

## Introduction

Scripture uses parental metaphors to describe certain aspects of Yahweh's nature and how He relates to His people—the depiction of Him as a Father is Scripture's most prominent parental metaphor. However, the lesser-known metaphor of Yahweh described as a mother is also important to consider because it provides a fuller picture of His relational character.

This study evaluates thirteen passages that depict God as a mother alongside paternal metaphors in Scripture and relevant historical and cultural context. These thirteen passages are separated into two categories; images of Yahweh as an animal mother (Ruth 2:12; Ps. 17:8; 91:4; Deut. 32:10-11; Hos. 13:8) and a human mother (Num. 11:4-6, 12-14; Isa 42:14; 49:15; 66:13; Prov. 8:22-26; Ps. 90:1-2; Isa. 45:9-11; Deut. 32:18). This study discusses how these distinctive maternal metaphors reveal that Yahweh is the ultimate Comforter, Caretaker, and Life-giver, just as much as He embodies the characteristics emphasized by His paternal associations in Scripture.

## Research Methodology

While depictions of Yahweh's paternal nature take precedence throughout Scripture, the Old Testament also uses maternal descriptions that depict His unique role as a comforter, caretaker, and life-giver. The cultural movement away from motherhood has prompted this approach to Scripture with the inquiry into God's position on the cosmic significance of motherhood.

This study was conducted through a Protestant Christian worldview lens to address relevant theological implications. According to this worldview, God is the perfect model of godliness (1 Cor. 11:1), and humans are His humble image-bearers who are finite and incapable of adequately fulfilling their given roles (James 3:2; Ecc. 7:20). Yet, they are called to emulate His nature in every position and aspect of life (1 Jn. 2:6; Jn. 15:9-11). This fundamental belief led to the inquiry of how a woman's role as a mother reflects God's character. Further, what do the maternal metaphors of Yahweh in Scripture say about His character?

In addition, a core tenet of the Christian worldview is the authority of Scripture. This conviction of Scripture's authority led to the design of this research around an in-depth textual exegesis of Scripture passages that depict Yahweh as a mother. Using an inductive study method, each passage is analyzed alongside its historical-cultural context and how each metaphor describes Yahweh as a comforter, caretaker, and life-giver.

## Results

This exegetical analysis of Scripture revealed that Yahweh is the ultimate comforter, caretaker, and life-giver. Through an in-depth, inductive analysis of each passage, the maternal metaphors used were observed as part of two major categories, human and animal. Within the human category, Yahweh is described as a routine human mother and a mother in labor. In the animal category, He is depicted as a mother bird (hen/eagle) and a mother bear. An inductive analysis of these passages highlighted and emphasized Yahweh's maternal attributes as noteworthy, considering the historical-cultural understanding of human/divine motherhood in Ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East. These depictions revealed Yahweh's unique role as the ultimate Comforter, Caretaker, and Life-Giver of those who love and follow Him.

### Conclusions

This study has shown that Scripture uses parental metaphors to describe certain aspects of Yahweh's nature and how He relates to His people. While depicting Him as a Father is significant and compelling, it is also essential to consider the maternal metaphors used to describe Him in the Old Testament. These depictions reveal His unique role as the ultimate Comforter, Caretaker, and Life-Giver of those who devote their lives to following Him. Understanding Yahweh's paternal and maternal metaphors ultimately provides a fuller consideration and appreciation of His nature and character as the God of Christianity.

## Bibliography

- Allen, Leslie C. *Psalms 101-150*. Revised. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002. Deuteronomy Commentaries
- Ashley, Timothy R. *The Book of Numbers*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1993.
- Block, Daniel Isaac. *Judges, Ruth*. Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999.
- Boda, Mark J., J. G. McConville, and J. G. (J. Gordon) McConville. *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*. Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012.
- Budin, Stephanie Lynn., and Jean MacIntosh Turfa. *Women in Antiquity Real Women Across the Ancient World*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Cooper, Dana, and Claire Phelan. *Motherhood in Antiquity*. Edited by Dana Cooper and Claire Phelan. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Craigie, Peter C., and Marvin E. Tate. *Psalms 1-50*. 2nd ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004.
- Craigie, Peter C., and Peter C. Craigie. *The Book of Deuteronomy*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.
- Cross, Nancy. "Those Poor Misquoted Scriptures." *The Homiletic and pastoral review*. 84, no. 10 (1986): 4. (interesting argument to refute or support)
- Dille, Sarah J. *Mixing Metaphors : God As Mother and Father in Deutero-Isaiah*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2004. Accessed February 13, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Ebeling, Jennie R. *Women's Lives in Biblical Times*. London: T & T Clark, 2010.
- Foster, J. A. *The Motherhood of God: The Use of Hyl as God-Language in the Hebrew Scriptures. Uncovering Ancient Stones*, 1994.
- Freedman, David Noel. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Hubbard, Robert L. *The Book of Ruth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.
- Milgrom, Jacob. *Numbers = [Ba-Midbar] : the Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990.
- Motyer, J. A. *The Prophecy of Isaiah: an Introduction & Commentary*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
- Oswalt, John. *The Book of Isaiah*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1986.
- Rappé, Donald J. 2012. "Seer's Corner: Motherhood and Beyond." *Bible Today* 50: 172-77.
- Schmitt, John J. "The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother." *Revue biblique*. 92 (1985): 13.
- Schroer, Silvia. *Ancient Near Eastern Pictures as Keys to Biblical Metaphors. The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*. Atlanta, Georgia: SBL Press, 2014.
- Tate, Marvin Embry. *Psalms 51-100*. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990.
- VanGemeren, Willem. *A Guide to Old Testament Theology and Exegesis: an Introductory Articles from the New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1999.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *Deuteronomy*. Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996

## Human – Maternal Metaphors



Figure 1. An image of a mother holding her child as a depiction of the mother's role of caretaker. (Photography by Natalia Sharokina, n.d., <https://www.vecteezy.com/vector-art/4268940-mother-holding-baby-illustration-of-happy-motherhood-childbirth-black-outline-simple-lines-clip-art>)

### Mother

- Isa. 49:15; 66:13

**"As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; And you will be comforted in Jerusalem." (Isa. 66:13)**

### Mother in Labor

- Ps. 90:1-2
- Isa. 42:14
- Deut. 32:18

**"You forgot the Rock who fathered you, And forgot the God who gave you birth." (Deut. 32:18)**



Figure 2. An image of a pregnant mother that represents the category of Yahweh depicted as a mother in labor. (Photograph by Tatiana Baez, Pregnant Woman 011 stock illustration, 2021., <https://www.istockphoto.com/vector/pregnant-woman-011-gml361721572-434009103>)

## Animal – Maternal Metaphors

**"He found him in a desert land, And in the howling wasteland of a wilderness; He encircled him, He cared for him, He guarded him as the apple of His eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest, And hovers over its young, He spread His wings, He caught them, He carried them on His pinions." (Deut. 32:10-11)**

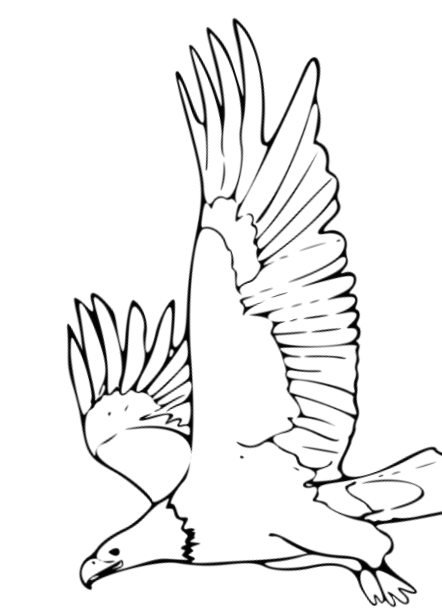


Figure 5. An image of an eagle that illustrates the image used in Ruth, Psalms, Deut. And the New Testament. (Photograph by OpenClipart Coloring Book Bald Eagle, 2013. <https://openclipart.org/detail/177432:coloring-book-bald-eagle-2-remix>)

### Mother Bear

- Hos. 13:8



Figure 3. A picture of a mother bear and her cub that illustrates the image used in Hosea 13:8. (Photography by Mikko, White bear with cub, n.d., <https://www.dreamstime.com/stock-image-white-bear-cub-vector-drawing-polar-bear-image37753261>)

### Mother Bird (Hen/Eagle)

- Ruth 2:12\*
- Ps. 17:8; 91:4
- Deut. 32:10-11\*

\*Matt. 23:37; Lk. 13:34

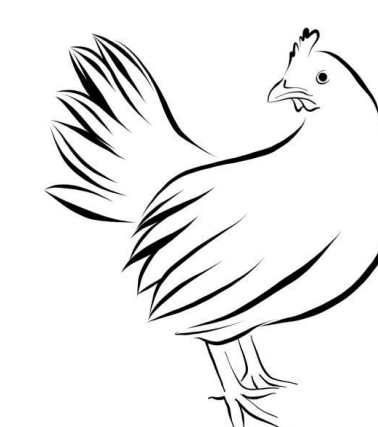


Figure 4. A picture of a hen that illustrates the image used in Ruth, Psalms, Deut. And the New Testament. (Photograph by Andreea Hill, 2018, <https://www.istockphoto.com/vector/chicken-vector-illustration-in-pen-and-ink-isolated-on-white-gml1057728676-282668787>)