

INTERPRETING *the Messiah*

BY JEAN SHELDON

The most loved and, perhaps, significant verse of Isaiah 9:1–12:6 also forms the lyrics of my favorite piece in Handel's *The Messiah*: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6, KJV). Perhaps our appreciation of these words stems from their awesome combination of divinity, power, aid, and peace. Perhaps we also read these words in retrospect, envisioning their fulfillment in the deeds and teachings of Jesus.

Nevertheless, their original setting resides in acts of violence and punishment. Another way to translate this verse is: “For a child is born to us; a son is given us. Dominion shall be upon His shoulder. And His name shall be called, Marvelous Counselor, Warrior-God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.” In the context of these chapters involving the imperial domination of Assyria, these would be comforting words: the promise of someone who could outdo Assyrian domination. Most scholars view the words I have translated here as “Warrior-God” as “Mighty God.” Yet the same word is used to describe Nimrod



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in Genesis 10:8–10 as “first to be a mighty man,” with names of the kingdoms He founded. This word, *gibbor* in Hebrew, usually means “hero,” and can involve someone who excels in war.¹ This is the way the ancient Israelite community would likely read this word in this verse.

Scholars do speak of larger ways to interpret the word *gibbor*. A hero then would be anyone who used extraordinary power or means to accomplish a great action. That helps us some, but the ancient Israelites not as much. From the time of Sargon of Akkad in the third millennium, who attempted to create the first empire by

conquest, the ancient Near Eastern mind understood peace to be the by-product of war. A prince of peace could have blood on his hands. What should we do with this? Do we throw out the tradition of applying this prophetic statement to Jesus in His first coming, since Jesus in the Gospels never killed anyone? Should we continue to soften it with most translators so that it fits better with Jesus's life, who alone in history deserves the title "mighty God"? Would we better limit its prophetic application to Jesus's second advent? Then what do we do with the image of a vulnerable newborn, not only mentioned in this verse, but highlighted in Matthew's and Luke's gospels?

The rest of this week's lesson includes Isaiah 9:1–12:6: chapters filled with prophecies of violence against the northern kingdom of Israel, violence against Assyria whom Isaiah, speaking for God, refers to as "the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the staff of my fury" and who will exercise that violence against Israel (Isa. 9:8–10:19, CEB). Within this section, Isaiah depicts these consequences to Israel's waywardness in four sequential statements that each end with the words: "Even then God's anger didn't turn away; God's hand was still extended."² The extent of violence, albeit intermingled with words of hope and deliverance, raises the larger problem of the portrayal of Yahweh in the Old Testament over against Jesus in the New Testament. Why does such apparent disparity exist between Yahweh and Jesus, who referred to Himself as Yahweh (John 8:58)? When looking for understanding as to whether our own violence is justifiable, must we be forced to choose between God in the Old Testament and God in the New?

I have elsewhere advanced a canonical narrative reading proposing that two voices exist in the Old Testament—the voice of God's preferred will, usually heard first in a narrative sequence, followed by the people's will, which usually fails to heed God's preferred

will. In response to the people, the second voice is heard acquiescing or adapting to the people's will. A specific set of criteria establishes further these two voices. Time and space do not permit me to develop this further; and besides, it works primarily within a narrative framework instead of poetry. So instead of utilizing this method here, I would like to point out some principles that I have found useful for resolving the problem here.

The Setting: God Meets People Where They Are

This one is commonly applied to the problem I have outlined above. It recognizes that the people are simply not in a position to understand gentle speech and action. To speak softly and lovingly, and use only kind actions, would not turn them around from their downward path. They are used to external control, harshness, and violence. Try going to a similarly violent society and pleading with them gently, persuasively, to stop their violence. Does it work? According to Ezekiel, Yahweh was dealing with hard-headed and hard-hearted people, so He would have to give His prophets hard heads and hearts in order to be heard (Ezekiel 3:4–9).

The Problem of Language: Divine Determinism

One of the problems in terms of the violence as punishment is that Yahweh is said to cause it. In addition to Assyria serving as the rod of His anger, God is said to raise up their enemies against them. He "stirred up" the Aramaeans "from the east, and the Philistines from the west" (Isa. 9:11, 12, CEB). This is what I have come to call "divine determinism," in which God is said to do what we would naturally suppose was the result of human choice or forces of nature. This divine determinism exists throughout much of the Bible. Even Jesus uses it. Consider this statement: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace, but a sword. 'For I have come to set a man against

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Aaron's Staff Becomes a Snake (Exodus 7, 10). Wood engraving, published in 1886

his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's household" (Matthew 10:34–36, NRSV). Interestingly, here Jesus is quoting Micah 7:6 and, for that reason, I added single quotes to designate the fact. Yet Micah 7:6 itself does not apply the principle of divine determinism, even in its context. Instead, it reads: "For the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household" (NRSV). Why does even Jesus use this principle?

We have a similar problem in Exodus where it says that "God hardened Pharaoh's heart" (Exodus 9:12). One could argue that God revealed Himself to Pharaoh as a superior deity and thus, by giving him something to harden his heart against, He "hardened" Pharaoh's heart. Similarly, one could say that Jesus sent a sword by sending truth that would lead some, even in one's home, to turn against the one who believe that truth. As helpful as this is, it doesn't explain every instance of divine determinism.

Here is where it is extremely important to recognize the principle of inspiration—that the language is human. Since only the Ten Commandments are said to be of "divine composition" (GC v-vi), I believe that even Jesus's

words can be interpreted as human. That doesn't mean that Jesus may not have spoken words that indicated divine determinism, but it does allow us the ability to recognize that human beings who wrote gospels could use their own words and logic. In terms of the Old Testament, the ancient Mesopotamian mind was steeped in the belief that the gods fated everything and everything that happened was according to the divine will. No

doubt this thinking was fairly pervasive throughout much of the ancient Near East, including the Hebrews. And in some ways they needed to think that God was responsible for everything, to avoid the worship of other forces and powers who would fill the gap that would result if God wasn't the originator of disaster.³ Keeping this in mind allows us to interpret these

kinds of passages differently, so that we understand the punishments in the Bible to be the result of God not preventing something happening, of natural disasters, of the free choices of others, and so on.

Jesus Is the Frame of Reference

When we confront Jesus's words and actions and His message that these words and actions reveal the Father, that if we have seen Him, we have seen the Father, we are faced with two options: either we don't believe that

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Jesus represented the Father (or at least we treat His claim to do so as less important) or we have to relook at the portrayal of God in the Old Testament and rethink our interpretations of it. To do the latter is important because, in my last eight years of teaching, I have had two theology majors come separately to me to tell me that the portrayal of God in the Old Testament is the greatest hindrance to their peers to having a relationship with Him. How can our Millennials and Generation Z trust God when He seems to behave and speak so differently than Jesus?

Given the way first Israel, and then Judaism, understood Isaiah 9:6, 7—that the child born to them would be named, “Wonderful Counselor, Warrior God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace” as one who would wreak bloodshed—it is understandable why they would reject Jesus as the fulfillment of that and every other messianic prophecy. They expected the messiah to exercise dominion, gain peace by warfare, and control the people so that, by force, they would be righteous.

Jesus did quite the opposite; He rejected dominion in both word and deed as having any part of His kingdom for the sake of humble service (Mark 10:42–45). When He chased the people in charge of monetary exchange from the temple, He was not suddenly in support of violence. So far as we know His raised whip never systematically lashed anyone and no one died as a consequence. Only tables and chairs got pushed over and the cattle got driven out (Matt. 21:12–13; John 2:13–17). When Jesus confronted those who showed zeal for the law when they brought the woman caught having an adulterous affair to Him, He did not punish them or her; He resolved the situation by bringing accountability to the accusers and forgiveness to the accused (John 8:1–11).

To read the Old Testament through the lens Jesus

has provided brings a more coherent interpretation of its portrayal of God. It can lead us to view violence as not belonging to God’s preferred will. It allows us to understand that we hear expressions of God’s will adapted to people’s choices much more frequently than we hear words that represent God’s preferred or ideal will. And if we let the gospels influence us fully, behind the strong human expressions and harsh punishments, we can imagine Yahweh-Jesus weeping over His hardhearted people, “How can I give you up; . . . how can I hand you over, O Israel?” (Hosea 11:8, CEB).

Endnotes

1. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, rev. ed., trans. M. E. J. Richardson, 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1994): 172; H. Kosmala, גָּבַר, in G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. J. T. Willis, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 2:373.
2. Isaiah 9:12b, 17b, 21b; 10:4b, CEB.
3. Alden Thompson has used this interpretation to explain why mention of Satan in the Old Testament occurs so late. See *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 43–70.



JEAN SHELDON, professor, specializes in Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East. She has worked as an instructor of religion at Hong Kong Adventist College, a graduation analyst for PUC, and a religion professor. Recently she has been working on “Mother Versus Child: A Feminist and Comparative Look at Exodus 21:22–25,” in preparation for publication in a book to be published by Phoenix Sheffield.