

# Models of Motherhood

## Expansive Mothering in the Old Testament

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Motherhood, both in the scriptures and in our own experiences, is a wonderful and beautiful thing, but it can sometimes be a fraught category. Societal and religious expectations on mothers can be overwhelming and can lead to despair, difficulty, and marginalization.<sup>1</sup> Motherhood is often defined as a narrow range of nurturing behaviors such as bearing, nursing, feeding, and fulfilling other physical needs of children.<sup>2</sup> Some people have used the Old Testament to proscribe women's roles to motherhood and then to define their roles of motherhood as a limited range of these mostly physical acts of childcare.<sup>3</sup> While these are vitally important activities, mothering encompasses more than just this physical caretaking. This paper illustrates specific examples in the Old Testament in which the roles women play can be broadened by motherhood rather than diminished or restricted by it.

## Methodological Considerations

Before examining these examples of mothering in the Old Testament, we need to discuss a few points. The first is to describe what we mean regarding our idea of expansive motherhood. Neill F. Marriott, former counselor in the Young Women's General Presidency, taught that "nurturing is not limited to bearing children. Eve was called a 'mother' before she had children. I believe that 'to mother' means 'to give life.'"<sup>4</sup> Fundamentally, this paper is about exploring various examples from the Old Testament that show mothers giving and preserving life. This definitely includes the physical bearing and rearing of children, but it also includes supporting and feeding families. Further, it involves creating places, including communities, where individuals can live and grow. Mothering can even involve saving lives through military or political intervention. When we refer in this paper to the expansive perspective of mothering and motherhood, we are thinking of Sister Marriott's broad definition of giving life.

Next we must recognize that the Old Testament is an ancient collection, and its books reflect the ancient culture that produced them, including ancient cultural perspectives on male/female relationships.<sup>5</sup> These relationships were often oppressive for the women involved, and the Old Testament has been used at times to justify the continued subjugation of women. We wish to state categorically that this is not an appropriate interpretation of the scriptures, then or now, and the oppression of women has never, is not, and will never be God's will.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, in this paper we draw from both the Old Testament as it has come down to us and the inspired changes in Joseph Smith's New Translation, commonly called the Joseph Smith Translation (JST).<sup>7</sup> This point is especially true in our discussion of Mother Eve. Elder Franklin D. Richards included in the Pearl of Great Price the first few chapters of the JST of Genesis, and today these chapters are called the Book of Moses.<sup>8</sup> The Book of Moses provides important insights into the character of Eve and her role as the mother of

all living. As there are no significant JST changes in the stories of Deborah or Pharaoh's daughter and Jochabed, the JST does not play a role those discussions.<sup>9</sup>

## **Eve: The Mother of All Living**

Because of Eve's epochal role in moving forward humanity and the plan of salvation, much religious discourse throughout the ages has focused on her and the Fall. Much of this interpretation has been negative toward Eve and by extension toward all women.<sup>10</sup> The Latter-day Saint perspective distinctively presents Eve as a full agent in the garden who makes a selfless choice on behalf of humanity.<sup>11</sup> This understanding is based on modern revelation and a close reading of Genesis 3 and Moses 4. For Latter-day Saints, her mothering does not begin after the Fall when she first bears children but is part and parcel of her actions in the Garden of Eden. As noted above, Neill Marriott explained that "nurturing is not limited to bearing children. Eve was called a 'mother' before she had children. I believe that 'to mother' means 'to give life.'"<sup>12</sup> Eve's motherhood encompasses more than the bearing of children and includes her choice in the garden to "open the doorway toward eternal life."<sup>13</sup> This understanding of Eve makes it clear that her mothering is an expansive, rather than a restrictive, category. Eve, whose name in Hebrew means "life," is presented in Genesis and in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a paradigmatic mother-figure, suggesting that her mothering in general should be understood in the expansive sense of not only being the first to bear children but also being the one to give life to all creation through her choice to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.<sup>14</sup>

When God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, God said, "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, *nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it, for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely*

die” (Genesis 2:16–17; Moses 3:16–17; the italicized section is from Moses and is not in Genesis). Although in the text the Lord gives this commandment before the creation of Eve, it is clear that in the beginning of the Eden narrative Eve also understands which tree is off limits. “And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: but of the fruit of the tree which *thou beholdest* in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.” (Genesis 3:2–3; Moses 4:8–9; italicized section in Moses).<sup>15</sup>

Although God had forbidden eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, he had also given Eve and Adam the commandment to “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Genesis 1:28//Moses 2:28). According to the Book of Mormon, Eve and Adam could not have had children as long as they remained in the garden (see 2 Nephi 2:23). While they were innocent and immortal, Eve and Adam were unable to fulfill God’s commandment to be fruitful and multiply, and the plan of salvation could not move forward until they left the garden and began their mortal experience (2 Nephi 2:21–25).

Eve is persuaded by the serpent that she should eat some of the fruit because she will not die but will be as a god, knowing good and evil. Genesis records: “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat” (Genesis 3:6; Moses 4:12). Although the idea came from the serpent, Eve made a conscious choice to eat the fruit. Elder Holland reminds us that “[ours] is the grand tradition of Eve, the mother of all the human family, the one who understood that she and Adam *had* to fall in order that ‘men [and women] might be’ and that there would be joy.”<sup>16</sup>

After the Lord calls Eve and Adam to account, he tells them the consequences of their actions. He tells Eve, “I will greatly multiply your toil and your conceiving. Through work you will bear children, and your sexual desire will be to your husband, and he will govern

you” (Genesis 3:16; authors’ translation). In Hebrew, the word translated here as “toil” (as “sorrow” in the KJV), is *itsabun*, a word that appears only three times in the Hebrew Bible—all of them in Genesis and two of them in context of the consequences of Eve and Adam’s fall, discussed in Genesis:16–17.<sup>17</sup> For Adam, this word describes the process of producing food from the soil. The parallel usage in Genesis 5:29, alluding back to the passage in Genesis 3, is helpful for understanding the meaning of *itsabun* in Genesis 3. There, Noah is blessed as a comfort for the “toil of our hands” (Genesis 5:29). The Hebrew word for *toil* is the same as for *sorrow* in Genesis and represents a better reading. Bearing children and producing food are labor, but neither are inherently sorrowful acts of labor.<sup>18</sup>

Genesis 3:16 has had a long interpretive tradition, much of which has unfortunately justified the oppression of women because of the verse’s explanation about the difficulty of pregnancy.<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that at no point is the Lord’s statement to Eve described as a “curse,” an assumption that has been the root of much of the justification of this negative deployment of pregnancy. Childbearing is not a curse that women are called to bear. It does contain distinctive dangers and difficulties, especially in the ancient world and even today in places without access to modern medicine, but that does not make it a curse. In Genesis, the only curses are on the serpent and on the land. Neither Adam nor Eve are personally cursed.<sup>20</sup>

This first scriptural framing of motherhood focuses on the difficulties of pregnancy and the pain of labor, which Genesis couples with a statement about the subjection of the female to the male. This has often had the unfortunate tendency of leading people to link female subservience with motherhood.<sup>21</sup> Mothering does not need to be an act of subservience, and Eve’s choice in the garden was a courageous act of motherhood—not just for her immediate children but for all of the world.<sup>22</sup>

Joseph Smith’s New Translation adds to our knowledge of Eve’s perspective about her choice. Moses 5:11 states, “And Eve, his wife, heard all these things and was glad, saying: Were it not for our

transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient." Eve here expresses a communal view of her and Adam's choices, rather than a view focused on individual salvation. Adam's view centers much more on salvation for his own sins, saying in verse 10, "Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God." Adam expresses personal joy, while Eve sees the goodness of their choices for her and Adam together with their descendants and has joy in that. For Eve, the choice in the garden was a choice to bring about humanity, and her choice constitutes the first act of mothering on this earth.<sup>23</sup>

This insight provides an important nuance to Lehi's claim that "Adam fell that men might be" (2 Nephi 2:25). In Hebrew, the word translated as the name *Adam* (*'adam*) is a common noun that means "human" or "humanity."<sup>24</sup> In fact, most places in Genesis 2 through 5 where the KJV text shows *Adam*, the Hebrew text simply reads *the human*.<sup>25</sup> This idea has possible expression in the inspired introduction to creation in Moses 1:34, "And the first of all men have I called Adam, which is many." A similar notion is visible in Genesis 1:27, where God make[s] "man [*'adam*] in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." Humanity [*'adam*] encompasses both males and females, and so Lehi's statement that "Adam fell that men might be" refers to both of our first parents' falls.<sup>26</sup> This is especially significant because we know from the scriptures that Eve was the first to make the choice to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This means that Adam's fall, as discussed in the scriptures, is fundamentally derived from Eve's foundational act of motherhood in choosing to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Thus, Restoration scripture makes it very clear that Eve, as well as Adam, fell out of the garden and innocence so that they could progress. They seem not to have been fully informed when they partook of the fruit: their "eyes" were not yet "opened" (Genesis 3:5). Even with

that, they—Eve in particular—made choices according to the best of their knowledge that would provide a path for humanity to come to earth and gain bodies. President Russell M. Nelson has said, “It was our glorious Mother Eve—with her far-reaching vision of our Heavenly Father’s plan—who initiated what we call ‘the Fall.’ Her wise and courageous choice and Adam’s supporting decision moved God’s plan of happiness forward. They made it possible for each of us to come to earth, receive a body, and prove that we would choose to stand up for Jesus Christ now, just as we did premortally.”<sup>27</sup> By eating the fruit first, Eve was the first to attempt to bridge the gap between the two commandments given by the Lord and to begin the mortal stage of the plan of salvation.

Sheri Dew points out how Eve broadens our perspective of motherhood: “While we tend to equate motherhood solely with maternity, in the Lord’s language, the word mother has layers of meaning. Of all the words they could have chosen to define her role and her essence, both God the Father and Adam called Eve ‘the mother of all living’—and they did so before she ever bore a child. Like Eve, our motherhood began before we were born. . . . Motherhood is more than bearing children, though it is certainly that.”<sup>28</sup> This makes it clear that Eve is the mother of all living, not *just* because she would bear children but also because her choices in the Garden of Eden led to all people living on this earth as part of the eternal plan of our Heavenly Parents.<sup>29</sup> Eve provides an expansive Old Testament example of mothering through her willingness to make hard choices on behalf of humanity. She also shows us a definition of *mother* that contains but also transcends the physical bearing of children. Eve’s mothering was not passive but was the result of her “far-reaching vision” for all of humanity. A mother can be someone who is willing and able to make hard choices in order to create a place where life can thrive.

## Deborah: Judge, Prophetess, and “Mother in Israel”

The next Old Testament mother we will look at is Deborah.<sup>30</sup> Deborah represents a perspective on mothering in the Old Testament that derives from her experiences outside the domestic sphere. Deborah is one of only a few Old Testament individuals identified as a prophetess.<sup>31</sup> She is the only known woman to function as a judge over Israel. And she is one of only two individuals identified by the specific phrase “mother in Israel” (Judges 5:7).<sup>32</sup> All of these roles express an Old Testament example of a mothering figure from which we can learn about mothering in broader application than just immediate family. Deborah is a mother who is able to give life through actions outside the domestic sphere; in her case, she fulfills this through fighting in Israel’s wars.

Deborah is introduced in Judges in this way: “And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time” (Judges 4:4). *Prophetess* is a word that has sometimes presented some difficulties for Latter-day Saints as they interpret the Old Testament, since the role of prophet is largely associated with priesthood callings and keys. The Church’s Guide to the Scriptures is quick to clarify: “A prophetess does not hold the priesthood or its keys.”<sup>33</sup> It is worth noting, however, that in the Old Testament it seems that not even all the *males* described as prophets held “the priesthood or its keys.”<sup>34</sup> Although Deborah’s identification as a prophetess does not specifically mean that she was a Church leader in the way that a prophet is in the modern Church of Jesus Christ, it is notable that she is the only judge in the entire book of Judges to whom prophetic gifts are ascribed. An unnamed prophet goes before Gideon in Judges 6:7–10, but Gideon is not described as a prophet nor is Samson, Ehud, Jephthah, or any of the other judges. Deborah is distinctive among the judges in this respect. She is the only judge described in the book of Judges as any kind of religious leader.<sup>35</sup> Her role as prophetess may connect to her motherhood since there are scriptural examples of



male prophets being addressed by their followers as *father*.<sup>36</sup> Deborah's broader role in the community seems to be a significant part of her mothering.

Of course, just being the only female judge in the book of Judges makes Deborah distinctive. An Israelite judge (Hebrew *shophet*) is different from our modern conception. They did not simply try cases. Old Testament scholars Richard Holzapfel, Dana Pike, and David Seely observe, "The book of Judges consistently depicts the judges as military leaders, i.e. deliverers."<sup>37</sup> In fact, the only judge described in Judges as functioning in a juridical context is Deborah (see Judges 4:5).<sup>38</sup> As the only female judge, Deborah is in a distinctive position, but she is also, like all the judges, involved as a military leader. As with the role of prophetess, Deborah's military role may play into her characterization as a mother: the Aramean military captain Naaman is called "father" by his servants (2 Kings 5:13), suggesting that military relationships could be understood in terms of kinship.

The story of Deborah follows the pattern of the general narrative of the book of Judges—Israel is in bondage to a foreign power, and the Lord calls up a judge to free them. The people oppressing Israel in the time of Deborah are the Canaanites, led by a general named Sisera.<sup>39</sup> Deborah encourages a man named Barak to gather Israel to fight against Sisera. Barak does so, and together they defeat the Canaanites. Barak will not go to battle without Deborah, highlighting the importance of her role in the military victory of the Israelites, as we would expect from her role as a judge. The coup de grâce does not come from Barak or the male Israelite soldiers but from a Midianite woman named Jael, who puts a tent spike through Sisera's head while he was sleeping. Although Deborah works through a male war-leader to fight against the Canaanites, the final victory is facilitated by a female. Indeed, the story of Deborah is one in which women are pre-eminent, and their mothering roles are highlighted, including those of Deborah, Jael, and Sisera's mother.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, we come to "mother in Israel," a phrase that seems to relate to Deborah's position as both prophetess and judge. After

the conquest over the Canaanites, Deborah sings a victory song—which is called “Deborah’s Song” by biblical scholars—in Judges 5. This may be part of her role as a prophetess, as we see the prophetess Miriam doing something similar in Exodus 15:20.<sup>41</sup> At the beginning of the song, Deborah describes the difficulties under which Israel had suffered “until that I Deborah arose, that I arose a mother in Israel” (Judges 5:7). The interpretation of this key phrase “mother in Israel” is crucial.

We know from Judges 4:4 that Deborah is married because the name of her husband, Lapidoth, is given. Although we cannot rule out that Deborah had children, we have no evidence from the biblical text itself. This means that we must be careful not to reduce Deborah’s statement that she is a mother in Israel to a declaration about her having borne biological children.<sup>42</sup> Thus, we will consider other meanings of how she might be considered a mother in Israel.

The theme of Deborah’s Song is the deliverance of Israel through the divine intervention of Jehovah. The Lord calls on Deborah and Barak, saying, “Awake, awake, Deborah: awake, awake, utter a song: arise Barak, and lead thy captivity captive, thou son of Ahinoam” (Judges 5:12). The Lord also describes tribes that came to fight against these Canaanites: “And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah; even Issachar, and also Barak” (Judges 5:15). As Deborah continues to describe her role as a mother in Israel through her song, she does so in terms of her leading the children of Israel to victory alongside Barak. Therefore, within the book of Judges, it seems that Deborah’s being a “mother in Israel” is not directly related to whether she has children but to her active role in leading, judging, and delivering Israel. This reminds us of Neill F. Marriott’s definition of mother as a “giver of life.” As a mother in Israel, Deborah has given life to all of Israel by saving their lives, freeing others from bondage, and leading Israel to victory over the Canaanites.

As we think about Deborah’s roles, we should also note that the ancient Israelites did not experience the dichotomy of women either staying at home or working outside the home that dictates

much of our discourse about motherhood in the modern world. In a society built around subsistence agriculture, *everybody* worked as a part of the economy. In this environment, the economic activity of both women and men was centered in and around the home.<sup>43</sup> The breakdown of the household economy after the Industrial Revolution brought new questions, new challenges, and new opportunities for women, which has conditioned how we understand motherhood and mothering today. This understanding means that our modern perspective on the household economy will be different from that of the ancient world. Thus Deborah is not choosing to “work outside the home” in the modern sense because that concept is not applicable in the ancient biblical world.

However, Deborah’s example can still be a model for mothers and motherhood that is not part of the traditional perspective on stay-at-home mothers. Deborah represents a mother in Israel whose mothering is not limited to her family, the bearing and raising of children, or even contributing to the household economy. Again, this is not to say that these are not vital activities, but in Deborah’s case we simply do not have the evidence to know whether she had children, so her identification as a “mother in Israel” rests on other activities, including her being a prophetess and a judge. Deborah is a mother in Israel because of her abilities to lead and save her people. She teaches us the value that mothering can bring to groups larger than immediate families, even to entire societies. A mother can be someone whose pursuits outside the home can give life—these activities can include supporting a family, serving in the military, and being a religious leader.

### **Pharaoh’s Daughter and Jochabed: The Mothers of Moses<sup>44</sup>**

Our final example of motherhood is that of Pharaoh’s daughter and Jochabed. These two women, the two mothers of Moses, illustrate the roles that women can play when working together to accomplish the

Lord's work.<sup>45</sup> One of the women bore Moses, and the other reared Moses, but both of them were involved in saving Israel.<sup>46</sup> In our modern society, mothering can sometimes be viewed as a very personal and idiosyncratic choice, connected to contentious arguments and differences of opinion in the hows and whys of raising children.<sup>47</sup> But Jochabed and Pharaoh's daughter are two women from two very different cultures and socioeconomic situations who still found common ground in the mothering of Moses.<sup>48</sup> By working together despite their differences, these two women demonstrated the power that can be had in creating community for mothers and mothering.<sup>49</sup>

The narrator in Exodus does not inform us of the name of the mother of Moses until a genealogical list is given in Exodus 6:20—here we are told that her name is Jochabed.<sup>50</sup> The initial introduction of Jochabed describes her marriage, and the next depicts her giving birth to a male child: "And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months" (Exodus 2:1–2). From this, we learn about the lineage of Moses's biological father and mother but nothing about the rest of the family. The reader meets Moses's older sister Miriam later in this biblical story, but Moses's older brother Aaron (who is almost as important as Moses in the biblical record) is nowhere to be found until Moses's adulthood.

The opening chapters of Exodus display a large number of females taking action: the midwives Shiprah and Puah,<sup>51</sup> Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam, and Jochabed. Each of these women acts in some way to rescue Israel.<sup>52</sup> Jochabed is the active force in the birth and rescue of Moses, rather than his father, Amram.<sup>53</sup> Because Pharaoh had sentenced all male Israelite infants to death, Jochabed took Moses and hid him until he was three months old. As a newborn, the baby was relatively easy to hide; however, hiding the baby became more difficult as he grew, so his mother made "an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink" (Exodus 2:3). Jochabed

acts here to save the baby by placing it in a little boat in the Nile. This is not simply leaving the baby's fate to the elements and God: Exodus 2:4 makes clear that "his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him." Miriam followed the ark, suggesting that she and her mother expected something to happen to it rather than its being destroyed in the Nile. Finding the ark is not as coincidental as it might have seemed.<sup>54</sup>

Unlike the baby's mother and sister, Pharaoh's daughter remains unnamed throughout the biblical narrative, making it impossible to identify her with any specific historical figure in Egyptian history.<sup>55</sup> According to Exodus, she is with her attendants washing herself in the river when she discovers the little boat and finds the crying baby. According to the record in Exodus, "She had compassion on him" (Exodus 2:6). One of the features of Hebrew narrative is the relative paucity of emotional exploration—thus the compassion of Pharaoh's daughter is worth remarking upon.<sup>56</sup> The Hebrew word translated as "had compassion" is not a very common one and appears fewer than fifty times in the Hebrew Bible, though it often carries with it the sense of "to spare," especially in a military context.<sup>57</sup> The compassion shown by Pharaoh's daughter is not simply a passive emotion but a life-saving action. As a male Israelite baby, Moses was under a death sentence, but in her compassion, Pharaoh's daughter chooses to pull him out of the water and save him.<sup>58</sup>

The Bible makes it clear that this compassion was not just the ordinary compassion one feels for a baby because the text highlights the role of Pharaoh's daughter in saving a baby who was under a decree of death from the Pharaoh. Note that Pharaoh's daughter immediately recognizes the baby as "one of the Hebrews' children" (Exodus 2:6). This may be because the baby was already circumcised or because the Israelite phenotype was sufficiently different from the Egyptian. Or, the recognition may simply have occurred because the Israelites had much more reason than Egyptians to put their babies into baskets and float them down the river. But regardless of how Pharaoh's daughter identified the baby, her compassion on Moses

was an intentional choice to save the baby of an enslaved population. Her action is liberating to Moses and potentially puts her life on the line because of her disobedience to Pharaoh's decree.<sup>59</sup>

Here is where the story gets particularly intriguing. An Israelite girl suddenly appears and asks Pharaoh's daughter whether she should go and call "a nurse of the Hebrew women" to breastfeed the baby (Exodus 2:7). In the ancient world there were almost no options for feeding babies besides nursing since formula did not exist. Pharaoh's daughter needed to find a way to feed the baby, and there likely would have been Egyptian women among the slaves and servants in the palace who were lactating and able to serve as a nurse for the new baby.<sup>60</sup> Pharaoh's daughter did not need an Israelite nursemaid, which highlights the unusual circumstances of Pharaoh's daughter instantly agreeing to the girl's suggestion. When Pharaoh's daughter finds an Israelite baby floating in the Nile, an Israelite girl just happens to be nearby, and the girl just happens to know an Israelite woman who is currently lactating and can nurse the baby. The coincidences abound in this story. The narrative suggests the possibility that Pharaoh's daughter is aware that this is not at all coincidental but is part of Jochabed's plan to save her son. If this is the case, then Pharaoh's daughter's agreement to raise and adopt the baby makes her a part of that plan.<sup>61</sup>

Pharaoh's daughter summons Jochabed and agrees to pay her to nurse the baby. Such contracts were not uncommon in the ancient world.<sup>62</sup> And here we see the success of Jochabed's plan. Not only does she save the life of her child but she is able to raise him for the first few years of his life—and she is paid by Pharaoh's daughter for the privilege!<sup>63</sup> The nursing contract between Pharaoh's daughter and Jochabed protected Jochabed and the baby as she nursed and raised the child. We know from other Near Eastern parallels that these contracts lasted for up to three years.<sup>64</sup> Moses is then brought back to Pharaoh's daughter, where he is adopted as her son.

All of this provides very positive outcomes for Moses, Pharaoh's daughter, and Jochabed. As biblical scholar Shawn W. Flynn notes,

“At first Moses is condemned to die but now through the institution of adoption and wet-nursing contracts, Moses’ mother has three years or more to bond with her son, living back in his own house, while his mother is even paid by the same culture that threatened his life in the first place.”<sup>65</sup> Moses is rescued by the plan of his mother and the willingness of Pharaoh’s daughter to engage with and abet that plan.

The story of Pharaoh’s daughter and Jochabed reminds us that mothering and motherhood is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Moses does not have just one mother. He does not grow up in a nuclear family, which has sometimes been seen as the norm and ideal in the modern age.<sup>66</sup> Yet the mothering that both of Moses’s mothers perform is critical for his growth and his ability to become the person the Lord needs him to be. Jochabed conceives, bears, rescues, and nurses Moses, providing much of the physical nurturing that we associate with motherhood. Yet all of this would have come to naught without the nurturing compassion of Pharaoh’s daughter, who spared a child of enslaved Hebrews and took him as her own son. In addition, she gave the child back to his mother to be nursed and reared. These two mothers show how traditional acts of motherhood lead to outcomes of great national and spiritual significance. Although these two women, to their knowledge, save only one infant and never see beyond that, their actions move the Lord’s eternal purposes forward in saving the nation of Israel.

Jochabed and Pharaoh’s daughter were two women from very different cultures and very different socioeconomic statuses. Jochabed already had children (Aaron and Miriam are Moses’s older siblings), but we know nothing about any other children of Pharaoh’s daughter, or even if she was married. We do know, however, that she adopted Moses as her own and that he was raised among the Egyptians.<sup>67</sup> Rather than letting their different cultures and religions divide them, these two mothers built bridges and mothered Moses together. Without the important work of birthing, nursing, and raising Moses, the work of the Lord would not have gone forward (at least in that way). The example of Pharaoh’s daughter and Jochabed

shows the ways in which these two women worked together in their mothering, in spite of their different circumstances and familial statuses. They serve as a model for modern alliances that bring diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and abilities into the important work of mothering. Their experiences also create space in modern mothering for adoption and for stepparenting. Mothering need not be limited to biological considerations alone. A mother can be someone who, without regard to social or economic class, provides a way for all of our heavenly parents' children to thrive.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have looked at four women from the Old Testament who provide intriguing models for mothering in the latter days. The Old Testament, in spite of its largely male-focused culture, provides diverse models for understanding the process of mothering. Each of these models widens the scope of what mothers do and depicts mothering as an active process performed by agents. These acts of mothering can be large or small and have both immediate and eternal consequences. Mothering, as it is realized in the stories of these Old Testament women, is not only about bearing and rearing children within the household, though it is about that in part. In this context, mothering is also about making choices that build and protect both current and future children and families. Mothering is about moving the plan of salvation forward. Mothering is about gathering armies and physically delivering Israel from its captors. Mothering is about bringing together women from disparate backgrounds and perspectives in order to accomplish the goals and means of motherhood. Far from presenting a limited view of motherhood, the Old Testament presents latter-day women and men with models for understanding motherhood that are expansive, ennobling, and beautiful.



## Notes

1. In memory of Torvald Alistair Shannon, February 11, 2021.
2. See Alena Prikhidko and Jacqueline M. Swank, "Motherhood Experiences and Expectations: A Qualitative Exploration of Mothers of Toddlers," *Family Journal* 26 (2018): 278–84; Miriam Liss, Holly H. Schiffrin, and Kathryn M. Rizzo, "Maternal Guilt and Shame: The Role of Self-Discrepancy and Fear of Negative Evaluation," *Journal of Children and Family Studies* (2013): 1112–19. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles speaks of the anxieties that can come from both the world and the Church. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Because She Is a Mother," *Ensign*, May 1997, 35–37.
3. For a broad overview of this concept, see Lynda R. Ross, *Interrogating Motherhood* (Edmonton, AB: AU Press, 2016), 14–23. This perspective appears across a wide variety of historical and geographical places. See the discussion on motherhood in the Mediterranean during the Hellenistic period and beyond in Alicia D. Meyers, *Blessed among Women? Mothers and Motherhood in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 31–38. For a discussion of this topic in early American history, see Nora Doyle, *Maternal Bodies: Redefining Motherhood in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018). For a study exploring this concept in twentieth-century England, see Angela Davis, Pamela Sharpe, Penny Summerfield, Lynn Abrams, and Cordelia Beattie, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England 1945–2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 177–95. These studies are representative rather than exhaustive, but they serve to illustrate the narrow range in which motherhood has often been defined.
4. See Mary Kelly-Zukowski, "The Subversiveness of the Marginalized Women of Scripture: Models of Faith and Action for Twenty-First Century Women," *Gender Studies* 22 (2005): 30–32. The study and history of motherhood has often been a difficult topic to study, in part because of the paucity of sources. Although focused largely on American history, an excellent survey of the question appears in Jodi Vandenberg-Daves,

- “Teaching Motherhood in History,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3/4 (2002): 234–55.
5. Neill F. Marriott, “What Shall We Do?,” *Ensign*, May 2016, 11.
  6. Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40–46.
  7. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints do not believe that the scriptures are without error, thus there is no need for us to be tied to ancient perspectives on matters such as the treatment of women. See the excellent discussion in Jeffery R. Holland, “My Words . . . Never Cease,” *Ensign*, April 2008, 91–94.
  8. For a discussion of the variety and complexity of the various kinds of JST changes, see Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 8–11.
  9. See Kent P. Jackson, *The Book of Moses and the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005), 1–52.
  10. All of the women discussed in our paper have also been discussed in Camille Fronk Olson, *Women of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009). Eve is discussed on pages 7–20, Deborah on pages 107–36, and Jochabed and Pharaoh’s daughter are discussed as part of her treatment of Miriam on pages 90–92.
  11. See Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 72–78; Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 127–29. For an example of a negative interpretation of Eve in a relatively modern commentary, see Meredith G. Kline, *Genesis: A New Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2017), 20–21. See also the citations from Reformation theologians in John L. Thompson, *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Genesis 1–11* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 213–17. Note, in particular, Martin Luther’s statement on p. 215. There is a similar interpretive strand within ancient Judaism; see *Genesis Rabbah* 17:7–8.
  12. Olson, *Women of the Old Testament*, 12–13. For an apostolic Latter-day Saint perspective on Eve and the Fall, see Dallin H. Oaks, “The Great

- Plan of Happiness," *Ensign*, November, 1993, 72–75. Related to our positive view of Eve and the Fall, but taking it in a different direction, C. S. Lewis presents an intriguing possibility in his novel *Perelandra* about the Lord providing ways to move forward if Eve and Adam had chosen differently. See Benita Huffman Muth, "Paradise Retold: Lewis's Reimagining of Milton, Eden, and Eve," *Mythlore* 37 (2018): 23–44.
13. Marriott, "What Shall We Do?," 11.
  14. Oaks, "Great Plan," 73.
  15. The life-giving roles of Eve in Latter-day Saint thought are explored in Donald W. Parry's recent study, "Eve as a Help ('Ezer) Revisited," in *Seek Ye Words of Wisdom: Studies in the Book of Mormon, Bible, and Temple in Honor of Stephen D. Ricks* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2020), 199–232.
  16. There has been much discussion of what is going on here, but it is sufficient for our purposes to note that the story makes it clear that Eve is aware of the commandment and is an agent. Biblical scholars have suggested that there are actually two accounts of the creation underlying Genesis 1 and 2. These seem to have been put together by an inspired redactor, much like the Book of Mormon. For a discussion of the sources and redaction in the creation of Genesis and the entire first five books of the Bible, see Daniel L. Belnap, "The Law of Moses: An Overview," in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 19–34. There is an even greater in-depth discussion of this branch of scholarship in David Rolph Seely, "We Believe the Bible as Far as It Is Translated Correctly: Latter-day Saints and Historical Biblical Criticism," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 8 (2016): 64–87. In Genesis 1 humanity is created together, male and female, while in Genesis 2 the male human is created first, followed by the female human.
  17. Holland, "Because She Is a Mother," 36; emphasis in the original. The addition to 2 Nephi 2:25 is also in the original.
  18. See Francis Brown, Samuel Driver, and Charles Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1906; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 781 (hereafter cited as *BDB*); Ludwig Koehler

and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 865 (hereafter cited as *HALOT*). There is a related noun deriving from the same root that appears another seven times, including in this verse; see *HALOT*, 865.

19. Claudia D. Bergmann, "Mothers of a Nation: How Motherhood and Religion Intermingle in the Hebrew Bible," *Open Theology* 6, no. 1 (2020): 135–36.
20. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 101–9.
21. In his letter to his son about baptizing infants, Mormon talks about how "the curse of Adam" is taken from little children through Jesus Christ (see Moroni 8:8). The reference seems to be to humanity's fallen nature (a major theme in the Book of Mormon). It is possible that Mormon's use of this phrase derives from his understanding of Genesis 3, but that is difficult to ascertain. Even if Mormon understands our fallen nature in connection with Genesis 3, it is still worth noting that the language "curse of Adam" or "curse of Eve" do not derive from the book of Genesis.
22. A good overview on this point appears in Deborah W. Rooke, "Feminist Criticism of the Old Testament: Why Bother?," *Feminist Theology* 15, no. 2 (2007): 160–74. The classic discussion of some of the problematic elements of this passage is in Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 72–143.
23. Donald Parry reminds us that the pain of childbirth is life-giving. See Parry, "Eve Revisited," 211. In "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," modern apostles and prophets remind us of the fundamentally equal role of men and women, even in things like the rearing of children: "In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners," ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
24. Parry argues in "Eve Revisited," 208–10, that the giving of life is central to the narrative in the Garden of Eden.
25. See *BDB*, 9; *HALOT*, 1:14. See also the discussion in Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 81.
26. This is made clear by the presence of the definite article. Examples in which this is the case include Genesis 2:19, the first instance in 2:20, 2:21, 2:23, 3:8, 3:9, 3:20, 4:1. In some places, such as the second instance in 2:20,

- the definite article is not present, suggesting that it could be read as a name. But these instances in which the definite article is not present have a prefixed preposition, which can lose the marker of the definite article under certain phonological conditions. See Bruce Waltke and Michael O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 26. In Genesis 5:1–2, *human* appears without the definite article, suggesting it could be understood as simply a personal name, but the usage of a plural suffix pronoun in 5:2 suggests that it is being understood in a collective sense, as in Genesis 1:27. The places in Genesis chapters 1 through 5 where *'adam* seems to be functioning exclusively as a personal name is in Genesis 4:25 and Genesis 5:3–5. See *BDB*, 9.
27. See the discussion in Olson, *Women in the Old Testament*, 8.
  28. Russell M. Nelson (citing Henry B. Eyring), "Sisters' Participation in the Gathering of Israel," *Ensign*, November 2018, 68–69.
  29. Sheri Dew, "Are We Not All Mothers?," *Ensign*, November 2001, 96.
  30. Parry, "Eve Revisited," 212.
  31. Deborah means "bee" in Hebrew. There is some possible connection between her name and Near Eastern prophecy. See Daniel Vainstub, "Some Points of Contact between the Biblical War Traditions and Some Greek Mythologies," *Vetus Testamentum* 61 (2011): 324–34. Latter-day Saint authors have not commented much on Deborah. Camille Fronk Olson is a notable exception to this: see Olson, *Women in the Old Testament*, 107–27.
  32. The others are Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14), and the unnamed prophetess who is the mother of Isaiah's son Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Isaiah 8:3). The New Testament adds Anna, who met the baby Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:36). See Lester Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 115–16; Olson, *Women in the Old Testament*, 83–85.
  33. The other individual is an unnamed woman who pleads for mercy from David's general Joab in 2 Samuel 20:16–22, with the specific reference in 20:19.
  34. Guide to the Scriptures, "Prophetess," ChurchofJesusChrist.org.

35. An example of this would be the prophets who oppose Jeremiah, or Balaam, the rogue prophet in Numbers 22–24. On this point, it should be noted that the New Testament book of Revelation describes the spirit of prophecy as the testimony of Jesus (see Revelation 19:10). See the discussion in Avram R. Shannon, “Prophets and Prophecy in the Book of Mormon: The Case of Samuel the Lamanite,” in *Samuel the Lamanite* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2021), 3–24.
36. See Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 172. They mention that Samuel is also a prophet, and he is portrayed in 1 Samuel as the last of the biblical judges.
37. See 2 Kings 2:12.
38. Holzapfel, Pike, and Seely, *Jehovah and the Old Testament*, 172.
39. Samuel acts in a juridical context in 1 Samuel 7:6.
40. Canaanite is a fairly obscure ethnonym here, usually referring in the Bible to a collection of various peoples. It is difficult to discern whom the biblical author intends here. See Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 64.
41. See Rannfrid Irene Thelle, “Matrices of Motherhood in Judges 5,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43 (2019): 437. See also J. Cheryl Exum, “Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?,” in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007): 65–90. In particular, Exum characterizes Barak and Sisera as “little boys” alongside the mother figures of Deborah, Jael, and Sisera’s mother in her discussion on pages 70–73.
42. Some biblical scholars have identified that linguistically both Exodus 15 and Judges 5 are some of the oldest parts of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament). Interestingly, both of these texts describe prophetesses and their songs. See Charles L. Echols, “Tell Me, O Muse”: *The Song of Deborah (Judges 5) in the Light of Heroic Poetry* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 51–59. See also Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, trans. John Elwolde (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 35.
43. Olson, *Women in the Old Testament*, 114–16.

44. See Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 142–48. Meyers also notes that there is a public and private division between males and females. As an example of this, Proverbs 31:10–31 describes what the KJV calls a “virtuous women,” who is primarily praised for what she brings to the household economy. Significantly, the Hebrew for *virtuous woman* has nothing to do with how we ordinarily understand *virtue* in English, instead having a primarily economic meaning. The *virtuous woman* purchases flax and wool to make thread for cloth (31:14), she buys fields and plants vineyards (31:16), and she makes clothing not just for her family but also for sale outside the home (31:24).
45. Amy Easton-Flake also treats this story in “Recognizing Responsibility and Standing with Victims: Studying Women of the Old Testament,” in the present volume, with intriguing insights. See also the discussion in Lauren Ellison, “Mothers: Heroes, Then and Now,” *Religious Educator* 8, no. 3 (2007): 65–74.
46. Scott Langston notes that, as we saw with Deborah, this is a narrative in which “three women, all nameless, dominate the actions.” Scott M. Langston, *Exodus through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 21.
47. Mark S. Smith, *Exodus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 16–17.
48. Tracy Thompson, “A War Inside Your Head,” *Washington Post Magazine* (February 15, 1998), W12, <https://washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/mommywars/mommy.htm>
49. Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women’s Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 77.
50. Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 39.
51. This is likely not an example of the biblical focus on the male, since we are also not told Moses’s father’s name (Amram) at this point in the narrative. See the discussion in Meyers, *Exodus*, 42.
52. For a discussion of Shiprah and Puah, see Olson, *Women of the Old Testament*, 167–81; see Easton-Flake, “Recognizing Responsibility and Standing with Victims,” included in the present volume.
53. The famous Tannaitic sage R. Aqiva commented, “Through the merit of righteous women, Israel came out of Egypt.” *Yalqut Shimoni*, 795:5. Text found on Sefaria.org; translation is the authors’ own.

54. We cannot know what Amram did or did not do. We are once again limited by what the scriptures tell us.
55. Ellison, "Mothers," 67.
56. See the discussion in Olson, *Women of the Old Testament*, 91. In 1 Chronicles 4:17–18, a daughter of Pharaoh marries into the house of Judah, and some have connected this daughter of Pharaoh to the one who saves Moses. Since the identity of the pharaoh of the Exodus is still open to scholarly debate, we should not be surprised by our inability to identify Pharaoh's daughter here, though she is named Bithiah in 1 Chronicles 4:18.
57. The most famous exploration of this characteristic of Hebrew narrative is in Erich Auerbach, "Representations of Reality in Homer and the Old Testament," in *Modern Critical Views: The Bible*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 45–58. This is a reprint of his chapter in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).
58. *BDB*, 328; *HALOT*, 328.
59. Indeed, Pharaoh's daughter becomes a potent symbol to many, including those in support of adoption and adoptees. See Langston, *Exodus*, 30–31.
60. Ellison, "Mothers," 67–68.
61. Meyers, *Exodus*, 40–42.
62. Ellison, "Mothers," 67.
63. Shawn W. Flynn, *Children in Ancient Israel: The Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamia in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 59–61.
64. Cynthia R. Chapman, *The House of the Mother: The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 141.
65. Flynn, *Children in Ancient Israel*, 89.
66. Flynn, *Children in Ancient Israel*, 89.
67. For a discussion of the American ideology that presents nuclear families as an ideal, see Karen V. Hansen, *Not-So-Nuclear Families: Class, Gender, and Networks of Care* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 4–7.



68. We do not know from the text when or how Moses learned about his Israelite heritage. He certainly already knows it in Exodus 2:11-14 when he kills the Egyptian overseer. Since he was raised in the household of his Israelite mother and could have lived there until he was three, it is possible that he always knew of his Israelite heritage. In the New Testament, Hebrews 11:25 equates Moses's rejection of his Egyptian heritage with his rejecting of "the pleasures of sin."