# The Compound Name in Isaiah 9:5(6)

The four Hebrew phrases comprising the namein Isa 9:5b [6b] are commonly translated “wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace.” While they are not applied to Jesus in the New Testament, in Christian exegesis represented by a writer such as Jerome it was usual to take them as phrases describing the messiah and as cohering with the incarnation of Jesus. The translator of the Targum of Isaiah also assumes that the names refer to the child to whom the verse refers (and incorporates the word *mšyḥ’*, apparently as an equivalent to *rb*); so does Ibn Ezra. But Jewish exegesis represented by figures such as Rashi came to take at least the first three of the phrases to refer to God as the one who names the “prince of peace,” perhaps partly in reaction to the Christian appropriation.[[1]](#footnote-1) Modern critical exegetes take them to reflect Middle Eastern courtly language describing the child as “mighty God” only in a figurative sense compatible with the conviction that Yhwh is the only God. A recent key contribution to the literature sustaining this interpretation is that of Hans Wildberger, who has compared the phrases with Egyptian material.[[2]](#footnote-2) My aim here is to question the plausibility of Wildberger's understanding and to support the view that the name refers to God, not to the child, that it declares what God will be for the child and comprises a pair of noun clauses, not a series of asyndetic phrases.

A description of the king as mighty God is hard to parallel precisely elsewhere in the Middle East, let alone in Israel, and it is difficult to know what the original hearers would have made of the words intended thus. Wildberger's attempts to reassure his readers that the phrases are theologically quite imaginable on the lips of Isaiah (or of a later contributor to the Book of Isaiah) have the opposite effect. “Isaiah used formulations which surpassed what was commonly used in the palace and ... went beyond what was generally accepted in Israel but... were at the same level as the concepts about sacral kingship in Egypt” he says, and the parallelism of 9:5(6) and 10:21 “corresponds ... to the ancient Near Eastern concept of kingship, according to which the king can be depicted by using the same predicates as the divinity whom he represents.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Using the same predicates used of God is not the same as calling the king God, however, and even if it were the same, it would be hard to believe that Isaiah used formulations going even beyond usage in the palace but still expected to be understood in Judah. “Whatever would recall the polytheism of Egypt or would not fit in with Israel's faith,” says Wildberger, “has been meticulously removed.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This seems questionable in itself, aside from the question whether it contradicts what Wildberger said in the previous quotation. There is actually no parallel to the supposed designation of a present or future king as *’el*, and the possible designation of the king as *’elohim* in Ps 45:7(6) is much controverted. Even if Wildberger is correct in stating that *’el* and *’elohim* can be used in the OT in a rather free way, in the sense of divine beings,”[[5]](#footnote-5) calling the king *’el* is another matter. For Wildberger, if Yhwh can address the Davidic king as his son, it is “not a very big step” for the Davidic king openly to be called “a divine being.”[[6]](#footnote-6) On the contrary, it is a huge step, one likely to make a person fall over.

Perhaps a way out of these difficulties can be found which will leave the standard critical understanding of the name largely intact. The first half of the four-phrase series means literally “wonder planner God warrior.” I accept the usual view that these four words form two two-word phrases. In the conventional translation “wonderful counselor” the first phrase is apparently taken as a construct phrase, “wonder of a planner.” If that is an appropriate rendering, the second phrase might well suggest “God of a warrior,” “Godlike warrior,” rather than “warrior-like God,” which is presupposed by the translation “mighty God.” Indeed, in Ezek 32:21 the plural of this phrase, *’ly gbwrym*, appears to mean “mighty leaders.” The four phrases in Isa 9:5(6) would then be quite unexceptionable (if still striking) descriptions of a king hoped for: a wonderful planner, a God-like warrior, a permanent father, a peaceful commander.

One difficulty with this understanding of the second phrase, *’el* *gibbor*, is precisely its recurrence in 10:21 with definite reference to Yhwh. This makes it harder to believe that in 9:5(6) it means “God-like warrior,” or that it refers to the promised king. Further, Wildberger himself has strongly disputed the understanding of the first phrase as “wonder of a planner,” rightly noting that it more naturally suggests “planner of a wonder.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The phrase does not constitute a construct chain but a participial phrase in which the participle governs the preceding noun. This subverts the attempt to retranslate the second phrase and leaves us with our problem.[[8]](#footnote-8) If we are to solve the problem, we need to reconsider our assumptions regarding the relationship between name and person.

In what sense does a name relate to its bearer? Some Hebrew names describe the persons who bear them; for instance, Gen 32:28 implies that “Israel” means “he struggles with God.” Other names make statements of faith about God; many ordinary names in Isaiah such as Uriah, Zechariah, and Jeberekiah are examples, as is Immanuel. Yet others in Isa 7:1-8:10 are clauses making statements without reference to God; an example is Maher-shalal-hash-baz. Some commentators, Wildberger, Kaiser, Clements, and Watts, among them,[[9]](#footnote-9) assume that our four phrases belong to the first category and describe the person named, as the name Israel does. But do they really describe the person named, or do they describe Yhwh?

We have seen that in Isa 10:21 *’el* *gibbor* definitely refers to Yhwh, and this is the natural reference of the phrase in 9:5(6). Also, to say that someone is “one who plans a wonder” (*pele’* *yo*‘*eṣ*) is in itself to describe that person in divine terms, not least in the book called Isaiah; for the sarcasm in 5:19

presupposes that making plans and fulfilling them is a specialty of Yhwh. “Father,” particularly “everlasting father” (*’abi* ‘*ad*), is otherwise uninstanced as a title for a king but is entirely intelligible as a title for God.

All this suggests that the child's name in Isa 9:5(6) is a description of his God rather than of the child himself. Given that this is a common feature of biblical names, not least in Isaiah, and not least in the case of the name Immanuel, the curiosity is that commentators in the Christian exegetical tradition have simply assumed that the name refers to the person who bears it. Of the comments which I have discovered, those nearest to being a defense of this assumption are G. B. Gray's comment that this name “is different in character” from the name Immanuel (without further explanation) and M. Rehm's repeated comment that the name needs to refer to the child, not to God, because it is there to tell us about the child (which begs the question).[[10]](#footnote-10)

“One who plans a wonder,” then, recalls Isaiah's emphasis on Yhwh as one who effectively designs and implements a purpose; more specifically, it anticipates the description of Yhwh as wonderful in planning (28:29; see also 14:24, 27; 19:12; 23:9; 25:1; 29:14, which include references to specific extraordinary events which Yhwh is planning). The participle is used of Yhwh at 19:17. We have seen that “warrior God” recurs as a description of Yhwh in 10:21; the term *’el* for God already came in the earlier name Immanuel, while in 42:13 the word for “warrior” is used in a description of Yhwh going out to battle like a champion. “Father for ever” recalls the book's opening description of God as one who has brought up children and has had to watch them run away (1:2-4), but in this son's name (here in 9:5[6]b) it would also specifically recall Yhwh's commitment to David's line as “father .. . forever” (Ps 89:27, 28 [26, 29]); the words in the psalm are the same as here, a fact which in itself makes less plausible as well as unnecessary the rendering “father of spoil.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

In the phrase “commander who brings well-being,” the first word, *sar*, conventionally “prince,” suggests an army commander in this context (cf. Gen 21:22). The application of the word to Yhwh is otherwise uninstanced before Dan 8:11, 25, but names sometimes do incorporate unparalleled designations of God (e.g., Joah, “Yhwh is brother,” Isa 36:3). “Commander” accompanies “warrior” in 2 Chr 32:21 and fits with Isaiah's emphasis on Israel's God being “Yhwh of armies.” But this commander's war making is destined to bring *shalom*, both in the sense of an end to war making (cf. v. 4[5]) and in the sense of the broader well-being suggested by *shalom*, a well-being which includes growth, blessing, joy, and fairness (cf. vv. 2, 6 [3, 7]).

These four phrases of the child's name express key truths about Yhwh, who is committed to working with him and through him so that this child's reign will bring well-being and justice (v. 6 [7]).

Besides questioning the reference of the four phrases, we need to question the exegetical tradition's further assumption that they comprise a series of asyndetic phrases which offer four parallel descriptions of the person they refer to.[[12]](#footnote-12)

As far as I have been able to establish, it was the Italian Jewish commentator S. D. Luzzatto who revived the notion that the four phrases refer to God, not to the child, though he still assumed that they constitute the child's name. Luzzatto took *yw‘ṣ* as a verb and rendered the whole series as “God the mighty plans a wonder—the eternal father, the ruler of peace.”[[13]](#footnote-13) In the Jewish Publication Society's translation of 1917 it was rendered as “Wonderful in counsel is God the Mighty, the Everlasting Father, the ruler of peace,” but the Jewish Publication Society's translation of 1985 reverted to Luzzatto's understanding, except for rendering *pl’* as “grace.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Holladay links the two middle phrases as a noun clause and renders the series as “Planner of wonders; God the war hero (is) Father forever; prince of well-being.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

It would be more natural to take the name as two clauses, like Maher-shalal-hash-baz, both of them noun clauses like Immanuel. Given that the two middle phrases are indeed the ones that apply most distinctively to God, we might then most plausibly take the four as a characteristic prophetic chiasm: “One who plans a wonder is the warrior God; the father for ever is a commander who brings peace.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The two most unequivocally divine epithets at the center are the subjects of the two clauses. The opening designation of Yhwh as planner and his uninstanced designation as commander at the end are predicates which have implicitly theological and metaphorical significance. They declare that Yhwh is a certain sort of planner and commander —specifically, one who is better than Tiglath-pileser (*pl’sr*, Akkadian *šarru* *rābû*?).[[17]](#footnote-17)

Modern critical exegetes are right in claiming that these four phrases need to be understood in the light of their historical and literary context. Traditional Christian exegetes are right in holding that they constitute the child's name. Traditional Jewish exegetes are right in maintaining that they refer to God. The name is a statement which would raise no theological eyebrows in its context but would bring a challenge to faith, a challenge having to do with the God whom the king will serve, the God who will support him and will fulfill a purpose through him.

1. See J. J. Staub, “A Review of the History of the Interpretation of Isaiah 8.11-9.6,” in *Jewish Civilization: Essays and Studies* (ed. R. A. Brauner; Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, 1979) 1. 89-107 (esp. 103). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. H. Wildberger, “Die Thronnamen des Messias, Jes. 9,5b,” *TZ* 16 (1960) 314-32; *Jesaja 1.* (BKAT 10/1; 2d ed.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1980) 362-89 (= *Isaiah 1-12* [Continental Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991] 383-410), with his references. See also O. Kaiser, *Das Buch des Propheten Jesaja, Kap. 1.2* (ATD 17; 5th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981) 203-18 (= *Isaiah 1-12* [OTL; 2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster; London: SCM, 1983] 210-14); R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 107-8; J. D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (WBC 24; Waco, TX: Word, 1985) 128-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, 401, 404 (= Wildberger, *Jesaja 1*, 380, 382). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 402 (= Wildberger, *Jesaja 1*, 381 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 404 (= Wildberger, *Jesaja 1*, 383). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 408 (= Wildberger, *Jesaja 1*, 387-88). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 403 (= Wildberger, *Jesaja 1*, 381-82). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. To complicate the discussion, the word “Gottheld,” Wildberger's German rendering of *’el gibbor* (*Jesaja 1*, 363), is misleadingly translated “God's hero” rather than “heroic God” in English (Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, 385; also 403, without equivalent in the original German). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See n. 2 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. G. B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; New York: Scribner's, 1912) 1.128; M. Rehm, *Der königliche Messias im Licht der Immanuel-Weissagungen des Buches Jesaja* (Eichstätter Studien N.E 1; Kevalaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1968) 147-48, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, e.g., J. Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel* (London: George Allen, 1956) 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See, recently, M. A. Sweeney, “A Philological and Form-critical Reevaluation of Isaiah 8:16-9:6,” *HAR* 14 (1994) 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See S. D. Luzzatto, *Il Profeta Isaia volgarizzato e commentato ad uso* *degl’Israeliti* (Padua: Antonio Bianchi, 1867) 131-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See H. L. Ginsberg, “First Isaiah,” *EncJud* 9. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. W. L. Holladay, *Isaiah: Scroll of a Prophetic Heritage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Compare P. D. Wegner, “A Re-examination of Isaiah ix 1-6,” *VT42* (1992) 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See R. A. Carlson, “The Anti-Assyrian Character of the Oracle in Is. ix 1-6,” *VT* 24 (1974) 130-35, though he assumes, of course, that the name refers to the Judean king [↑](#footnote-ref-17)