

YHWH AS CARING EAGLE: USING CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY TO EXPLORE נִשֵּׁר 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, נִשֵּׁר, often translated as ‘eagle,’ is used as an appropriate image to describe YHWH in Deut. 32:11: “As a נִשֵּׁר 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 נִשֵּׁר, 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 נִשֵּׁר 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: נִשֵּׁר, 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 נִשֵּׁר, 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 נִשֵּׁר 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.