

# Hezekiah or Jesus: Who is the Child of Isaiah 9:6-7

by  
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## I. Viewpoint One

There are some Christian Old Testament scholars who treat the prophecy in Isaiah 9 as referring to the birth of Hezekiah. There are several issues to be considered in interpretation of the passage.

**1) With respect to the child:** The issue is whether the passage is referring to literal birth or royal succession. R. E. Clement translates the verse 6 as "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given", and proposes that it should be understood as a reference to a royal succession and not to a literal birth. Thus, he concludes that the passage is referring to the accession of Hezekiah after the death of Ahaz. Gray in *The International Critical Commentary* also takes the child in verse 6 as referring to Hezekiah. He writes, "The ideal standpoint of the poet seems to be shortly after the birth of the prince, after he has been recognized as prince of Israel, but before the wide extension of his kingdom has begun."<sup>1</sup> Wildberger also points out the usage of the imperfect consecutive tense and suggests that this birth is not in the distant future but it has possibly already taken place. And in the same light, Wildberger takes the phrase "the sovereign authority came upon (cf. the imperfect consecutive) his shoulder" as that will make most sense in the context of a royal enthronement: "This sentence does not assert something about enthronement but must be interpreted as an

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<sup>1</sup>George B. Gray, *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark LTD., 1980), 180.

act of investiture, by means of which the child is officially elevated to the status of crown prince and is proclaimed the future ruler. <sup>2</sup>

**2) With respect to the names:** Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace: Clement claims that these titles portray various functions of the king, using the imagery and ideology of Egyptian origin: The series of four names which follow, built up in word couples, almost certainly derives from the Egyptian practice of giving throne names to the Pharaoh...The Egyptian practice was for a series of five names to be given, suggesting that this was originally the case here, and that one name has been lost in the transmission. <sup>3</sup> Clement explains the titles as follows: **Wonderful Counselor** describes the king's role as political guide; **Mighty God** emphasizes the extraordinary skill and strength of the king as a warrior. However, Wildberger cautions against watering down the title and understanding it as anything less than mighty God. He explains the title in relation to the ancient Near Eastern idea of kingship, in which the king was portrayed as the divinity whom he represents; **Everlasting Father** should be understood as father for ever and expresses the king's fatherly concern for the well-being of his people. (Gray also understands the third title as Father forever rather than as Eternal Father, and takes its meaning as the benevolent guardian of his people so long as he and they endure. He supports his view by giving other instances in which the word forever was used in the Old Testament which do not necessitate understanding the title as equivalent to Eternal Father, which implies the eternity of God: Is.47:7: You said, I will continue forever -- the eternal queen...; Dt. 15:17: Then you shall take an awl and pierce it through his

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<sup>2</sup>Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 400.

<sup>3</sup>R.E. Clements, *New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 108.

ear into the door, and he shall be your servant forever... Gray also directs attention to Job 29:16 and Is. 22:21 where father was used figuratively of a protector and benefactor.) ; **Prince of Peace** underscores the king's role as the promoter of peace and prosperity.

**3) With respect to the nature of the promise in verse 7:** Clement takes the proclamation in verse 7, 'There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace...' as a promise of a solid and independent kingdom under a Davidic ruler rather than a promise of a great universal kingdom ruling over many nations -- which was fulfilled in the accession of Hezekiah who provided a reprieve for the dynasty. Gray also takes the similar approach to the promise in verse 7 and understands the main thought of the promise to be that Yahweh will establish and secure a righteous and just government under the new Davidic dynasty. Wildberger finds several motifs in verse 7: the motif of stable order, the possibility of flourishing development, the steadfastness and permanence of the rule, and the quality of the rule as that of justice and righteousness. Yet Wildberger also cautions against taking the motif of duration in the sense of a strict eschatology. His view is recapitulated in the following:

This section, 9:1-6, is targeted for a time which addresses a situation full of distress brought on by foreign domination... The message is thus not about an absolute, unalterable, eternal plan of salvation wrought by God. Even if it were incorrect to connect this message with events surrounding the loss of the territory of Israel to the Assyrians, the darkness through which the people were traveling would not refer to the human condition in general... Isaiah is talking about the birth of a crown prince, from the house of David. It has either already taken place or, if child and give in v.5 are to be interpreted as prophetic perfects, it will happen in the very near future. ... We have already mentioned that the widespread

term messianic is problematic as a designation for this present section. There is no place in the OT which speaks of a Messiah as a savior figure who comes forth out of the transcendent regions and brings world history to an end. The child, about whose birth Isaiah speaks in this passage, will sit upon the throne of David in Jerusalem. Yet without a doubt, his birth is a salvation event; the future ahead of him will be more than just a drawn out continuation of the present; it is indeed still history in the normal, earthly-human realm, but it is at the same time fulfilled history. <sup>4</sup>

## II. Viewpoint Two

On the other side are scholars such as John Oswalt and J. A. Alexander who take the birth of the child in verse 6 as referring to the birth of Jesus Christ. Both Oswalt and Alexander reject the view that Isaiah 9:6 is simply a recognition of the birth of the crown prince Hezekiah for the following reasons: 1) Such view does not accord with the chronology of Hezekiah's birth; 2) The description of the child cannot be applied to merely a human king; 3) The nature of the rule promised in verse 7 transcends a normal-earthly rule.

According to Oswalt, the titles in verse 6 are above normal and highlight the ultimate deity of the child. Against the attempts to understand the titles as reference to the Egyptian throne names, he gives the following arguments. First, the customary practice of Egypt was to give five throne-names to the king upon his accession. But there are only four names in Isaiah 9, and only speculating some kind of emendation can add fifth. Second, this is a birth announcement and not an enthronement hymn. Third, the Egyptian throne-names were expression of their belief

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<sup>4</sup>Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, 406.

that the kings were gods -- a belief that goes against the grain of Hebrew monotheism. <sup>5</sup>

Oswalt also repudiates the attempt to deny divine attributes inherent in the titles. For example with respect to the rendering of *Mighty God* as *great hero*, he writes, *Apart from the attempt to deny deity to the person in question, however there is no reason to depart from the traditional rendering. Wherever *el gibbor* elsewhere in the Bible there is no doubt that the term refers to God (10:21; cf. also Deut. 10:17; Jer. 32:18).*

<sup>6</sup> Along with Oswalt, Alexander repudiates renderings with respect to *Eternal Father* -- such as *benefactor of the people* and *founder of a new or everlasting age* -- that exclude and discredit the obvious meaning of *an eternal being*. Besides, Motyer points out that *Father* is not current in the OT as a title of the kings, and it is used of the Lord in His concern for the helpless and the care of His people.

Furthermore, the rule promised in verse 7 transcends a normal and earthly rule. Thus it could not have been applied to Hezekiah whose rule was confined to Judah, and which was neither progressive nor perpetual. As Alexander writes, *The reign here predicted was to be not only peaceful but in every respect prosperous. And this prosperity, like the reign of which it is predicted, is to have no limit, either temporal or local. It is to be both universal and eternal...* <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>John Oswalt, *The International Commentary on the OT: The Book of Isaiah 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 246.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>7</sup>J.A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 205.

### III. Evaluation

A proper two-fold consideration must be given in interpreting the Old Testament prophecy: 1) the original meanings in light of their historical backgrounds; 2) the covenant theology that undergirds prophetic writings.

Frequently, Isaiah speaks to his contemporaries concerning their own times, and even his eschatological oracles issue from a historical setting. Isaiah 9:6-7 is a part of Isaiah's response to the Assyrian crises in the days of Ahaz, in which Ahaz fails to trust God and makes Judah an Assyrian vassal state. In the oracles of judgment and hope surrounding the event, Isaiah pronounces the royal hope of Davidide in 9:6-7. The original audience of Isaiah were Ahaz and the Judahites facing the Assyrian threat. Thus, that these were the words of hope held out to the people living in a situation full of distress brought by Assyrians in the eighth century BC should not be dismissed, but rather should be underscored.

One of the most crucial issues in approaching this passage is understanding the relationship between messianism and the Davidic dynasty which entails the following: 1) The messianic thinking in the prophets is frequently tied up with specific historical events with the following themes: that the family of anointed kings would be subject to judgment; that however, their line would be restored after the exile; and that they would take a leading role in rebuilding the temple. The prophets often show how the Davidic covenant was to be interpreted in particular, historical circumstances. 2) The messianic aspect is inherent in the Davidic covenant. And the messianic concepts attached to David's dynasty brings a focus to the hopes offered by the prophets in relation to both the present and future. 3) Thus much of the messianism found in the prophets is a form of dynastic messianism (i.e., it expresses a hope that all descendants

of David will be the king *par excellence*). 4) However, there is another side to this dynastic messianism. It also pointed to the fact that often the ruler on the throne at the time fell far short of the ideal, and thus needed to be replaced. In the end, there will be a seed of David who will not fail but bring to full realization the hopes for eternal peace and world dominion of righteousness under Davidic dynasty.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the approach of dynastic messianism to the text takes into the account the undergirding covenant theology of the prophets. Isaiah 9:1-7 seems to be a recapitulation of the Davidic covenant announced in 2 Samuel 7. In Davidic covenant, the Lord promises that David's dynasty will never be utterly rejected, although individual Davidic king may be chastised. This promise of God to David was extended to contemporary Israelites, as well as pointing ultimately to the ideal king that is to come, the true king of *par excellence* typified by David, Hezekiah, and the like. Thus it is God who raises up the Davidic offspring and guarantees the continuity of the kingdom forever under the Davidic king in both Isaiah 9 and 2 Samuel 7.

Thus from all these appears that the royal hope pronounced in Isaiah 9:6-7 had its immediate reference to the Davidic king born in the prophet's own days (i.e., Hezekiah). However, it also had a farfetching reference (despite the fact that the prophet himself probably did not have a full understanding of the exact nature of this more remote reference) to another king that is to come in ultimate and complete fulfillment of the pronounced hope -- the one who is the antitype that completely and truly satisfies all the criteria of the king *par excellence*. As Daniel Schibler writes,

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<sup>8</sup>Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard Hess, and Gordon Wenham, eds., *The Lord's Anointed* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 97-104.

What is important is to realize that messianism in general and messianic prophecies in particular all had a beginning, a *terminus quo*. and an end, a *terminus ad quem*., and in between a whole range or history of fulfillment. But when Jesus of Nazareth had come, the early church and generations of Christian following it have believed that, ultimately speaking, every messianic prophecy, every messianism even, found its fulfillment in Jesus, the Christ which... means the Messiah. <sup>9</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The major scholarly consensus with respect to approaching Isaiah 9:6-7 has been either messianic or Isaianic (i.e., that it is reference to Hezekiah as the awaited king), and not both. However, in light of dynastic messianism , the most appropriate approach to Isaiah 9 seems to be that which embraces both messianic and Isaianic outlook. Hezekiah does play a major role in the book of Isaiah. He is the king *par excellence* that replaces Ahaz, and the first to be the child of Isaiah 9:6. Hezekiah was the first Messiah for Isaiah and the people living in the eight century BC Judah, for Hezekiah's birth signified God's presence with them in a most precarious circumstance. <sup>10</sup>Moreover, this oracle of royal hope was to serve as a model for Hezekiah and the ensuing kings to follow.

However as Provan notes, Hezekiah as well as the rest of the earthly Davidic kings that followed-- in the total effect within the context of the entire book of Isaiah -- was only a type and a paradigmatic king in whose reign the promises were in fact as yet unfulfilled, and who thus points beyond himself to another Davidic monarch to come. <sup>11</sup> Thus, the ultimate fulfillment of the royal hope -- announced with an immediate

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 103.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 83.

reference to the prophet's own day, and with somewhat pale and shadowy understanding of its remote reference -- began with the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is continuing, and will be consummated with His glorious return.