

Unveiling the Mystery...

of the Closed Mem (ם) of Isaiah 9:7

Ya'acov Natan Lawrence

Waters in the Wilderness, A Teaching Ministry of Hoshana Rabbah Messianic Discipleship Resources

Isaiah 9:6–7 Says:

6 For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government/dominion shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor/Advisor, The mighty El, The Everlasting/Eternal Father, The Prince of Peace/Sar Shalom. 7 Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of YHVH of Hosts/Legions will perform this. (Emphasis added.)

Commentary:

IN THIS VERY CLEAR REFERENCE TO the forthcoming Messiah of Israel, the prophet Isaiah utilizes a literary device found nowhere else in the Tanakh (Hebrew Scriptures) to convey a hidden, prophetic message concerning the nature of the Messiah.

This hidden message is found in the Hebrew word *l'marbeh*, (translated as “of the increase”) found in verse seven above. The word *l'marbeh* written in Hebrew letters would normally look like this: למרבה. The second letter in from the right (Hebrew reads from right to left) is the Hebrew letter *mem* (מ) corresponding to the letter *m* in our English alphabet. According to Hebrew grammatical rules, there are several letters in the Hebrew alphabet which when they occur at the beginning or inside of a word have one form, but when they appear at the end of a word they have another form, or final form (*sofit*). The final letter actually looks different. For example, when the *mem* appears at the beginning of or inside of a word it looks like this: מ (called an *open mem*); however, when it appears at the end of a word in its final form it looks like this: ם (called a *closed mem*). According to Hebrew grammar rules (which originated in antiquity), closed mems are to be used only at the end of a word. Yet the prophet Isaiah uses a closed mem at the beginning of the word *marbeh* (למרבה). (The Hebrew letter ל which proceeds ם is simply a word-prefix meaning “to” or “for”).

The word *marbeh* (*Strong's* H4766; *TWOT* 2103) simply means “abundance, increase, increasing” and originates from the Hebrew root word *rabbah* meaning “to be or become great, many, numerous, make large, increase, multiply.” Isaiah 9:7 is one of only two places where this word occurs in the Tanakh (the other one is Isaiah 33:23).

One must remember that the Hebrew language is ideographic (i.e., the use of pictures or symbols in a system of writing to represent an idea or a thing) or pictographic (i.e., characterized by picture writing) in nature. The letters, especially in their ancient form, called paleo-Hebrew, were even more pictographic than the more modern square script with which everyone is familiar. Each letter was a picture of a concept, not unlike Egyptian Hieroglyphics. The Hebrew letter *mem* in its ancient Hebrew script (from which the modern script is derived) means “water or waves of water like an ocean.” The Hebrew word *mayeem* is spelled with two mems: םים *mem-yud-mem sofit* (*Hebrew Word Pictures*, by Frank T. Seekins, Living Word Pictures, Inc., Phoenix, AZ: 1994). In Hebrew mystical thought, the letter *mem* is not only connected to water, in accordance with its ancient pictographic origins, but with the Hebrew word םא *em/aleph-mem sofit* (or *mother*), as well as a woman's belly or womb from which flows water at the time of birth. The open and closed mem both have pictographic implications as well. A closed mem represents a closed womb and therefore can connote the masculine gender, which is incapable of giving birth to a child, or to a woman who is barren and incapable of giving birth. Likewise, a virgin has a closed womb until she gives birth to her first child. We see some of these ideas in some ancient Jewish mystical writings below:

The open Mem. What is the open Mem? It includes both male and female. What is the closed Mem? It is made like a belly from above. But Rabbi Rahumai said that the belly is like the letter Teth [ט *tet*].

He said it is like a Teth on the inside, while I say that it is like a Mem on the outside. 85, What is a Mem? Do not read Mem, but Mayim (water). Just like water is wet, so is the belly always wet. Why does the open Mem include both male and female, while the closed Mem is male? This teaches us that the Mem is primarily male. The opening was then added to it for the sake of the female. Just like the male cannot give birth, so the closed Mem cannot give birth. And just like the female has an opening with which to give birth, so can the open Mem give birth. The Mem is therefore open and closed. (*Sepher HaBahir* 84)

Three Mothers, A[leph] M[em] Sh[in], in the Soul are fire, water, and breath. The head is created from fire, the belly is created from water, and the chest, created from breath, decides between them. (*Sepher Yetzirah* 3:4)

Messianic Jewish Hebrew roots scholars who are schooled in Christian theology as well as the Hebrew language, Hebrew Scriptures (Tanakh) and Jewish mystical writings have studied and written on the significance of the *closed mem* in Isaiah 9:7. For example, Avi ben Mordechai has noted this in his book, *Messiah Vol. 3* where he writes:

The closed Hebrew Mem refers to a “belly,” and a “womb” in Hebrew mysticism. This is highly significant that a *closed mem* (meaning a *closed womb*) would be hinted at in a context-specific prophecy about the coming of HaMashiach, at least according to the Targum [Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Scriptures] (p. 522).

Ben Mordechai then poses the question: “Is this closed mem supposed to mean that the Messiah would be born in a womb that was ‘closed?’” In attempting to answer this question, he relates Isaiah 9:6 to its larger Scriptural context of which Isaiah 7:11–14 is a part. He relates this verse (9:7) to 7:11 where the mention is made of a sign from both the highest heaven and the lowest depths of the earth (i.e. the womb) would be given, and that sign would be that *the* young maiden or virgin would conceive and bear a child (7:14) and his title-name would be *Immanuel* meaning *El with us* (Ibid. p. 523).

Ben Mordechai sees a link between the womb of a woman, a child being formed in the depths of the earth (in its mother’s womb) (see Ps 139:15–16), a child being “hidden” deep in the “subterranean” caverns of its mother’s womb and a hidden subterranean fountain of water. He believes that Yeshua was hinting at this allusion in John 7:38 where he said (Ibid.):

He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, “From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water” (NASB).

Another Messianic Jewish scholar who sees the connection between the Messiah who would be born of a virgin/young maiden (Isa 7:14), would be *Immanuel* (*El with us*), would be a “Son” with divine titles (i.e., Counselor, the Mighty El, the Everlasting/Eternal Father, and Prince of Peace) (9:6) and the closed mem prefiguring the virgin birth is Dr. Daniel Botkin. He writes, “A closed mem is a closed womb; an open mem is the womb opening to give birth (*Bahir* 84). What does this tell us about this Child in prophecy? It tells us that this Child will be concealed inside a closed womb, i.e., the womb of the Virgin spoken of in Isaiah 7:14” (*Gates of Eden* magazine, May-June, 2003, p. 5). Botkin goes on to write,

It is also interesting to note that the Virgin Mother ... had a name that begins and ends with the letter *mem*. Christians know her as Mary, but her Hebrew name is Miriam.

Of course, the rabbis do not see any hints of Miriam in Isaiah’s prophecy, but they are aware of this mysterious closed mem and of its Messianic implications. The rabbis teach that when it is time for the Redemption, the closed mem of Isaiah’s *l’marbeh* will open for the coming Messiah (Radak, Isa. 9:6). (Ibid.)

The understanding of the open mem has been noted in Christian circles as well. Early nineteenth-century Christian Bible scholar, commentator and disciple of John Wesley, Adam Clarke commenting on Isaiah 9:7 noted the closed mem and concluded the following:

This is an illustrious prophecy of the incarnation of [Messiah] ... He shall appear as a child, born of woman, born as a Jew ... but not in the way of ordinary generation. He is a Son given—the human nature, in which the fullness of the Godhead was to dwell, being produced by the creative energy of the [Spirit of Elohim] in the womb of the Virgin (See Matt 1:20,21,23,25 and Luke 1:35; Isa 7:14)” (*Clarks Commentary*, vol 4, p. 65).

