EXEGESIS OF ISAIAH 66:7-14 – GOD THE MOTHER?

SUBMITTED TO PROFESSOR JUSTIN EVANS
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7 “Before she travailed,
   She brought forth;
Before her pain came,
   She gave birth to a boy.
8 “Who has heard such a thing?
   Who has seen such things?
Can a land be born in one day?
   Can a nation be brought forth all at once?
As soon as Zion travailed,
   She also brought forth her sons.
9 “Shall I bring to the point of birth and not give delivery?” says the Lord.
   “Or shall I who gives delivery shut the womb?” says your God.
10 “Be joyful with Jerusalem and rejoice for her,
   All you who love her;
Be exceedingly glad with her,
   all you who mourn over her,
11 That you may nurse and be satisfied
   With her comforting breasts,
That you may suck and be delighted
   With her bountiful bosom.”
12 For thus says the Lord,
   “Behold, I extend peace to her like a river,
   And the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream;
And you will be nursed,
   You will be carried on the hip
   And fondled on the knees.
13 “As one whom his mother comforts,
   So I will comfort you;
   And you will be comforted in Jerusalem.”
14 Then you will see this, and your heart will be glad,
   And your bones will flourish like the new grass;
And the hand of the Lord will be made known to His servants,
   But He will be indignant toward His enemies.
Introduction

“Paternity is more important than maternity,” stated Freud after considering the current interpretation of Bible and centuries of Christian thought, believing that God disclosed paternity’s all-encompassing importance by revealing Himself as “Father,” rather than “Mother.”

However, “it is not a new thing for scholars to comment on depictions of God as mother,” and since the book of Numbers, there have been times when God’s relationship with Israel has been referenced by maternal significations. Even throughout Isaiah, motherhood seems to be a motif, showing up in Isaiah 42:14, 45:10, and 49:15. There are “multiple visions of the divine-human relationship,” and Yahweh, then, rather than being seen in the paradigmatic light of masculinity, also has a maternal relationship with Israel, having conceived the nation, fed the nation, and provided for the nation. Further, in Isaiah 66:7-14, the maternal, unconditionally loving aspect of His relationship with Israel is made clear, revealing that the female signifier “mother” is just as precise of a signifier for God as the current conception of the male signifier “father.” Therefore, the literature of Isaiah 66:7-14 reveals that God embodies both male and female, or rather, transcends both male and female, breaking down the current conception of a masculine God.

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2 Chris Franke, “Like a Mother I Have Comforted You,” in *The Desert Will Bloom* (Ed. Joseph Everson and Hyun Chul Paul Kim; Atlanta, Ga.: Society for Bible and Theology, 2009), 47.
3 In Numbers 11:12, Moses states, “Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors,” (NIV) which may infer that God was the one who “conceived” the people, and further, that He is even commanding Moses to have a maternal relationship with them.
5 Franke, “Like a Mother I Have Comforted You,” 35.
Contextual Analysis

Literary Analysis

Isaiah 66 falls in what some scholars claim to be “third Isaiah,” which they believe to be written at a much later date than the earlier chapters of Isaiah. This belief was mostly held until the late 20th century, and it was assumed that first, second, and third Isaiah were all separate books written by different people that had little to no relation to one another. However, the evidence for the unity of the book of Isaiah is much stronger than the evidence for the separateness, with scholars such as R. Rendtorff being so convinced as to say that “an independent existence of this third section is, in my opinion, hardly conceivable.” The evidence for the unity of the book derives from the realization that each book is intricately dependent on one another for meaning, and that the book took on “the necessary development of the central themes,” which caused the shifts in language and style. Further, many scholars today note that it is important to simply deal with “the text as received, being unwilling to assume that ancient editors ordered their work with scant understanding of what they were doing,” thus allowing scholars to depend on the reliability of the ancient editors, rather than attempting to parse the book themselves. Thus, although it is not true that Isaiah 66 falls in some distinct third book, it is true that it falls at the very end of the whole book of Isaiah, which infers that it will be the chapter that culminates the themes, ideas, and ethos of the book as a whole.

Further, the term “prophetic book” raises issues regarding whether the prophecy Isaiah spoke was strictly for the Israelites of his time or if the prophecy contained predictive properties.

8 Ibid., 4
For instance, one school of thought, which supposes prophecy to be concerning its current historical period, maintains that “the prophet is always a man of his own time and it is always to the people of his own time that he speaks, not to a generation long after, nor to us.” Following this line of logic, the historical context of Isaiah, including the people of the day, their concerns, fears, desires, and their worries, would be of utmost importance, and the historical time period would be the only thing with which a scholar should be concerned. However, another school of thought believes that this minimizes the importance of prophecy and reduces it to one prophesying nothing more than the prophet nonchalantly stating, “in my judgment, this is what the present situations calls for,” and neglects the ways in which prophecy “reaches out into the dim and distant future.”

This struggle between the prophet being a “man of God,” or a “humanized” person affects the ways in which one applies the historical context of Isaiah today, but nevertheless, the “original meaning,” or “what meaning it had for those who were the first to hear,” the prophecy must be understood before understanding on further application of the prophecy can be sought.

As a literary text, the book of Isaiah is a prophetical book written mostly in the form of poetry. Specifically, chapters 60-66 assume an incredibly high style of poetry, making them some of the most beautiful and respected poems in the world. Further, some scholars refer to chapters 40-66 as the “Book of Consolation,” claiming that they begin with the question of if Yahweh is capable of and desires to comfort and restore the people whom He has been judging. Other scholars, however, find that there is no coherent style, structure, or purpose to this last

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 2, 21
13 Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah, 8.
14 Allis, The Unity of Isaiah, 48; Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah, 8.
third of the book, and simply view it as a “rag-bag,” but it is clear that this is the minority view, and most scholars would contend for coherence.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, the people are questioning, lamenting, being consoled, and Isaiah 65-66 is a “continuation of the response to the lament” which occurred in Isaiah 63-64.\textsuperscript{16} Because of this, there is a consistency in word choice throughout the chapter in order to create a sense of literary unity.\textsuperscript{17} This book also refers back to Isaiah chapter 1, mentioning, “theological and practical problems within the nation and two distinct destines for the righteous and the wicked.”\textsuperscript{18} Further, Isaiah 66 culminates by centering on one of the main motifs in the book—the “motif of the city.”\textsuperscript{19} Thus, in the way that Isaiah 1 was an introduction to the book, Isaiah 66 serves as a bookend, and in doing this, it reveals how the theology revealed in the first section of Isaiah has been affected and expanded by the events that occurred in the second section of Isaiah.\textsuperscript{20}

Specifically, Isaiah 66:7-14 is split into distinct parts: Isaiah 66:7-9 serves to explain the “birth of many in Zion,” 66:10-11 explains the “joy and comfort for Jerusalem,” and 66:12-14 explains “peace, prosperity, and comfort.”\textsuperscript{21} Thus, the literature found in Isaiah 66 reveals God, who “addresses his faithful followers with images of hope and joy in a proclamation of salvation,” ending the book on the conclusion that God is faithful and that He will take care of His people.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{15} Motyer, \textit{The Prophecy of Isaiah}, 26.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Motyer, \textit{The Prophecy of Isaiah}, 16.
\textsuperscript{20} Oswalt, \textit{The Book of Isaiah}, 8.
\textsuperscript{21} Smith, \textit{Isaiah}, 736.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 738.
Historical Analysis

It proves difficult for scholars to locate the writing of the last third of Isaiah historically, for there are no references to specific events or individuals mentioned within this segment of the text.\(^{23}\) The historical time period ranges from anytime after 586 to before the mid-fifth century.\(^{24}\) Thus, the lack of information leaves us with simply not enough context to “locate the composition of these chapters within an absolute chronology,” and this proves to be further true for the social and political conditions.\(^{25}\) Thus, the only political remarks are made to the concept of political leaders, rather than specific leaders themselves, saying that they are “good-for-nothing shepherds or dogs to lazy to bark.”\(^{26}\)

Thus, as we know very little historically, we are also at a lack politically and socially. However, religiously, we are aware that there was a “prevalence of syncretic religious practices,” which has the potential to point us to the Hellenistic time period or to Judah during their first century being governed by Persia (Blenkinsopp 43). If this is the case, the political leaders would be as follows: Darius I (522-486), Xerxes I (486-465), and Artaxerxes I (465-424) (Blenkinsopp 43). Although positioning Isaiah 66 within a specific chronology proves to be difficult, it is true that Israel, throughout the time Isaiah was being written, was dealing with the rise and fall of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires, and further, the Persian emperors were the ones most likely being dealt with when Isaiah 66 was composed.\(^{28}\) Artaxerxes I is mentioned over one hundred times, along with being mentioned in 63:1-5, which may show that he was the particular emperor being dealt with, and if so, the fact that he restored Israel’s temple,

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
\(^{25}\) Ibid.
\(^{26}\) Ibid. Cf. Isa 57:9-12.
appointed Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild the temple, and captured Egypt is important to our understanding of the text due to the fact that it points to the restoration and comfort of Israel.  

During this time of rebuilding Jerusalem, Israel had to face the obstacles of how to work with land that was destroyed and how to relieve themselves from the support of the Babylonians. Thus, some people had much land, while others had none; some people had stable financial situations in Babylon and did not want to return to rebuild Jerusalem, while other’s had stayed in the land the whole time, and from this, there was a devastating economic situation, which led to the stratification of the people who were returning. Finally, this desolation and stratification create an ideal environment in which Yahweh chooses to reveal Himself to Israel as a loving, protecting, providing, and nurturing mother.

**Detailed Analysis**

The detailed analysis of Isaiah 66:7-14 must be divided into the following subsections: Isaiah 66:7-9, concerning the “birth of many in Zion,” 66:10-11, concerning the “joy and comfort for Jerusalem,” and 66:12-14, concerning “peace, prosperity, and comfort.”

**Isaiah 66:7-9**

This proclamation begins in the form of poetic statements and questions, or “riddles,” which cause Israel to wonder about the way in which God will act and “express ideas that are… unusual.” In verses seven and eight, God states this riddle:

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., xxiv.
31 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 739.
Before she travailed,
    She brought forth;
Before her pain came,
    She gave birth to a boy.
Who has heard such a thing?
    Who has seen such things?
Can a land be born in one day?
    Can a nation be brought forth all at once?

The first two cola are the riddle, and the second two cola represent God questioning the people, pushing them to make sense of His riddle. By doing this, God uses the literary device of poetic riddles in order to prepare the people to be introduced to how He “will act in unexpected and exceptional ways.” This allows the general norms by which the people view God to be broken down, and allows for a new way of thinking about God, namely, that He will comfort them as a mother would comfort them.

The full passage, verses seven through nine, centers on the themes of “‘having labor’ (ḥīl is used three times), and ‘giving birth’ (yālad is used five times).” The word yālad, which usually always refers to a mother giving birth to a child, is used 23 times in Isaiah. Further, “beget is also possible… when a man is the subject.” Thus, not only does this passage use it often—five times—but it is used often throughout Isaiah as a whole, and because this verb can be used as either a man or a woman “begetting” a child, it is not specific to an actual, physical mother delivering a physical child. Thus, yālad seems to be a motif, which speaks about God’s relationship with Israel in terms of conception and birth.

The passage begins by describing an unnamed woman in an unusual situation; she is giving birth before she begins labor, and the oddness of this passage lies in the “speed of the

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Victor P. Hamilton, “3528,” NIDOTTE 2:455
37 Ibid.
delivery and the total absence of any pain.” It may be important to note that the symbol of painless labor signifies “Eden restored and the curse removed,” when man and woman were at completely unity with God and in a state of complete perfection. This parallel is set up like a riddle, and Isaiah asks in verse 8 for the listeners to explain this riddle, if they can. Because they cannot, he continues asking questions, but by doing so, begins to reveal that “this riddle is talking about a nation of people.” Further, he then reveals that the travailing mother is Zion and the child refers to the group of people within Zion. In this section, the verbs concerning childbirth are used reveal that “this prediction about the future is similar to the earlier promises of many children.”

In verse 9, “God asserts involvement in Zion’s miraculous birth” by asking rhetorical questions, which assure the audience that “God does not begin to fulfill his promises about the birth of his people without causing that new nation of people to be born,” or that God will not begin something without bringing it to an end, as well. Thus, in the same way that a mother will not stop during the birthing process, God will not fail to be faithful to His promises. This rhetorical device does not only point to the faithfulness of God, but it equates God to having the care for Israel that a mother would have for her children. Although these themes are specifically applied to Zion, naming Zion as the mother of the people, this odd analogy opens up a new conception of God as a nurturing mother by revealing that “He is the one who gives life,” and that ultimately, He is the one who controls if and when anyone, namely Zion, gives birth. By beginning the passage with this message centering around having labor and giving birth, God

38 Smith, *Isaiah*, 739.
40 Smith, *Isaiah*, 739.
41 Ibid.
42 Franke, “The Desert Will Bloom”, 44.
sets Himself up as having an integral role in the process of Zion giving birth, being the founder and deliverer.

Isaiah 66:10-11

The passage is continued into verses ten and eleven, which seem to be the pivotal point in this section. God declares that those who were once mourning for Israel, due to their being overtaken by other nations and due to their inability to live in God’s commanded righteousness, now have reason to rejoice because of God’s faithfulness, causing Zion to give birth quickly and painlessly to the people. The passage continues by stating that the people who love Jerusalem will be able to rejoice because of the motherly and nurturing comfort they will receive in Zion, which echoes the way God’s salvation was symbolized in chapters 49 and 60 with God’s salvation being “symbolized using the metaphor of a mother providing milk for her children.”

In light of this, this verse points to the fact that there will “ever again be any discrepancy between need and supply,” and that God’s salvation is full and complete. The translated phrase “overflowing abundance,” can be understood by some scholars to mean “the nipple of her glory,” which states in irrevocably female terms the significance of the provision that God will provide through Israel.

Further, it is interesting to note that in verse 11, which declares to Israel that the nation “may nurse and be satisfied with her [Zion’s] comforting breasts,” that it “may suck and be delighted with her bountiful bosom,” the first reference to “breasts” is the Hebrew word shad.

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47 Cf. 49:23 and 60:16.
while the second reference, translated “bosom,” is the Hebrew word *kabowd*. While *shad* refers directly to breasts or a bosom, *kabowd* refers to glory, honor, or abundance. Isaiah seems to make use of this word to reveal that “the Messiah’s resting place will be glory,” and to proclaim “God’s glorious presence to Zion after a period of chastisement.”

It is clear that God does not just provide abundance, but His provision is directly provided through female *shad*, and this female signifier carries enough honor to be connected with the word *kabowd*, which generally signifies the manifest presence of God. God’s *kabowd* is not just reserved for being carried by man, or male signifiers, but God also extends to be carried by female signifiers, breaking the “metaphor for woman,” which usually connotes “negative aspects attributed to women, including ‘ignorance, inexperience, and naivéty.’” Thus, God is not just speaking about providing for Israel, but He is speaking about providing fully, abundantly, providing His *kabowd*, for Israel with maternal qualities. Further, although it is Zion who is being referred to as the mother, ultimately, the people “will have satisfaction and be comforted by all God will do for them,” and God is the source of a comfort, life, provision and protection.

Isaiah 66:12-14

The final segment of the passage begins with another messenger formula, “For thus says the Lord,” reminding the people that this is a promise from God Himself. This segment is used to “justify the preceding claims,” revealing and promising that God has said these things, made

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52 Franke, “Like a Mother I have Comforted You”, 47.
54 Ibid.
these promises, and will comfort in these ways. God assures His people that He will not only provide salvation, but the people will be “nursed,” “carried,” and “fondled,” or that they will be wholly taken care of. At this point, in verse 13, God turns from Zion being the comforting mother to revealing Himself as the ultimately comforting mother. This is because “Jerusalem is a loving mother by the grace of God,” and her nature “becomes in turn a clue for understanding the divine.” Thus, “the effect mirrors the cause,” and God states in verse eight, “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you.” This transforms “God’s relationship with Zion as mother to child.”

Though there are maternal qualities to God’s relationship with Israel throughout the Old Testament, this is “one of the few places in the bible where God is directly compared to a mother,” and this direct comparison reveals God’s “intimate, personal involvement” with His children, whom He loves. God, through “Mother Zion,” “is everything to [His] children.” Thus, as a whole, this passage explains the nurturing part that Yahweh plays in the birth of the city, the “new peace” that He is choosing to extend to the city, and finally, it is declared that once and for all, “rebellious sinners” have been done away with.

However, some scholars make note of the fact that “God is not compared to a nursing mother; Zion is,” and that “God is compared to a mother who embraces her grown son,” which distances God from the “nursing motif,” similarly as He is distanced from the idea of impregnating or giving birth. They say the Bible writers do this in order to “protect the truth of

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55 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Franke, “Like a Mother I have Comforted You,” 46.
60 Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 538.
transcendence of God,” revealing God as more than human, more than a list of characteristics from a binary gender oppositions, and revealing that “all that is personally and spiritually true of mothers and father sis true of God,” although he is not truly either a mother nor a father.  

**Theological Analysis**

It is important to note that God is overwhelmingly seen as masculine, to the point that some scholars are okay with referring to God as “Father,” but when it comes to referring to God as “Mother,” they create distance as to “protect the truth of transcendence of God.” The transcendence of God should be protected, and it will be discussed at a later point, but the issue at hand is the idea that the church—including laypeople and scholars alike—is comfortable with directly signifying God through masculinity, while she shies away from even alluding to God through femininity. It is this strong signifying relationship between God and masculinity that caused Freud, among others, to believe that paternity is more important than maternity; thus, the importance of correct understanding of this passage of Isaiah is manifest, for it has the potential to affect underlying beliefs about men and women in general.

Rather than accepting Freud’s interpretation of the Bible, there may be a clue to why God is seen as more paternal than maternal. This may lie in the fact that Christians worship an unseen God, so when “one considers that the invisible, omnipotent God is God the Father, not to say God of the Patriarchs, we may well wonder whether… the promotion of the invisible over the visible… is not a consequence of effect of the establishment of paternal authority: a consequence of the fact that the paternal relation is invisible.  

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63 Ibid., 679.
64 Ibid.
In other words, the indirect or invisible relationship that fathers have with their children, as opposed to the direct and visible relationship mothers have with their children, causes people to be more comfortable talking of an unseen God in more indirect, invisible ways. Further, one must note the fact that the society in which idea of God as “Father” was set up was a patriarchal society, thus beginning a tradition of signifying God through masculine terms and becoming quite comfortable in that habit.

Thus, even though many are more comfortable with God being signified by masculinity, and even though men are considered to be the main providers for women, in this text it is clear that God chooses to shock those who are listening. He asks difficult, riddle-like questions in the form of poetry, then reveals His providing love for them through “the nipple” of Israel’s “glory.” In doing this, He shakes the conception of Him as solely a Father, and He reveals His love through maternal significations. It is at this point that scholars attempt to protect the transcendence of God. However, despite the attempts of some scholars to create a safe, comfortable distance between the potential of the signifier “Mother” referring to God, it is clear that “the imagery of this poetry stops just short of saying that God possesses a womb.” This is clear in that it is in the womb where Israel is conceived, destined, and brought forth, which are all ways in which “Yahweh molds life for… the nation Israel.” Further, this passage is referring specifically to the faithful, loving compassion that God has on Israel, and “as the locus of birth, the womb is one of the most profound symbols of human love,” which reveals God’s motherly characteristics along with His fatherly characteristics.

68 Ibid.
Further, in the New Testament, although God is not often, if at all, revealed as having maternal characteristics, the power that women hold in the body of Christ becomes evident as the attention shifts from the men of God in the Old Testament to the women of God in the New Testament. Matthew, of course, opens with the Lord coming upon Mary, allowing her the honor of carrying Christ in her womb. Women have a high role throughout the Gospels, in the book of Acts, and even throughout the epistles, allowing one to note that although God is not revealed as directly having maternal characteristics Himself, He chooses to reveal His Spirit through women in a way that the Old Testament did not allow, and those through whom the Lord reveals Himself reflects upon the characteristics of the Lord.

**Conclusion**

In light of the direct feminine significations for God in this passage, one can see that God clearly reflects masculinity as well as femininity. Thus, not only is Yahweh a father, but “Yahweh is a consoling mother” as well.\(^70\) However, the transcendence of God *does* need to be protected, but it does not solely need to be protected from female significations. The transcendence of God must be protected from both direct male or female significations, for even though the poetry directly refers to God as a mother, and “the readings suggest, but do not assert that God is a woman,” it is important to remember that “metaphor allows no resting place in the image of God female—nor in the image of God male.”\(^71\) Both metaphors are direct; however, they are still only metaphors, and in this passage as well as throughout the whole Bible, they can only vaguely point to “the

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\(^70\) Ibid., 67.

\(^71\) Ibid., 69.
transcendent Creator, going before us to make all things new.” Therefore, in light of this passage, God cannot and should not be limited solely to direct male significations, but it is clear that God may be just as precisely referred to in female terms as well as male terms. Furthermore, although the duality in God’s nature is to be recognized, it must be understood that solely because God can be seen in light of both masculinity and femininity does not mean that God is masculine, feminine, or both, but it means that God is the transcendent Creator of masculinity and femininity, Who works in all ways through all things to reveal His eternal, faithful love.

Furthermore, the questions that arose during research point to researching the male and female signifiers, not just in Isaiah, but throughout the whole Bible. Along with this, a cultural study into the patriarchal time period, the metaphors and poetic devices used in the day, and the ways in which people throughout the Bible viewed gender must be studied in order to confidently address the issue of whether God is more often referred to as masculine due to the patriarchal culture, and if it is something that may shift with time, or if God’s nature truly reflects more inherently masculine characteristics than female characteristics.

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72 Ibid.
Bibliography


