

Cultural and Religious Influences on the Church Fathers' Breastfeeding God

A recurring image of God as a breastfeeding mother appears in the works of Roman Church Fathers from the 2nd to 5th centuries CE. While the meanings of each example vary, from metaphors for Christ's reincarnation to personifications of catechesis, the patristic breastfeeding God generally bears similarities to earlier, pagan religious symbols, and often references Greco-Roman secular culture.

This paper examines instances of the male breastfeeding image in the works of Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and Augustine of Hippo. It identifies possible cultural, scientific and religious influences on the image. Previous scholarship has focused on the impact of Aristotelian medical theory, New Testament writings, and sometimes the Cult of Isis. This paper also suggests that Rabbinic law and midrash may have influenced the use of the symbol in patristic didactic texts and conversion narratives. Furthermore, it explores how the Greco-Roman nursing culture, which placed great importance on a wet nurse's background, character, and relationships, may have influenced the use of the male breastfeeding image. Finally, this paper underscores that the gendering of breastfeeding is a cultural construct, and that attitudes towards breastfeeding, both modern and historical, are not immutable, but products of the wider context.

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