

YHWH AS CARING EAGLE: USING CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY TO EXPLORE נֹשֵׂר IN THE SONG OF MOSES¹

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Abstract. An eagle exhibits impressive speed and strength as a bird of prey. In the Song of Moses, נֹשֵׂר, often translated as ‘eagle,’ is used as an appropriate image to describe YHWH in Deut. 32:11: “As a נֹשֵׂר protects its nest, over its young it hovers, he spreads his wings, he takes him, he bears him on his pinions.” Several studies have been concerned mainly with the identity of נֹשֵׂר, attempting to locate its place in contemporary scientific taxonomies. However, there has been little discussion about the underlying motivations for using this bird of prey to describe YHWH in the first place. This study explores the use of נֹשֵׂר in light of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). The first portion of the study surveys recent scholarship on Deut. 32:11, while the second explains CMT. The third portion then applies the CMT perspective to the text. Deut. 32:11 puts forward the metaphor YHWH as CARING EAGLE, but there may be an even larger metaphor at play in the ancient Near East: GOD as BIRD.

Keywords: נֹשֵׂר, eagle, metaphor, care, bird, wing, cognitive linguistics.

Because of its speed and strength, an eagle is considered a majestic bird not only in today’s North America, but also by various groups in the ancient Near-East (ANE). The ancient Israelites appear to be one such group. The Hebrew term נֹשֵׂר, often translated ‘eagle,’ is commonly found in figurative expressions throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Deut. 28:49, Jer. 49:16, etc.).² The image is typically used

¹ I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Erik Eynikel for his assistance in helping me begin my academic career. He encouraged me to participate in his seminar on Septuagint lexicography and this gave me the opportunity to present my own research as a master’s student for the very first time.

² The term נֹשֵׂר is found in: Ex. 19:4, Lev. 11:13, Deut. 14:12, 28:49, 32:11, 2 Sam. 1:23, Is. 40:31, Jer. 4:13, 48:40, 49:16, 49:22, Ezek. 1:10, 10:14, 17:3, 17:7, Hos. 8:1, Obad. 1:4, Mic. 1:16, Hab. 1:8, Ps. 103:5, Job 9:26, 39:27, Prov. 23:5, 30:17, 30:19, and Lam. 4:19. Some of the references, such as Lev. 11:13, Deut. 14:12, all references in Ezekial, Job 39:27, Prov. 30:17, and 30:19 may be characterized as descriptive, given they simply name bird. All other references except Ex. 19:4, Deut. 14:12, 32:11, Jer. 48:40, and 49:22 describe, mainly through simile, the swiftness of a person or other creature (e.g., Jer. 4:13) or the renewing of youth (e.g., Ps. 103:5, etc.). Ex. 19:4, Deut. 14:12, 32:11, Jer. 48:40, and 49:22 all contain eagle imagery either using a metaphorical expression or a simile to describe YHWH or an action of YHWH.

when applying traits of a נֹשֵׂר, such as speed, strength, protection, or care, to a subject. One occurrence of this is nested within the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:11), where YHWH is the subject of comparison: “As a נֹשֵׂר protects its nest, over its young it hovers, he spreads his wings, he takes him, he bears him on his pinions.”³ The writer conveniently expands on the image, providing the reader with the characteristics he wishes to apply to YHWH (e.g., hovering over the nest, carrying on pinions, etc.). Past exegesis on this image has focused on what is made explicit in the text, namely, that YHWH is a God possessing the aforementioned characteristics of the eagle.⁴ However, the thought process behind invoking this image is discussed very little.⁵ What is it that makes the writer use a bird of prey as an appropriate designation of YHWH?

Cognitive linguistics offers insights into language in relation to cognitive functioning.⁶ One of its major branches is Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Within CMT, ‘metaphor’ is understood as an inevitable cognitive process by which humans map characteristics of the concrete world onto abstract concepts. When the writer of the Song of Moses compares YHWH to a נֹשֵׂר, the metaphor becomes YHWH as CARING EAGLE.⁷ Further, in using this image, the writer is drawing on a possible wider ANE conceptual metaphor of GOD as BIRD. It is this conception that may motivate the comparison. The first part of this study establishes the literary context, the translation, and parameters of the metaphor. The second part of the study provides an overview of CMT then the third part uses this theory to explain Deut. 32:11.

³ Translation mine. The translation leans towards a more literal rendition of the Hebrew in order to preserve the poetic word order.

⁴ There are a handful of works addressing this specific image in Deut. 32: Hendrik G.L. PEELS, “On the Wings of the Eagle (Dtn. 32,11) – An Old Misunderstanding,” *ZAW* 106 (1994): 300–3, as well as Hans-Georg WÜNCH, “Like an Eagle Carries Its Young,” *HTS* 72 (2016): 1–6, whose work will be in focus for the first part of this study in order to lay down the groundwork for the second.

⁵ See a recent study by Annette POTGIETER, “Images of God, the Song of Moses, and Metaphors,” *Scriptura* 122 (2023): 1–13, in which she discusses various metaphors for God throughout the Song of Moses using Conceptual Metaphor Theory. This present study differs from Potgieter’s in that it focuses solely on Deut. 32:11, expanding further on bird metaphors in the ANE.

⁶ Raymond W. GIBBS, “Why Do Some People Dislike Conceptual Metaphor Theory?” *Cognitive Semiotics* 5 (2009): 15.

⁷ Uppercase is the convention for naming conceptual metaphors (Matthieu RICHELLE, *Interpreting Israel’s Scriptures: A Practical Guide to the Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* [Peabody: Massachusetts, 2022], 242).

Song of Moses: Literary Context and Translation

Literary Context

The Song of Moses is a poem describing the past relationship between the Israelites and Adonai. It details YHWH's past deeds as well as the deviant deeds of his children. Some have described it as a "covenant lawsuit,"⁸ while others have deemed it as having elements of a hymn.⁹ One possible outline of this song is the following:¹⁰

A	God's justice and Israel's disloyalty	32:1–6
B	God's blessing on Israel in times past	32:7–14
X	Israel's sin provokes God's punishment	32:15–29
B	God's decision to punish his enemies	32:30–35
A'	God's "vengeance"—Israel delivered	32:36–43

Verses one to six open with descriptions of the nature of God, 'the Rock,' and his justice. It then introduces the 'unwise and foolish people' (6a) and establishes that these people have a 'blemish' (5b). The next section recalls what God has already done for Israel, approximately verses 11–14. In this section, he finds them in a wilderness, guides them, and feeds them. The center of the poem (15–29) describes what Israel has done to 'repay' God for his kindness. The Israelites repaid God by worshipping other deities, following them instead of their 'Rock.' God is also depicted as having two main emotions in this section: jealousy (e.g., 32:21) and anger (e.g., 32:22). The fourth section addresses God's desire for vengeance, which is then followed by his deliverance of Israel. The *נָשַׁר* metaphor is located in the remembrance of God's past blessings on the Israelites in the first half of the song.

⁸ G. Ernest WRIGHT, "The Lawsuit of God: A Form-Critical Study of Deuteronomy 32," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. ANDERSON and Walter HARRELSON (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 26–67.

⁹ Matthew THIESSEN, "The Form and Function of the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:1–43)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123 (2004): 401.

¹⁰ Duane L. CHRISTENSEN, *Word Biblical Commentary vol.6b, Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12* (Dallas: Word Books, 2002), 786.

Translation Issues in Deuteronomy 32:11

The verse in question is Deut. 32:11, when God is compared to a *נֹשֵׁר*. Conveniently, the writer provides a series of metaphorical expressions that elaborate on the characteristics being mapped onto YHWH. The Hebrew with my translation is as follows:

כְּנֹשֵׁר יַעִיר קִנּוֹ עַל-גּוֹזְלָיו יִרְחַף יִפְרֹשׁ כְּנַפָּיו יִקְחֵהוּ יִשְׂאֵהוּ עַל-אֲבָרְתּוֹ
 ‘As an eagle protects its nest; over its young it hovers; he spreads his wings;
 he takes him; he bears him on his pinions.’

There are three main translation debates within this verse: The identity of *נֹשֵׁר*, the meaning of the hiphil verb *יַעִיר*, and the plausibility of a bird carrying young on its pinions. For a discussion concerning metaphor, the identity of the bird is of higher importance, but some discussion of the other two topics will be provided in order to establish the meaning of the traits associated with *נֹשֵׁר*.

The Identity of נֹשֵׁר

The Hebrew term *נֹשֵׁר* can be translated as ‘eagle’ or ‘vulture.’¹¹ Any difference in the characteristics between these birds will impact which characteristics are transposed onto God in this context. The reference to *נֹשֵׁר* in Lev. 11:13 and Deut. 14:12 includes *נֹשֵׁר* as an unclean animal but also lists another bird: *פֶּרֶס*, commonly translated as ‘vulture.’ This word appears in the same list as *נֹשֵׁר*. Deut. 14:12 provides a good example where they are separated only by a conjunction: *וְזֵה אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תֹאכְלוּ מֵהֶם הַנֶּשֶׁר וְהַפֶּרֶס וְהַעֲזוּנִיָּה* ‘But these are the ones that you shall not eat: the eagle, the vulture, the osprey.’¹² Though *פֶּרֶס* is only found in Lev. 11:13 and Deut. 14:12, the coexistence of these two terms in the same context suggests a distinction from the perspective of the writer. Other uses of the term refer to the bird’s speed (e.g., 2 Sam. 1:23) or care (e.g., Ex. 19:4). In Hans-Georg Wüch’s work, he outlines four main characteristics with which *נֹשֵׁר* is usually associated: speed, strength, security and care.¹³ In Deut. 32:11 specifically, the rarer characteristic of care is present. This is represented by God’s action of spreading out his wings over the young, a very common way of expressing care in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Rt. 2:12, Ps. 36:8, etc.), although in many of these instances, there is no specific reference to a particular kind of bird of prey as found in Deut. 32:11.¹⁴

¹¹ William L. HOLLADAY, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Based Upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 249.

¹² NRSV.

¹³ WÜCH, “Like an Eagle Carries Its Young,” 1–2.

¹⁴ For example, in the book of Ruth, *כַּנֵּף* ‘wing’ is used instead of specifying a particular kind of bird.

The majority of English translations opt for ‘eagle,’ most likely because it is a more positive image than the vulture in the North American context.¹⁵ Despite the appeal of the image of an eagle, ‘vulture’ is popular among several scholars, including William H. Propp who argues in his commentary on Exodus that both etymology and ornithology support the usage of ‘vulture’ over ‘eagle.’¹⁶ Roy Pinney notes that נֶשֶׁר may refer to a griffon vulture which has more traits like the eagle than other vultures do.¹⁷ One verse that is usually referenced in this discussion is Micah 1:16: “Shave your head in mourning for the children in whom you delight; make yourself as bald as the נֶשֶׁר for they will go from you into exile.”¹⁸ The baldness is understood as the baldness of a vulture and not an eagle. Even though some vultures are ‘bald,’ such as the Nubian or lappet-faced vulture, the griffon vulture has plumage on its head.¹⁹ If the choice is between an eagle or a griffon vulture, then the reference in Micah does not clear up the matter. In terms of eagle species, Roy Pinney lists four possibilities: the Golden Eagle, the Lesser Spotted Eagle, the Imperial Eagle, and the Serpent Eagle,²⁰ but there is not much difference in behaviour between them (e.g., they eat carrion and are hunters).²¹ Without an ancient physical description of these birds, it is not possible to be certain about its species. Additionally, as Wüch points out, natural phenomena are interpreted through the lens of the ancients and do not necessarily adhere to a set of contemporary scientific categories when referring to these species.²² It is possible that their folk taxonomies do not account for the slight differences between these

¹⁵ WÜCH, “Like an Eagle Carries Its Young,” 3.

¹⁶ William H. PROPP, *Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 155. Also curious is another reference to נֶשֶׁר in Prov. 30:17: ‘The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by נֶשֶׁר’ (NRSV) where the behaviour of the bird appears more in line with what is stereotypical of vultures, namely, that they scavenge for meaty scraps.

¹⁷ Roy PINNEY, *The Animals in the Bible: The Identity and Natural History of All the Animals in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1964), 147.

¹⁸ NRSV.

¹⁹ WÜCH, “Like an Eagle Carries Its Young,” 3.

²⁰ PINNEY, *The Animals in the Bible: The Identity and Natural History of All the Animals in the Bible*, 147. Pinney’s species are originally listed according to their names in scientific taxonomic language, but Wüch ‘translates’ the names into more accessible terminology. The names of the eagle species listed above are in the more accessible language for convenience (“Like an Eagle Carries Its Young,” 3).

²¹ WÜCH, “Like an Eagle Carries Its Young,” 3.

²² WÜCH, “Like an Eagle Carries Its Young,” 3.

birds. As Milton Fisher observes, Semitic languages have tendencies to have *one* category: ‘large soaring birds.’²³

Because Biblical Hebrew may have one category for ‘large-soaring birds,’ it proves difficult when translating this term for a community of speakers who are accustomed to different animal categories. As the translator, s/he must take a broader Semitic category and reconcile it with more specific categories in the receptor language (in this case, the Hebrew term appears to be more generic, while the English term is more specific). The translators who advocate for ‘eagle,’ opt for the more favourable bird in the eyes of the reception community given the positive nature of Deut. 32:11 when describing God. The overall point of referencing this bird is to draw attention to the impressive traits of speed, strength, protection, and care. It is an image that “inspires a special picture and feeling in the reader.”²⁴ In my own translation, I will use the term ‘eagle’ because of its positive image, but also because of the distinctions made in Lev. 11:13 and Deut. 14:12 between נשר and פרס.²⁵

The Hiphil Verb יעיר

The second translation decision regards the hiphil verb יעיר. Many English translations render this verb as ‘stirring up’ (e.g., NASB). There are other translations, such as the one found in the Common English Bible that translate it as ‘protecting.’ The Septuagint renders the first part of verse eleven as ὡς ἀετὸς σκεπάσαι νοσσιᾶν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς νεοσσοῖς αὐτοῦ. The Greek translator chose the verb σκεπάζω ‘to cover,’ ‘to shelter,’ or ‘to protect.’²⁶ The phrase ‘stirring up the nest’ has been interpreted in the past as pushing a young one out of the nest in order to teach it how to fly.²⁷ If interpreted in this way, God is understood to be a teacher of Israel, possibly “teaching Israel to stand on its own two feet.”²⁸ However, Hendrik G. L. Peels believes that this verb comes from the root יער meaning ‘to care for’ or ‘to

²³ Milton FISHER, ‘נשר’ in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, eds. R.L. HARRIS, G.L. ARCHER and B. WALTKE (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 606–7.

²⁴ WÜNCH, “Like an Eagle Carries Its Young,” 3.

²⁵ See also a recent study by Martin Johnson and Philip Jenson in which they analyze the kinds of birds listed in Lev. 11:13–19 (one being נשר) according to possible “onomatopoeic correlations between the Hebrew names with selected bird calls” (208). The conclusion they reach is in favor of the English translation ‘eagle.’ (Martin JOHNSON and Philip JENSON, “An Attempt to Identify the birds of Leviticus 11.13–19 Using Onomatopoeia,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 48 [2023]: 208–28.)

²⁶ LSJ, s.v. “σκεπάζω.”

²⁷ For example, P.C. CRAIGIE, *The Book of Deuteronomy* 21:10–34:12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 381.

²⁸ WÜNCH, “Like an Eagle Carries Its Young,” 3.

guard over,’ which is closer to the rendition found in the LXX.²⁹ In line with Peels and in contradiction to the traditional understanding of this verse, WüncH does not see God as a teacher in this context. He advocates for the interpretation of ‘protection’ that is suggested by Peels and the LXX.³⁰ Because the immediate context of this verse does not portray God as a teacher, but instead as an eagle who cares for his young (e.g., hovering over the nest, spreading his wings, bearing on pinions), the theme of teaching does not seem present here, or at least not in focus. In addition, eagles have not been observed shoving their young out of the nest.³¹ My own translation opts for ‘protects its nest,’ maintaining that ‘care’ is the central theme of this verse, as well as opting for a translation in accord with ornithological observations (at least, for the first half of the verse).

Carrying the Young

The phrase, ‘he bears him on his pinions,’ has caused confusion simply because this is atypical bird behaviour.³² Birds, in general, have not been observed carrying their young atop their wings. WüncH proposes an explanation for this unconventional description. The strength of his claim lies in his analysis of the Hebrew. He draws attention to the slight grammatical switch between the two halves of verse eleven. In the first half, the object is plural ‘young’ (גוזליו), while in the latter half, the object becomes singular ‘him’ (יקהרו). WüncH sees this switch as relating back to the original topic of verse, being Jacob and his relationship with God. He concludes that in the first half, the eagle is the subject; in the second, it is God who is the subject.³³ In his analysis of the latter half of verse eleven, he draws on ornithological data which contradict the perception that eagles carry their young on their wings. Seeking another interpretation, Peels concludes that “what the eagle cannot do...the Lord YHWH does: He spreads his wings out, takes his young up, and carries them.”³⁴ This deviation from what is known about eagles is nicely in line with the structure of the verse: 11a provides the image of the bird of prey supported by what is found in nature, while 11b takes it a step further and provides what Peels terms a ‘superlative’ image which is then applied to God and Jacob (Israel). This ‘superlative’ addition connects well with the more general wing imagery found in the ANE. Many times, throughout the Hebrew Bible, biblical figures take refuge under YHWH’s wings (e.g., Ps 17:8, 36:8, 61:5, etc.). Peels

²⁹ PEELS, “On the Wings of the Eagle (Dtn 32:11) –An Old Misunderstanding,” 302.

³⁰ WÜNCHE, “Like an Eagle Carries Its Young,” 4.

³¹ PEELS, “On the Wings of the Eagle (Dtn 32:11),” 300.

³² WÜNCHE, “Like an Eagle Carries Its Young,” 4.

³³ WÜNCHE, “Like an Eagle Carries Its Young,” 4–5.

³⁴ PEELS, “On the Wings of the Eagle (Dtn 32:11),” 302.

sees the picture in Deut. 32:11 combining these protective, divine wings with God's leading of Israel.³⁵

If the subject of 11a is a natural eagle and the subject of 11b is YHWH, then the pronominal suffixes in 11a should be translated as either 'its' or 'her' (depending on whether one believes the eagle to be the mother)³⁶ and the suffixes in 11b may then be switched to 'his.' Peels' explanation hinges on the understanding that גוזליו refers to actual young eagles. My own translation follows Peels' and Wünc'h's analysis of a natural eagle for 11a and YHWH in 11b. For the sake of consistency, my translation also uses 'its' in 11a as a way to remain closer to the Hebrew third-person masculine pronominal suffixes.

Boundaries of the נִשֵּׂר Metaphor

The application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory depends on the parameters of the metaphorical expression(s) to know which characteristics to apply to the subject. As mentioned in the previous section, Peels sees the eagle metaphor only in verse eleven, though split, with God as the grammatical subject of the second half. The poetic microstructure of verse eleven further supports this analysis. The first half contains a regular chiasmic structure (or 'inverse parallelism'³⁷) after the introduction of the image, but the latter half follows a different pattern. One possible analysis of the microstructure for 11a is shown below:

כְּנִשֵּׂר 'as an eagle':

(A) יַעִיר 'protects'

(B) קִנּוּ 'its nest'

(B') עַל-גּוֹזְלוֹ 'over its young'

(A') יִרְחֵף 'it hovers'

'As an eagle' is not part of the chiasmic structure—it introduces the section. It is also not part of the unit in the prior verse as verse ten ends in its own metaphorical

³⁵ PEELS, "On the Wings of the Eagle (Dtn 32:11)," 302.

³⁶ Among English translations, some use 'its' throughout 32:11: "like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft" (NIV). Others use 'her,' marking the eagle as a mother bird but switching the subject from the eagle to YHWH: "As an eagle that stirreth up her nest, that fluttereth over her young, He spread abroad his wings, he took them, He bare them on his pinions" (ASV). There are also other translations where 'he' and 'his' are used throughout, such as Christensen's translation: "Like an eagle, he rouses his nestlings, over his fledglings he hovers, he spreads his wings [and] he takes one, he bears him aloft on his pinions" (*Word Biblical Commentary vol.6b, Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12*), 790.

³⁷ RICHELLE, *Interpreting Israel's Scriptures*, 228.

expression ‘like the apple of his eye.’ In the case of 11a, it opens with the bird of prey metaphorical expression and subsequently continues with the chiasm. The latter half is slightly different in structure because there are a total of three actions instead of the two found in the first half: spreading out wings, taking him, and bearing him on YHWH’s feathers. Overall, the traits attributed to YHWH are that he: protects the nest, hovers over the young, spreads out the wings, and bears Jacob on his feathers.

Furthermore, the analysis of the boundaries of the metaphor considers the surrounding verses. Verse eleven is situated in the broader discussion of what Adonai did for Jacob, father of Israel. Formally, it is situated in the narrative portion of the song according to Tania Notarius’ work on the Hebrew structure of the Song of Moses.³⁸ She identifies the narrative portion as verses 8–20, following the ‘conversational framework’ of verse seven which calls readers/listeners to “remember the days of old...”³⁹ Immediately before verse eleven, verse ten explains “he found him in a desert land, in a wasteland, a howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he preserved him as the apple of his eye.” The reader (or listener) would presumably have an image of a dangerous place at this point. This also echoes the Israelites’ story of wandering in the wilderness found in Exodus 16. Verse twelve summarizes by making explicit that YHWH alone led him and there was no other god present. Verse thirteen then continues: “He made him ride upon high places of earth and he feasted on the fruit of [the] fields and he made him suck honey out of a rock from a crag and oil from flinty rock.”⁴⁰ The mention of riding on ‘high places’ and feeding on ‘fruit of the fields’ seems to continue the extended metaphor that began in verse eleven.

One option is to put the end of the metaphor at the beginning of verse fifteen after Jacob becomes fat and spurns God: (14) “Curds of cattle and milk of sheep with fat of lambs and rams of the breed of Bashan and goats with fat of kidneys of wheat and blood the grape you will drink wine. (15) But Jeshurun became fat and grew desirous. You became fat and you became thick, you became gorged, and he abandoned God [who] made him, and he treated the Rock with contempt [and] his deliverance as a fool.”⁴¹ While it is unlikely that a bird of prey would drink wine, the ideas of generosity and care remain. God, the bird of prey, who takes care of his young, is the one who feeds them. Despite the continuation of a similar theme, the more direct imagery disappears after verse thirteen, but verse twelve is a more

³⁸ Tania NOTARIUS, “The Song of Moses (Deut. 32:1–43),” in *The Verb in Archaic Biblical Poetry: A Discursive, Typological, and Historical Investigation of the Tense System* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 76.

³⁹ NOTARIUS, “The Song of Moses (Deut. 32:1–43),” 76.

⁴⁰ NRSV.

⁴¹ NRSV.

literal expression that seems to end the eagle imagery (e.g., God alone guided him). Because of the direct imagery in verse eleven and the statement that is verse twelve, the verses surrounding verse eleven will not be included in the application of CMT. Nevertheless, when the writer continues the theme of care using other expressions (e.g., ‘feasted on the fruit of the field’), the transition out of the eagle imagery is gentle, seamless, and sophisticated.

Biblical Hebrew poetry uses many techniques that contribute to rich and compact description. Beat Weber refers to its repetition or ‘recurrence’ as the basic phenomenon at work within Biblical Hebrew (lyrical) poetry. Part of its beauty may lie in its recurrence of grammatical forms or semantic units alongside the repetition of prosodic elements. Additionally, there is the preservation and use of language archaisms (e.g., *yiqtol* as a praeteritum tense), as well as the abundance of figurative language. Weber remarks, “It might be said that the ambiguation of language in poetry goes hand in hand with its metaphorization. The function of metaphors, which give to poetry a multifaceted ‘atmosphere’ and character, is important and deserves a treatment of its own...”⁴² Conceptual Metaphor Theory aims to give the metaphor its own treatment.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory Background

The translation of Deut. 32:11 as well as the analysis of its immediate literary context provided in the previous section both encompass several existing exegetical analyses and establish the foundation for the present study. Even though literary and discourse analysis yield much about a given verse, it is Conceptual Metaphor Theory, within cognitive linguistics, which can provide insight into the motivations for metaphors in the first place. Given that CMT is a large branch of cognitive linguistics, it promises to be interdisciplinary in nature.⁴³ There are two main benefits of CMT. The first is its dependence on empirical data from a wide range of sources (e.g., findings in biology or psychology). The second is that it provides a theoretical framework and an empirical method for understanding metaphorical language and thought.⁴⁴ The latter benefit pushes against the previous notion that metaphorical expressions express ‘one shot’ conceptions of something without touching ‘literal’ language. CMT helps us reevaluate our understanding of metaphor and associated expressions. Both Old and New Testament scholars have recently begun to take advantage of the value of CMT. They have produced studies that attempt to extract conceptions of the ancient Israelites by analyzing metaphorical

⁴² Beat WEBER, “Toward a Theory of the Poetry of the Hebrew Bible: The Poetry of the Psalms as a Test Case,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 22 (2012): 169.

⁴³ George LAKOFF, “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor,” in *Cognitive Linguistics Research* 34, eds. Dirk GEERAERTS, Rene DIRVEN, and John R. TAYLOR (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2006), 187.

⁴⁴ GIBBS, “Why Do Some People Dislike Conceptual Metaphor Theory?” 15.

expressions found in their texts.⁴⁵ This section will outline the cognitive linguistic understanding of the term ‘metaphor,’ provide an overview of the process of CMT, as well as look at two main critiques of the theory. The subsequent section discusses the viability of applying CMT to religious texts followed by an application of CMT to Deut. 32:11.

How is ‘Metaphor’ Understood in CMT?

The term ‘metaphor’ is typically considered to be a type of figurative language alongside others such as personification, hyperbole, simile, etc. When classified as ‘figurative language,’ many assume this means that metaphor is ‘non-literal.’ There are several assumptions that accompany the term ‘literal,’ outlined by George Lakoff: (1) everyday language is literal, not metaphorical, (2) the substance of what may be said can be understood literally and without metaphor, (3) only literal language can be true or false, (4) definitions in dictionaries/lexicons are literal, without metaphor, and (5) concepts in a grammar of a given language are literal and not metaphorical.⁴⁶ As Lakoff summarizes, the classical theory of metaphor finds its earliest known origins in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In this work, Aristotle draws a distinction between ‘everyday’ language and ‘poetic’ language. ‘Everyday’ language for Aristotle implies the ordinary sense of a word, whereas ‘poetic’ language meant a word was used in a way that was deemed unconventional. This theory persisted for centuries. Metaphor was understood to mean “a novel or poetic linguistic expression where one or more words for a concept are used outside of their normal conventional meaning to express a ‘similar concept.’”⁴⁷ Cognitive linguists, such as George Lakoff, sought to investigate metaphor further, and his findings suggest that the definitional approach is unsuitable. In his discussion of CMT, he explains that metaphor is in thought, not language. Approaching metaphor as though it is a mechanism within language that we can label as separate is an inaccurate representation of the underlying phenomenon. Metaphorical expressions⁴⁸ are evidence of conceptualizing

⁴⁵ For example, Zacharias KOTZÉ, “Metaphors and Metonymies for Anger in the Old Testament: A Cognitive Linguistic Approach,” *Scriptura* 88 (2005): 118–125; Gregory R. LANIER, *Old Testament Conceptual Metaphors and the Christology of Luke’s Gospel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). The Society of Biblical Literature even has their own section dedicated to sharing research combining biblical studies with cognitive linguistics (“Cognitive Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation”). CMT has also been put forward as a potential methodology for comparing religions such as in the work of Edward SLINGERLAND, “Conceptual Metaphor Theory as Methodology for Comparative Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (2004): 1–31, as will be discussed further on.

⁴⁶ LAKOFF, “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor,” 187.

⁴⁷ LAKOFF, “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor,” 185.

⁴⁸ ‘Metaphorical expressions’ are defined by Lakoff as “a linguistic expression (a word, phrase, or sentence) that is the surface realization of such a cross-domain mapping (this is what the word ‘metaphor’ referred to in the old theory),” (“The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor,” 186).

one mental domain using characteristics of another. The second part to Lakoff's claim is that metaphorical expressions are not only found in 'poetic' or 'literary' language, but also in conventional language.

There have been several empirical studies on metaphorical expressions and the conclusions have been that metaphor in general is a large part of all language, not just 'poetic' language. The term 'metaphor' means something different in contemporary research. Lakoff provides the definition: "a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system."⁴⁹ The 'conceptual' system is meant to describe the macro-metaphors or the underlying conceptions of life phenomena within an individual or group. Cognitive linguists using CMT through empirical studies of language attempt to find or derive metaphorical expressions that point to a larger metaphor. A popular example is Lakoff's LOVE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor. This metaphor is derived from common everyday expressions such as: "Our relationship has hit a dead-end street," "The relationship isn't going anywhere," "We may have to go our separate ways," "It's been a long, bumpy road," etc. He uses examples such as these to show that there are underlying ideas about what love is, and they surface in everyday expressions that are not poetic. Overall, he argues that the domain of 'love' is understood in terms of the domain 'journey.'⁵⁰ To clarify, for Lakoff, 'metaphor' refers to the underlying conceptual metaphors which are linked to human cognition, while a 'metaphorical expression' refers to utterances (written or spoken) that are the surface forms of the deeper conceptual metaphors, either in everyday language or poetic language. This kind of cross-domain mapping (i.e., metaphors) entail taking a concrete or more 'organized' domain (source domain) and using it to understand a more abstract, less organized domain (target domain).⁵¹ In the case of Lakoff's example, JOURNEY is the more concrete, source domain and LOVE is the abstract domain. In Deut. 32:11, EAGLE is the source domain and YHWH is the target domain.

Critiques of CMT

Despite the benefits of CMT, there have been some critiques of note. Raymond Gibbs, in surveying the critiques of CMT, reports that the more solid critiques revolve around the sources of data, the certainty of CMT scholars with regard to finding 'the one' metaphor, and how the metaphorical expressions are identified in the first place. Gibbs notes that CMT scholars do not have clear criteria for: (1) what determines a metaphor in the given language (word or phrase), (2) identifying which expressions refer to a specific domain, (3) how to choose the

⁴⁹ LAKOFF, "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor," 186.

⁵⁰ LAKOFF, "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor," 189.

⁵¹ Gilles FAUCONNIER, *Mappings in Thought and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 44.

conceptual metaphor after isolating specific expressions, or (4) how representative contrived examples are of actual discourse.⁵² The last critique mentioned rests on another critique: that it is unclear how helpful artificially generated utterances are in linguistic analysis as opposed to consulting corpora.⁵³ A final large critique is that CMT scholars do not do a good job of outlining a distinction between literal and metaphorical language meaning. To this, Gibbs adds that while they have not drawn a clear line between them, cognitive linguists do not clarify because of the ‘polysemous nature’ of the term ‘literal,’ but they do distinguish between metaphorical and non-metaphorical language and thought. In summary, he remarks that “most simply, metaphorical thought involves a mapping from a source domain into a target domain; non-metaphorical concepts and meaning do not.”⁵⁴

Another critique of this theory is its assumption that metaphorical language equals metaphorical thought. The heart of this critique lies in the circularity of language: “linguistic expressions are analyzed, and possible conceptual metaphors postulated, which are then reified by reference back to other language patterns: e.g., linguistic expression of conceptual metaphor entailments.”⁵⁵ In other words, in order to analyze language, we use language. One possible way out of this is to look outside linguistic evidence. It is not that CMT makes something out of nothing. There is psychological research that can support underlying conceptions of life phenomena in the areas of mathematics, history of philosophy, natural science, and psychology. For example, studies done by B.P. Meier and M.D. Robinson support the conception that GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN. They found that when their research participants were asked to identify positive words, they did it faster if the words appeared higher on the computer screen and vice versa for the negative words.⁵⁶ In a similar study, when asked to judge words referencing God, the participants did so faster if they appeared at the top of the screen. Words related to the Devil, if placed at the bottom of the screen, were judged faster as well.⁵⁷

⁵² GIBBS, “Why Do Some People Dislike Conceptual Metaphor Theory?” 19–20.

⁵³ Aside from consulting corpora, one other possible method for skirting around the artificially generated utterances in a living language would be to elicit a story, where metaphors may be more able to surface naturally. GIBBS, “Why Do Some People Dislike Conceptual Metaphor Theory?” 19.

⁵⁴ GIBBS, “Why Do Some People Dislike Conceptual Metaphor Theory?” 23.

⁵⁵ GIBBS, “Why Do Some People Dislike Conceptual Metaphor Theory?” 24.

⁵⁶ B.P. MEIER and M.D. ROBINSON. “Why the Sunny Side is up,” *Psychological Science* 15 (2004): 243–47.

⁵⁷ B.P. MEIER, M.D. ROBINSON, L.E. CRAWFORD, and W.J. AHLVERS, “When ‘Light’ and ‘Dark’ Thoughts Become Light and Dark Responses: Affect Biases Brightness and Judgements.” *Emotion* 7 (2007): 366–76.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Religion

While CMT is helpful for understanding conceptual metaphors in everyday speech, it is also helpful for understanding the copious amounts of metaphorical expressions found in religious texts. In a study done by Confucianist scholar Edward Slingerland, CMT (and its associated linguistic methodology) is put forward as a viable option for comparing religions. For Slingerland, this is mainly because it does not share the same pitfalls as other methodologies such as those based on linguistic structuralism or philosophical frameworks. CMT provides a new approach that is based on what is labelled as ‘experiential’ or ‘embodied’ realism.⁵⁸ This is what makes CMT appealing for analyzing/comparing religion(s); we are constrained by human biology, chemistry, etc. Our concrete world is parsed by means of language, but we frequently reach beyond the concrete to describe the abstract. Because these concepts are less tangible, we take what is tangible and attempt to understand the abstract through that. Within religion, a deity is often represented by what is found in the speaker/writer’s immediate surroundings. The concept of ‘god,’ (however that may differ among people groups) is very abstract and is often explored using cross-domain mappings. We make sense of the divine by using concrete phenomena as an image for representing what may be considered essential characteristics of a given deity. This is what we see happening in Deut. 32:11.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Deuteronomy 32:11

If we use the terminology of CMT, YHWH is the abstract, target domain, while the eagle is the concrete, source domain. Based on the first part of this study, the characteristics pulled from the source domain and applied to the target domain can be represented as a Venn diagram shown below in Figure 1:

⁵⁸ Edward SLINGERLAND, “Conceptual Metaphor Theory as Methodology for Comparative Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72 (2004): 1–31.

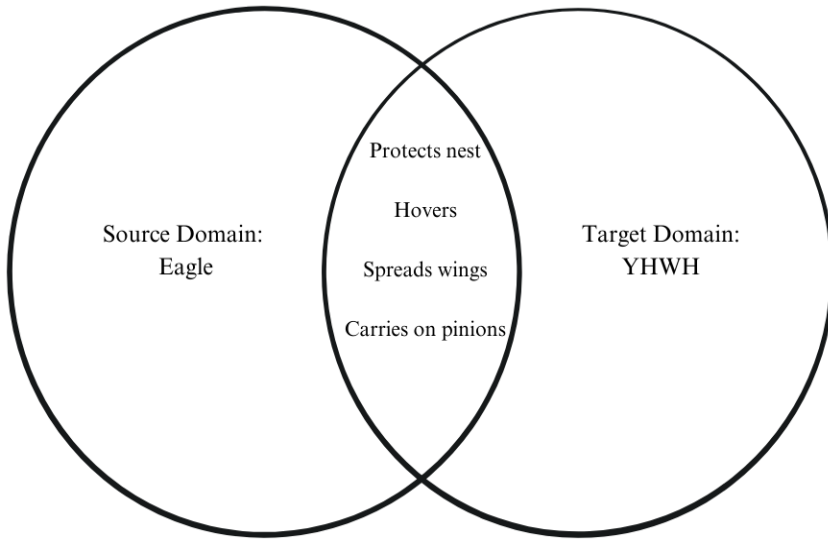


Figure 1: Cross-Domain Mapping Process in Deut. 32:11

The characteristics in the center of the diagram are determined based on the analysis above that limits the eagle metaphor to Deut. 32:11 (e.g., protecting the nest, hovering, spreading wings, carrying on pinions). On the surface, it is clear which characteristics are applied to God (regardless of ornithological validity). When working with a metaphorical expression, it is common to be unaware of the exact traits that are taken from the source domain. In this instance, it appears that the writer took pains to spell out precisely what he wanted his listeners/readers to apply to God. Based on the above traits, the conceptual metaphor may be outlined as GOD as CARING EAGLE. The traits of the eagle listed in the verse depict God as a bird who looks after the nest. However, what is murkier in Deut. 32:11 is why the writer chose this as an appropriate comparison to make at all. I propose that it is a natural and conventional comparison, considering both the ANE context in which the Song of Moses was written and the biological constraints that exist for humans.

There are numerous instances of other ANE cultures using bird imagery as a metaphor to make sense of their deities. Ancient Egypt serves as a good example because of its plethora of artifacts. Looking at their iconography, several of their gods are depicted as birds as well as combinations of birds and humans. For example,

Thoth has been depicted as an ibis and Horus, ‘he who is distant,’ as a falcon.⁵⁹ The Egyptians also used the vulture as a symbol for several female deities, a prominent one being Nekhbet in Upper Egypt, but the vulture was also used to signify the goddess Mut ‘mother.’⁶⁰ In Maria-Àngels Roque’s discussion about representations of the soul, she draws attention to frescoes in ancient Egypt that have a bird with the head of a human, symbolizing either the soul of someone passed away, or a god visiting Earth.⁶¹ However, isolated parts of the bird are depicted as well. The wing is a common symbol in ancient Egypt and in cultures influenced by Egypt, such as the Hittites and Persians.

Richard H. Wilkinson describes that the use of the wing symbol began (as far as is known) as a way to reference a falcon whose wings were the heavens and the eyes were the sun and moon in the ancient Egyptian cosmological understanding. Over time, the two wings took on the reference to Re, the sun god. Eventually, the symbol became a winged sun disk put above entrances and chambers to signal protection. This depiction also spread into Hittite and Persian art.⁶² Further, Wilkinson sees a possible connection to a verse in Malachi: “the sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in his wings.”⁶³ It is possible that the ancient Jewish writers were aware or thought about deities in a similar way to the Egyptians either through direct influence or their own experiences.

But what is it that makes birds such a popular comparison for ANE cultures in the first place? As Slingerland summarizes: “Conceptual metaphor theory argues that our primary and most highly structured experience is with the physical realm, and the patterns that we encounter and develop through the interaction of our bodies with the physical environment therefore serve as our most basic source domains.”⁶⁴ In Deut. 32:11, the image is of something that humans cannot do as a result of our physical constraints. Humans cannot fly— we do not have wings— and we are unable to reach the speeds of the birds of prey. Maria-Àngels Roque

⁵⁹ Pictures of an ibis or of a falcon do not always signify those gods. For example, the Egyptian king was sometimes depicted as a falcon (Richard H. WILKINSON, *Reading Egyptian Art* [London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1992] 83).

⁶⁰ WILKINSON, *Reading Egyptian Art*. The summary presented here is simplistic and mentions only the more prominent examples of associations between certain birds and their divine counterparts for the purpose of making the reader aware of a sample of how common birds were in ancient Egyptian iconography, statues, etc. These bird symbols were used for several other gods in various periods and places with twists and new renditions reflecting a myriad of cults and communities (WILKINSON, *Reading Egyptian Art*, 85). See also POTGIETER’s discussion of a possible political dimension to understanding נֶשֶׁר as a ‘vulture’ in the realm of Egyptian deities: “Images of God, the Song of Moses, and Metaphors,” 6.

⁶¹ ROQUE, “Birds: Metaphors of the Soul,” 99.

⁶² WILKINSON, *Reading Egyptian Art*, 101.

⁶³ Malachi 4:2; WILKINSON, *Reading Egyptian Art*, 101.

⁶⁴ SLINGERLAND, “Conceptual Metaphor Theory as Methodology for Comparative Religion,” 10.

describes, when looking at metaphors of the soul, that birds are “close to the sky, capable of speaking and, therefore, of teaching.”⁶⁵ In the Song of Moses, something closer to being totally outside of human experience is chosen to describe YHWH. Because it is outside human experience yet a part of the concrete world, birds serve as a natural image with which to compare a deity.

Given the popularity of depicting gods as birds across ANE cultures, it is possible to widen the conceptual metaphor to GOD as BIRD. It is curious as well that in the study done by Meier and Robinson, they suggest the conceptual metaphor that GOOD is UP and BAD is DOWN. With this study in mind (despite it being done in a contemporary culture), combined with their other study regarding the association between GOD and UP, it is possible that because birds fly, and are therefore UP, they may be associated with GOD and GOODNESS.

In addition, ANE cosmic geography further contextualizes the saliency of GOD as BIRD metaphors. As John H. Walton notes, Israelites, Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Canaanites, and Hittites all conceptualized the world in terms of three tiers: the heavens, the earth, and the underworld.⁶⁶ With regard to the heavens, Walton notes that in the Levant, gods were thought to have their homes at the tops of the mountains, and for the Mesopotamians, the mountains intersected with the heavens.⁶⁷ Birds were able to soar through the sky and live on the mountains if they chose. Viewed in light of the Mesopotamians, it seems natural that birds should be used as metaphors for gods. Exodus 19:4 also has YHWH dwelling on Mount Sinai and asking Moses to say to the Israelites: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”⁶⁸ To clarify, I am not suggesting the conceptual metaphor of GOD as BIRD is ‘the one’ metaphor to describe the pattern of bird imagery across ANE cultures. Each culture may have its own twists and spins on birds and associated expressions, and they may not always be used to depict a god. The conceptual metaphor GOD as BIRD is merely a way to begin establishing what appears to be a general macro-metaphorical trend in the ANE.

Conclusion

The emphasis on care found in the series of metaphorical expressions in Deut 32:11 portrays God as a protecting eagle who took care of Israel. This is, for the most part, straightforward to glean when reading the text. When CMT is

⁶⁵ ROQUE, “Birds: Metaphors of the Soul,” *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* 12 (2010): 98.

⁶⁶ John H. WALTON, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 88, though there are some who understand the underworld to be a part of the earth, meaning two tiers total.

⁶⁷ WALTON, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology*, 90.

⁶⁸ NRSV.

applied to this verse, it provides us with the process behind this comparison, namely, cross-domain mappings. YHWH, within CMT, is the target domain onto which attributes from the source domain, CARING EAGLE, are applied. In addition, CMT shows promise in providing insight into the motivations for using the comparison at all based on human biological constraints and interactions with the environment. Regardless of any direction(s) of cultural influence, the ANE may share the conceptual metaphor of GOD as BIRD because of embodied experience. However, Deut. 32:11 puts forward its own image of YHWH as the one who has protected the Israelites for the purpose of “maintain[ing] covenant fidelity” and encouraging hope.⁶⁹ When this verse is read in light of CMT and its wider cultural context, the reader is given a glimpse of the ancient Israelite perceptions of the world and how they attempted to make sense of YHWH, the intangible deity who guides them.

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⁶⁹ THIESSEN, “The Form and Function of the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:1–43),” 424.

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