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Images of God, the Song of Moses, and Metaphors

Annette Potgieter
Old and New Testament
Stellenbosch University
Huguenot College
Wellington, South Africa

Abstract

This article will investigate the various ways in which God is portrayed in the Song of Moses. The Song of Moses is situated within the liturgical use of early church communities; accordingly, the Song of Moses serves as a particularly good test case for examining the language employed in early Christian communities. The article will use conceptual metaphor theory, tracing the metaphorical patterns that arise within the text to delineate possible conceptual systems. Moreover, the meanings of these cognitive models found in the Song of Moses, particularly as they relate to divine language and imagery (as well as their deployment in ecclesial practices more generally), will be deliberated upon in this essay.

Keywords: Metaphors; Song of Moses; Worship; Images of God; Cognitive linguistics

Introduction

Imagination and metaphors are intricately linked. A metaphor, in general, describes something that is unfamiliar using a concept or image that is well-known. It is within the linkage and movement between the known and the unknown that knowledge and understanding is mapped. These “mappings” become a baseline for expanding our reality. They enrich us and teach us. They are also bounded by what we can imagine. What we experience and recognise as meaningful, and how we reason about it, is dependent on structures of imagination that make our experience what it is (Johnson 1987:172). Accordingly, our use of language reveals much about the way we see and understand the world around us, including the way we interpret Scripture. Indeed, the way a person interacts with a text is also dependent on what a person “imagines” the text to be (Decock 2010:15).

This is especially relevant when observing the language employed to describe God in church. Already in 1976, Elaine Pagels (1976:293) *inter alia* mentioned that language used during worship undergirds the impression that God is exclusively masculine. This remains problematic until the present day. In 2021, *Netwerk 24*, an Afrikaans news outlet, placed an article about the social media storm in the Dutch Reformed Church concerning the language utilised in speaking about God. Both ministers referred to in the article used metaphorical language to engage the imagination of God – one by describing God in an inanimate manner as a “holy prism” and the other by describing God using gendered and feminine-inflected language, such as “her”.[1] This ongoing debate is also connected to the need to explore the language employed in worship services and Christian gatherings on a continuing basis. Imagination, as reflected in worship and liturgy, is reflective of readers' views and interpretation of their own context. The flip side is also true: language can play an instrumental role in shaping broader worldviews.

The Song of Moses contains rich imagery describing God. Noteworthy is that the imagery does not try to capture one understanding of God but rather presents a God who cannot be pinned down. God is described as a father, a mother, a warrior, but also as an inanimate object (e.g., a rock) or an animate object (e.g., an eagle). What is more, the God of the Song of Moses is not unreservedly on the side of Israel or on the side of their enemies (Olson 2013:60). This variety and fluidity of the depiction of God plays an important role in the rhetoric of the poem. It shapes Israel’s experience of calamity and continually reminds Israel of the potential of restoration, as Yahweh is the one and only active and powerful God who remains committed to Israel, even when they are not committed to God (Nelson 2004:369). It is a poem full of ambiguity and does not attempt to provide a one-sided understanding of God. However, it seems many parishioners in the Dutch Reformed Church are uncomfortable with diverse language describing God – and here specifically femininely-gendered language. However, since the Song of Moses exhibits diverse imagery and was used extensively in the early church, it serves as a particularly good test case for examining language employed in early Christian communities in order to aid our understanding of the importance of imaginative language in worship as this is drawn from scriptural language. The Song of Moses was a particularly popular liturgical text in the Second Temple period, but also in early church communities (Crowe 2009:48).

In this article, I will be using conceptual metaphor theory, tracing the metaphorical patterns that arise within the text in order to delineate possible conceptual systems. Conceptual metaphor is a particularly helpful tool in establishing patterns that shape the way we think. It unveils our habits and ultimately our beliefs. The imagery of “God as a Father” is the most important conceptual blend for the church (Gomola 2010:388), and DesCamp and Sweetser (2014:13) indicate that the preferred metaphors for God in both Hebrew and Greek New Testament texts involve source domains with power-asymmetric relationship frames between two human or animate beings. This is understandable, as parental care is the first and deepest experience of a positive power-asymmetric relationship (DesCamp and Sweetser 2014:13). Moreover, the meaning of these cognitive models for thinking found in the Song of Moses for language and imagery employed in the church, in general, will be deliberated upon in this essay. Although, the “God as Father” is a foundational image in the church, a strict father model results in an oppressive morality, whereas a God portrayed as a nurturing parent interprets the “God as a Father” notion and accompanying morality differently (Lakoff and Johnson 1999:315–321 in Gomola 2010:392). Our use of language, especially in a church setting, should be reflected on. This article will investigate the various ways in which God is portrayed in the Song of

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[1] The minister remarks: “with which ever one is comfortable with” (Jansen van Rensburg 2021), an open and inclusive statement.

Moses. We first need to define what is intended with metaphorical language, why it is important, and what the impact thereof is.

Metaphorical language

Metaphors are embedded in our conceptual frameworks of how we perceive the world and interact with one another. In this regard, Lakoff and Johnson (1980:1) have redefined our understanding of metaphors as pervasive in everyday thought and action. Seeing that a conceptual metaphor entails understanding one concept in terms of another (Kövecses 2010:4), it is incumbent that knowledge of the source domain exists. Underlying these systems is basic knowledge of the elements that are being mapped from a source domain to a target domain (Kövecses 2010:42). These conceptual metaphors, again whether we are aware of them or not, create ways in which we interpret and perpetuate conceptual systems.

The metaphors in the Song of Moses work together for rhetorical effect (Claassens 2005:35). Thought patterns are established with patterns of repetition and recurrence, indicating the manner in which the metaphors function. Patterns of repetition contribute to internal cohesion as they draw on concepts from the same source domain employed to a closely related topic and argument of the text (Semino 2008:23). Patterns of recurrence, again, refer to different expressions that relate to the same source domain, connoting an aspect of the reality constructed in a text (Semino 2008:24). These structures and patterns are a matter of imagination (Johnson 1987:139). Image schemata and their metaphorical elaborations play a role in our understanding and reasoning, and are not merely a creative endeavour (Johnson 1987:139). The Song of Moses provides a viewpoint on how Israel imagined their relationship with God and how that representation guided their community's thinking.

The Song of Moses (Deut 32:1-43) and worship

The Song of Moses was compiled by different authors and is notoriously difficult to date. The song possesses sapiental, prosaic, poetic, legalistic, as well as hymnic features (Otto 2012:171). Deuteronomy, and specifically the Song of Moses, was a popular liturgical text in the second temple period. It is clear from 4 Maccabees 18:18 that the Song of Moses was used as a Psalm in the temple, sung in six parts. The Greek version of Deuteronomy was already in use by the middle or end of the second century BCE within Jewish communities in Palestine and Egypt (Perkins 2015:71). Even Philo mentions Deuteronomy in *Leg. All.* III.174; *Deus.* 50,[2] and Josephus gives a summary of Deuteronomy in *Antiquities* 4 (Perkins 2015:70). Deuteronomy became a standardised text for worship and study as evidenced by the many Deuteronomy manuscripts that were found at Qumran (Crawford 2005:130). The Song of Moses was also part of the Biblical Odes collection, which was used in liturgical contexts amongst early Christian communities. The Biblical Odes circulated independently before they were taken up in Codex Alexandrinus (Potgieter 2022:7–8). The reception of the Odes also cements the importance of the Song of Moses in early Christian worship.

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[2] Although he also uses other terms ('appendix', *Her*. 162, 250).

The Song lends itself to an educational function. The Song claims that it should be taught: vocabulary suggestive of an educational context is used throughout the poem and the theme of remembrance or memory is a central idea in the Song (Claassens 2005:42). Thiessen (2004:424) argues that the Song was intended to guide a community's thinking, worship, and response to God. The Song intrinsically wants to teach its hearers about their relationship with God. Israel's people will experience suffering as they continue to stray from God and worship other gods. Yet they should "give greatness to God", as Thiessen (2014:424) puts it.

Of course, what is intended with worship needs to be defined. The word "worship" is misleading, as the early Christians of the first four centuries did not have a concept of worship as a distinctly human activity that linked practices and ritual forms (McGowan 2014:7). For most modern hearers, worship is linked to the idea of music in a church setting. Early Christian worship should obviously be understood within its Greco-Roman setting, which is quite different from our modern understanding. It goes without saying that both Judaism and early Christianity were influenced by the Roman world in which they were entrenched, particularly in regards to language, religious practices, and culture (Bradshaw 2002:22). Christian congregations did not fashion something new with worship but rather applied it in their own distinct ways (Clemens 2014:178). "Religion"[3] was entrenched in everyday life for the ancients. Accordingly, the way they understood their relationship with God and the way they perceived God shaped the way they lived.

Imagery portraying God in the Song of Moses

The Song of Moses is saturated with rich imagery, especially imagery that depicts God. The song commences with a didactic section in Deut 32:1–3. In both the Greek Deut$^{\mathrm{LXX}}$ (προσέχω "pay attention", ἀκουέτω" "listen" (Deut 32:1$^{\mathrm{LXX}}$)) and the Masoretic version (אָזַן "pay attention"; שָׁמַע "listen" Deut 32:1$^{\mathrm{MT}}$) of the poem, imperatives are employed as Moses addresses the heaven and earth to pay attention. The use of heaven and earth creates a merismus, which invites the universe to be the audience for the Song. The imagery of heaven also forms an *inclusio* with the final verses of the Song.[4]

The imagery of heaven and earth reverberates in Deut 32:2. Heaven is picked up in the metaphorical language of Moses's words and teaching, which are compared to rain. Four similes (יַעֲרֹף כַּמָּטָר "drip like rain"; תִּזַּל כַּטַּל"trickle like dew"; "like rain"; וְכִרְבִיבִים "and like heavy rain") are employed all in connection with the source domain of water. The imagery conveys the target domain that the teaching and the words of Moses concerning God's justice and his dealings with Israel will be just as keenly received as rain, having the same life-giving effect (Tigay 1996:299). This is naturally an effective image in a water-scarce country, conveying the worth of Moses's words (Merill 1996:649).

Earth is compared here to a rainstorm on grass and snow on green crops/herbs (דֶּשֶׁא "young grass" Deut 32:2$^{\mathrm{MT}}$; עֵשֶׂב "grass/herbs"; ἀγρωστις Deut 32:2c$^{\mathrm{LXX}}$, χόρτος Deut

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[3] With regard to the term "religion", I use the term derived from Eighteen-Century European culture reflecting the modern view of religion as something essentially private and separate from politics, law, economic activity and ethnicity (see Nongbri 2013:65, 109).

[4] In Deut 32:1$^{\mathrm{LXX}}$, the first person is used as Moses addresses the heaven (οὐρανέ), singular and not plural, to pay attention, as he shall talk (καὶ λαλήσω (32:1b)) and the earth will listen to the words from his mouth (καὶ ἀκουέτω γῆ ῥήματα ἐκ στόματός μου (32:1c)). The deviation is probably on account of the aphoristic use of heaven.

32:2c$^{\mathrm{LXX}}$). The reason clause (ὅτι/ כִּי) in Deut 32:3 sheds light on God's qualities, ultimately establishing why the audience is moved to praise God (Nelson 2004:369). This highlights the greatness of God, which is an especially important theme within the Song of Moses, illustrating that God saves Israel, even if they are not deserving of it.

In Deut 32:4$^{\mathrm{MT}}$, the metaphor of God as "rock" (הַצּוּר) is employed for the first time in the Song. It is an important image in the Hebrew version, as it is repeated 7 times. A pattern of repetition is established with the rock metaphor. The metaphor of God as "rock" is especially seen in the Old Testament in 2 Sam 22:3, 32, 47; 23:3; Isa 17:10; 30:29; Hab 12; Pss 18:3; 32, 47[2, 31, 46]; 19:15[14] (Lundbom 2013:873). The metaphor conveys that God has been steadfast and reliable in the history of God's dealings with Israel. The target domain of the "rock" metaphor communicates God as a source of refuge and as a protector (Tigay 1996:300). At first glance, the rock metaphor in Deut 32:4$^{\mathrm{MT}}$ is not clear. The meaning takes shape in the elucidation of the parental metaphors (Deut 32:5,6$^{\mathrm{MT}}$) and the eagle metaphor (Deut 32:11$^{\mathrm{MT}}$). In Deut 32:4$^{\mathrm{MT}}$ the metaphor of God as rock particularly indicates that God is just. In Deut 32:15$^{\mathrm{MT}}$ the God as rock metaphor signals that God is the source of salvation. The focus in Deut 32:18$^{\mathrm{MT}}$ is that God is the creator of Israel (Tigay 1996:300). Again, in Deut 32:30$^{\mathrm{MT}}$, the rock is indicated as perfect, even in the context of catastrophe (Nelson 2004:370). Rock is used to refer to both God and other deities, as is suggested in its use in Deut 32:31 and 32:37. "Great Rock" or mountain is a common title for Assur and Bel in Assyrian texts (Knowles 1989:315, Lundbom 2013:873). However, in both Deut 32:31$^{\mathrm{MT}}$ and Deut 32:37$^{\mathrm{MT}}$, the metaphor is used to illustrate that God is not like the pagan gods (Nelson 2004:370). Accordingly, the pattern of repetition highlights God's position towards Israel, namely, the steadfast bond.

However, the rock metaphor is not translated in Deut 32:4$^{\mathrm{LXX}}$. The verse begins with God (θεός), retaining the emphasis of rock having been positioned first in the Hebrew version. God (θεός) and his works are described as truthful (ἀληθινὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ). The target domain of God's reliability is preserved. It is possible that the LXX translator, who is known to be a more literal translator,[5] did not use rock as it was perceived as too concrete to describe the invisibility and ineffability of God (Merrill 1996:649). At the core of the Song, there is also disparity concerning the view of deity (McClellan 2011:70). Recurring themes include the subordination or impotence of other gods (Deut 32:8, 17, 31, 37–38, 43) (Nelson 2004:369). According to Thiessen (2013:116), there is no indication in the text for an interpretation of "rock" as a metaphor. Thiessen (2013:107) highlights that the Rock imagery can be understood to reference the wilderness rock that did provide sustenance to Israel in a desolate land. Thus, the assumption that the rock language is not used literally might do injustice to ancient theologising (Thiessen 2013:116). The language might be problematic to modern interpreters, but not necessarily for the ancients (Thiessen 2013:116). The fact that the rock metaphor is not prevalent in the LXX translation indicates that the translator harmonised and reshaped the nature of God and the relationship of God with other deities as part of the developing Hellenistic-Jewish monotheism (McClellan 2011:67), hence the attempt of the LXX translator to rectify the language (Thiessen 2013:116).

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[5] The translator of the Greek Deuteronomy stayed close to the Hebrew text, often sacrificing Greek grammar in service to the Hebrew version (Perkins 2015:71).

In contrast to the depiction of God’s steadfastness and perfection, God’s children are illustrated in Deut^{MT} 32:5 to be the opposite. Deut^{LXX} 32:5 also contrasts the depiction of God’s children (τέκνα). The parental bond with God is depicted throughout the poem (Deut 32:5, 6, 18, 19, 20, 43) (Nelson 2004:369), establishing a pattern of recurrence. The image of God as father surfaces implicitly in Deut 32:5. It is from the delineation of Deut^{MT} 32:5 בָּנָיו “sons” and Deut^{LXX} 32:5 τέκνα “children” that the relationship is inferred. However, Israel behaves as “nonchildren”, as their actions undermine the parent-child relationship by being “perverse and crooked” in contrast to Yahweh who is “righteous and upright” (Nelson 2004:371). The Hebrew version mentions שִׁחֵת “ruin” whereas the Deut^{LXX} refers to ἡμάρτοσαν “they sinned”.

The parental image is continued in Deut 32:6, but explicitly as God is illustrated as a father (אָב Deut^{MT} 32:6 / πατήρ “father” Deut^{LXX} 32:6). The metaphor of Yahweh as father and Israel as son is not dominant in the Old Testament but does occur in Ex 4:22, Deut 1:31; 8:5; Hos 11:1-4; Jer 3:4, 19; 31:19; Isa 63:16; 64:7(8) Mal 2:10 (Lundbom 2013:875). This aversion could be attributed to the wide usage of father/son imagery in ANE religions (Lundbom 2013:875). This image is elaborated on, as God is now also described as a creator (קָנָה Deut^{MT} 32:6 / κτίζω Deut 32:6^{LXX}). God as creator is described with four verbs, three in Deut 32:6 (with the verbs קנה, “to create,” עשׂה, “to make,” כנן, “to bring into existence”) and once in Deut 32:18 (חול, “to give birth to”) (Christensen 2002:796). The repetition emphasises God’s ability to give life.

God being faithful, as established in Deut 32:4, is elaborated on in Deut 32:7–14 through the lens of Israel’s history (Nelson 2004:371). In Deut 32:11, the familial bond is portrayed with the image of a bird. The image also helps to clarify the “rock” metaphor. The simile is introduced with כְּ "like" and combined with נֶשֶׁר, which can mean either eagle or vulture (Kronholm 1999:78). The translation of נֶשֶׁר as eagle is more common. The source domain refers to a parent eagle that drops a youngster, then swoops down under it with spread wings to catch it, and then soars up high again – only to repeat the process. Lundbom (2013:880) mentions how reference is made to the male bird and not the female. This image of an eagle training its young is also seen in Ex 19:4 (Tigay 1996:304).[6] The LXX translates יציר as σκεπάσαι “it covered, sheltered” communicating overarching theme of protection for the nestlings (Lundbom 2013:880).

However, this image could also refer to a vulture, which could have a political reference as Nekhbet, the vulture goddess, represents Upper Egypt (Matthews, Chavalas, & Walton 2000:electronic ed., Deut 32:11). The portrayal of Nekhbet was especially maternal and associated with royal and divine births. Metaphors are always coherent, and so it could be plausible that the imagery of נֶשֶׁר derived from the observation of the vulture goddess and not observing birds in nature. In Deut 32:12, it is made clear that “no foreign god was with him”, thus transferring Nekhbah’s attributes to Yahweh (Matthews, Chavalas, & Walton 2000:electronic ed., Deut 32:11). The author employs the Piel imperfect of רחף “to flutter”, which only occurs elsewhere in the Piel in Gen 1:2 (Crowe

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[6] Tale of Etana also describes an eagle that carries Etana and then repeatedly lets him go and catches him on its wings (See Ex 19:4) (Matthews, Chavalas, & Walton 2000:electronic ed., Deut 32:11). However, Arbez &Weisengoff (1948:141) argue that the analogy with *Enuma eliš* is not convincing.

2009:56).[7] Arbez & Weisengoff (1948:148) cogently argue that there are no philological reasons for understanding רחף as having any connection with brooding. Rather, the link with Gen 1:2 and the fact that language of Gen 1:2 is prevalent in Deut 32:10 illustrates an overlap of creation and redemption (Crowe 2009:57). Yahweh is introduced as the eagle mother, describing Yahweh's care for Jacob (Dille 2004:36). The target domain communicates the protection Yahweh offers. Yahweh protects Israel just like a vulture cares for and protects its young. This target domain not only effectively communicates the nurturing of God but also communicates to a God who will continually be involved with his children. The Piel indicates a transitive verb, so that God is not a passive observer but an active participant (Berković 2007:180). All of this was done by Yahweh alone, without the assistance of other gods (Deut 32:12); this last assertion, however, does not presuppose the existence of other gods (see Deut 32:37–39) but emphatically declares the solitary existence and sovereignty of Israel's God (Merrill 1996: 652). Monotheism is a theme throughout the Song.[8]

The subsequent Deut 32:13–14 supports the target domain of God as a parent that provides (e.g., honey is found in unexpected places). Again, a parental metaphor is employed as Israel is just like a baby dependent on its mother to nurse it. The maternal image of breast-feeding (יָנַק) highlights Israel as receptive as well as passive. The wilderness tradition comes to mind as the honey and oil is found in the most unlikely place. Of course, this could be indicative of the setting within Palestine with bees making honey in crags and olive trees producing oil among rocks (Nelson 2004:372). Akkadian sources mention mountain honey (Lundbom 2013:882). Deuteronomy does not make mention of the Exodus, but it is worth remembering that Deut 1 commences with the departure from Horeb, which was in the wilderness (Lundbom 2013:879). Moreover, the language not only indicates God's abundance but also proves God's provisions in the wilderness, as Israel is now receiving honey and oil. This highlights the gross conduct of Israel, being ungrateful, passive, and rebellious in contrast to God, who has provided, nurtured, and been steadfast. The expression borders on hyperbole (Lundbom 2013:882).

In Deut 32:15–17, the abundance God has provided his children is elaborated upon. The word 'Jeshurum' is a rare nickname referring to Israel being "upright" (TDOT 6.472–477; cf. 33:5, 26; Isa 44:2). This lends dramatic effect to the state of Israel's rebellion. The second person plural dramatically describes how Israel became fat (שׁמנת "you became fat"), gross (עבית "you became gross") and gorged (כשׂית "you became gorged"[9]) (Christensen 2002:806). In light of God being Creator and having given Israel everything, the disappointment of Israel's decision to worship created things and forsake God is underscored (Brown 1993:299).

Deut 32:18 emphasises Israel's unthinkable behaviour as Israel has forgotten the God who has birthed her. The parental image resurfaces in Deut 32:18, but from a maternal vantage point. Again, Israel is cast in a bad light, as they are depicted as having forgotten their own mother. The second person plural again highlights the accusation. The verb יָלַד conveys "bring forth" (Schreiner 1990:77). The verbs יָלַד and חיל suggest a mother, as the former describes giving birth and the latter refers to labour pains (Tigay 1996:307). The mixing of father and mother metaphors appears in ancient Syrian inscriptions[10] which describe kings as father and the people as mother (Tigay 1996:307).

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[7] This verb only occurs 3 times in the MT text (Gen 1:2; Deut 32:11; Jer 23:9 (Qal).

[8] Single mappings between the Divine-Human relationship and any particular source frame is particularly utilised in monotheistic frameworks (Sweetser & DesCamp 2014:14).

[9] The precise meaning of the verb, כשׂית, remains uncertain. The root כשׂה does not appear anywhere else in the Bible. Relating the root to the Arab k-š renders the meaning "be gorged with food" or "to cover oneself with fat" (Tigay 1996:306). Another possibility is to consider the meaning as "grew stubborn" as a poetic parallel for "kicked" (*HALOT* 2:502).

The metaphor of God as parent is continued in Deut 32:19. The ungrateful actions of God's children has spurred on God's jealousy. Deut 32:19 explicitly uses the language of "sons and daughters" (בָּנָיו וּבְנֹתָיו Deut^{MT} 32:19; υἱῶν αὐτοῦ καὶ θυγατέρων Deut^{LXX} 32:19). This is the only instance, along with Ps 78:58, where God is moved to jealousy. The nurturing picture also has negative side. An outpouring of divine wrath against faithless people is commenced (Lundbom 2013:886). Deut 32:19–25 describes an outburst of divine wrath. In verse 20, Yahweh mentions that he will hide his face from them, an anthropomorphism meaning that God will withdraw his favour (Lundbom 2013:887). The immensely shocking statement occurs in Deut 32:21 where God calls Israel בְּלֹא־עָם "no people". God calls famine, pestilence and beasts of prey against Israel (Von Rad 1988:198). As nurturing, parental, and steadfast as God can be, God is also not to be trifled with.

Another portrayal of God in the song of Moses is as the Divine Warrior. This is seen especially in Deut 32:21–25 and 32:40–42. In Deut 32:22–25, God decides to punish Israel, withdrawing his protection and exposing Israel to war and natural disasters. God would have followed through had it not been for the fact that the enemy might have interpreted their success as a sign of their own power (Deut 32:26–31). In Deut 32:26–35, a detailed description of God's heart follows. In the soliloquy, Yahweh was determined to annihilate Israel and to have it blotted out of history. However, Yahweh fears he will be humiliated by his enemies as they would think Israel's demise is on their own accord and not Yahweh's. A prophetic message of salvation follows in Deut 32:36–38 (Von Rad 1988:199). In Deut 32:39–43 Yahweh announces his resolve to destroy other nations. The parental image is seen again in Deut 32:43, but in the DSS and LXX versions, not in the Masoretic version. Deut^{MT} 32:43 makes use of a servant image (דַם־עֲבָדָיו). Israel is no longer described as God's children but as his servants whom God "will avenge" (יקום, from the root נקם) (Christensen 2002:820).

The power of metaphors and biblical interpretation

The intricate structure of the Song of Moses resembles a poem that has been well crafted and construed. The images used are done with purpose. As already indicated, it was an important poem in liturgical settings, especially for pedagogical and educational purposes. This is prevalent as there are clear patterns of repetition and recurrence in the poem. A pattern of repetition is clear in the Hebrew version with the "rock" metaphor indicating a God who is reliable even against all the odds and the one true God in the plethora of gods. In both the Hebrew and LXX versions, a pattern of recurrence develops with the parental metaphors. The source domain of parental care is drawn on and the images range from

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[10] Tigay (1996:307) cites *ANET*, 653, 654; cf. *ANET*, 397, referring to a Hittite god. This is also seen in the worship of foreign gods e.g. the Moabites are the sons and daughters of their deity Kemosh (Tigay 1996:307).

God as father, to God as mother and as a mother eagle. The rock metaphor is an example of a repeating pattern. The image of God as father is initially implicit in Deut 32:5 and explicit in Deut 32:6. The imagery is elaborated on, elucidating God as a life-giver. In Deut 32:10, the caring aspect is picked up, but an animate metaphor of God as an eagle surfaces in Deut 32:11. In Deut 32:13, a nursing metaphor is used. Maternal imagery is seen in Deut 32:18 as Israel is portrayed as having forgotten who its mother is. The rock now "begets", illustrating how Israel forgot God their mother. In the Hebrew version, the rock imagery converges with the parental imagery as the rock "begets". The manner in which the author/authors conflate the metaphors is also important. The author/authors combine inanimate and animate. The rock metaphor in Deut 32:18 is combined with parental imagery. The same source domain, that is, rock, is employed but with each repetition a new understanding of the "rock" is added. The "rock" metaphor becomes elucidated with the parental metaphor, communicating God's steadfastness as this is conflated with the care of a parent. The parental metaphor continues in Deut 32:19. In the DSS and LXX versions, the parental image appears again in Deut 32:43, but not in the Hebrew version. The pattern of recurrence manufactured by the parental metaphor also creates a conceptual chain; various conceptual links are associated with the idea of a parent caring for children. The imagery is seen in God as a father as well as God as a mother, but also of an eagle and a rock nurturing and sustaining.

These images and the way in which they have been ordered also offer a view of Israel's imagination in understanding their relationship with God. Johnson (1987:140) defines imagination as our capacity to organise mental representations into meaningful coherent unities. God cannot be defined, but the attempt to understand God is presented in a manner in which especially the parental imagery contributes to understanding why God is worthy of worship and should be worshipped. This remains true – even if God is against the worshipper. The poem does not depict a one-sided experience of God. Rather, it depicts a God who is fluid and ambiguous.

For the initial hearers of the poem, gender would not have been interpreted in the manner it is in the modern age. Accordingly, the representation of God as female would not have been controversial. We see metaphors introducing God as female in early Christianity. Apart from the well-known example of Matt 23:37 (ὃν τρόπον ὄρνις ἐπισυνάγει τὰ νοσσία αὐτῆς ὑπὸ τὰς πτέρυγας) "as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings" and Wisdom Christology – a figure of femininity in the Hebrew Bible, early church figures such as Irenaeus refer to the Lord (Christ) feeding the faithful (*Adv. Haer.* 4.38.1), and Clement of Alexandria uses the "breast of milk" metaphor for the Logos issuing from the breasts of the Father, Christ or the Virgin Church (Corrington 1989:412). In the medieval period, Anselm of Canterbury refers to "God as Mother" in his prayers, as he mentions "Jesus as Mother". Julian of Norwich also discusses Jesus as "our true Mother" and God as "the motherhood of love, a Mother's love that never leaves us" (Gomola 2010:396).

However, all this seems problematic for many modern hearers. There is a discomfort and comfort with certain metaphors that display the strength of human-gendered language – including feminine-inflected terms – and its relationship to our conceptualisation of the Divine (Sweetser &DesCamp 2014:7). But what is more, for modern hearers of the text, the "God as Father" metaphor has become the bedrock of Christianity. It is introduced to

Christianity in the New Testament, with 184 instances in which "God as Father" is mentioned (Gomola 2010:388). We need to be aware of the consequences of the images we continually employ, as the "God as a Father" metaphor allows for more than one interpretation, depending on how we understand the "father-child" relationship (Gomola 2010:392). Ancient Near Eastern models of parenthood are not the same as Roma-era ones and are not the same as current modern-day models (Sweetser & DesCamp 2014:22). In the case of the Dutch Reformed Church, the reprimand that followed after the minister employed different imagery rather speaks to the need to continue cultivating more ways to think and talk about God. This should be underscored: it is not problematic to speak about God as a father as such. What is problematic is only thinking of God as Father, thus excluding other possibilities (Corrington 1989:395). Gomola (2010:402–404) indicates how the conceptual metaphor "God as Friend" found in Matt 11:19, John 15:14-15 and 1 Cor 3:9 communicates the notion of God as someone who understands. It shifts the focus to God as participating in people's lives as friends do. It serves as an alternative to reconceptualising abstract ideas in a modern context.

The call to focus on the Bible is often heard in church circles; this is central to the Reformed tradition. But which part of the Bible is read remains a problem. Certain passages receive more attention on Sundays than others. Even the lectionary does not add texts of violence against women, for example. Klopper (2010:652) mentions that texts are dangerous as there is no limit to the influence they have on people's lives. There is an ethical component that needs to be brought into the calculation. If the argument is to use the Bible, then the Bible in its totality should be used. The Song of Moses is an example of God being represented in an all-encompassing manner. The imagination of many modern interpreters seems at first glance to be jaded in not acknowledging various interpretations. Of course, underlying the problem of the *Netwerk 24* story is the need to constructively understand that metaphors are ways to understand and ways to imagine. Metaphors function from a system of associated commonplaces in the mind of the hearer which the hearer then applies to the subject (Black 1962:28). Accordingly, we need to be aware of our mappings and our inferences from them (Sweetser & DesCamp 2014:22). This provides a basis for exploring faith with its intricacies and complexities. It is necessary to cultivate various ways to imagine God in worship services and guide believing communities to discover the depth variety brings. One-sided theology is not only limiting to a believer but could potentially be harmful when used to exploit people. The two ministers in the *Netwerk 24* article seem to rather engage things in a biblical manner, trying to cultivate and enrich the ways we think about God. Intrinsic to the Song of Moses is a depiction of ambiguity. Or differently put, the Song uses a variety of metaphors that overlap and also juxtapose one another in order to illustrate a God that functions beyond the boundaries of human imagination and, in the same light, a God that will not abandon believers. This helps to navigate an uncertain and ever-changing world.

The metaphors are subservient to the unfolding theme of God being the one and only God who remains committed to Israel. It is a poem that also aims to be instructive. It serves as a song used during worship, but also as a song that helps to educate the community in ways of understanding their relationship with God. The original hearers would not have raised the questions of God's gender, as we see in our modern-day debate.

But it might be that the original hearers had a more fluid understanding of God compared to modern-day interpreters, especially with regard to the newspaper article in *Netwerk 24.*

Conclusion

The Song of Moses is full of ambiguities and contrasts. The metaphors used to describe God are rich and contradicting. The Song provokes imagination, inviting the hearer or worshipper to discover the nuances of faith. God is not only depicted as a "father" but also a "mother", a "rock", and an "eagle". The images flow into one another and together present pieces of a puzzle that remains a mystery. Language is used that wants to instruct believers about a God that cannot be contained by human notions, and that yet attempts to describe a God that is continually busy with people. The Song introduces rich language that illustrates a God that is caring but also not to be trifled with. Conceptual metaphor theory provides a lens for modern interpreters to consider the importance of the consequences of images. We need more discussions on how our images of God compel us to act. In South African society, where we also have a know problem of lacking male/father role models, the discussion is even more pertinent. But what is more, thinking of God as Father/Mother also necessitates speaking of the child. The parental metaphor calls for a magnifying glass to be put to God's relation to people. Imagination requires an atmosphere where people are exposed to numerous experiences; this entails engaging with Biblical texts in their original context and especially being sensitive to the changing contexts from where the texts are read. Especially in a Reformed tradition, we need to be mindful of how texts are continuously reread in various modern contexts.

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