



The Mystery Of The Closed Mem

By Daniel Botkin

The letter *mem*, which corresponds to our English letter *M*, is one of five letters in the Hebrew alphabet that takes a final form. In other words, the letter is written one way, מ, when it occurs at the beginning of a word or anywhere inside a word, but it is written a different way, ׀, when it is the last letter of a word. In words such as מָשִׁיחַ (mashiach = “messiah”, or אֱמֶת (emet = “truth”), It is written in its normal form, מ,

This is sometimes called the open mem, due to the small opening in the lower left corner of the letter. In words like אִם (em = “mother”) or שְׁלוֹם (shalom= “peace”), where it is the final letter, it is written in its final form, ׀, sometimes called the closed mem.

According to the rules of Hebrew grammar and spelling, a closed mem can appear only at the end of a word. A closed mem is a final mem, and can be used only as the final letter of a word. There is one place in the Hebrew Bible, however, where a closed mem occurs inside a word. This entry, which defies the rules of Hebrew grammar and spelling, is found in Isaiah’s famous prophecy of the coming Messiah:

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. There will be no end to the increase of his government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold

it with justice and righteousness from then on and forever more (Isa. 9:6).

The closed mem appears within the word לְמַרְבֵּה (l'marbeh), which is translated by the phrase “to the increase.” The reader can see that the second letter of this word (reading from right to left) is a closed mem. The first letter, ל (L), is a prefix translated “to the.” The main part of the word, מַרְבֵּה (marbeh= “increase”), is spelled with a closed mem. This word, marbeh, is found several other places in the Hebrew Bible, always in the form the reader expects it to be, with an open mem at the beginning. The only place where *marbeh* appears with the closed mem is in Isaiah’s passage about the birth of this very special Child, a Son who is given Divine titles and who will rule as Messiah Ben David.

Rabbis associated the letter mem with the womb (Sefer Yetzira 3:4, Bahir 85, Etz Chaim, Shaar HaYereach 3, p. 176). 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 the child in Isaiah’s 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:

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel [God with us].”

It is interesting to note that there is a Hebrew word for womb, which begins with mem-

מֵעָה (me’eh = “womb”). This word appears in the story of Ruth, one of the few women listed in the genealogy of the Messiah in Matthew chapter one. It is also interesting that the Virgin Mother, who descended from Ruth, had a name that begins and ends with the letter mem. Christians know her as Mary, but her Hebrew name was 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 of the Messiah (Radak, Isa. 9:6).

In light of all this, we can see why the Holy Spirit inspired Isaiah to break the rules of Hebrew grammar and spelling by writing לִמְרֵבָה (l'marbeh). The purpose is to draw our attention to the letter mem, where we see the initial of Miriam, the mother of the Child. We also see it as the initial for me'em, "womb," which in this case is a closed womb- the closed womb of the Virgin Miriam, which opened at the time of Redemption to give birth to the Child spoken of in this prophecy.

Additional Note:

Richard Wurmbrand once showed this closed mem in Isaiah's prophecy to a rabbi. "I asked the rabbi if he could explain this, but he could give me no answer. I then told him of the Kabbalistic tradition, that Isaiah put a ם in the middle of the word, in order to show the reader who was destined to understand it that the Divine Child of whom this prophecy speaks would be born of the closed womb of a virgin. Many other arguments, which I personally consider more conclusive, would have made a far smaller impression on the rabbi than this one. He had no further counter-argument when I told him that the Messiah is the man who was born of the Virgin Mary...."

From *Christ on the Jewish Road*, p.106