the Messiah.

Some distinguished Christian scholars have not translated *el gibbor* in Isaiah 9.6 as “Mighty God.” Martin Luther, in his German Bible translation, renders it “*Kraft-held*,” which means “Strength-Hero.” He explains that this epithet “belongs not to the person of Christ, but to his work and office.” Raymond E. Brown insists that Isaiah did intend to call Messiah “god/God,” here, but only as a king of Israel in a royal psalm, e.g., in Psalm

45.6. Some English Bibles do render it “Godlike hero” or “God-Hero,” e.g., warrior.

Indeed, the immediately prior context of Isaiah 9.6 presents Messiah as a Galilean warrior. It reads, “But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish;... Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them. You shall multiply the nation, you shall increase their gladness; they will be glad in Your presence as with the gladness of harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil [of war]. For You shall break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian. For every boot of the booted warrior in the battle tumult, and cloak rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the fire” (Isaiah 9.1-6). The Apostle Paul interprets this warrior as Messiah Jesus destroying the Antichrist (1 Thessalonians 2.8).

El gibbor occurs only one other time in the MT, in Isa 10.21. This verse predicts that on the eschatological Day, “the second coming” for Christians, an Israeli remnant will survive an attack and return to God to forever rely upon him. It is presumed that *el gibbor* refers to God, here, being translated “the mighty God” in most English versions. For this reason, plus its close proximity to Isaiah 9.6, many Christian scholars regard *el gibbor* in Isaiah 10.21 as certain evidence that *el gibbor* in Isaiah 9.6 should be rendered likewise.

However, Isaiah 10.20-21 undoubtedly will be accomplished by means of messianic agency, as in Isaiah 9.3-7. That is, the surviving Jewish remnant will return to God on the eschatological Day by literally presenting itself in servitude before Messiah its King, whom God sends to be its Deliverer. For, immediately following Isaiah 9.6 the prophet says concerning the military success and governmental reign of Messiah, that “the zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this” (v. 7), that is, by means of the Messiah. Thus, *el gibbor* in both Isaiah 9.6 and 10.21 may refer to the Messiah.

Regardless, it ought to be concluded that interpreting *el gibbor* in Isaiah 9.6 as “mighty warrior” fits the context better and therefore does not call Jesus “Mighty God.”

This article is authored by Kermit Zarley (Servetus the Evangelical) .

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