

El Shadday

Introduction

This article originated as an exegesis of Ex 6:3, a verse that employs the epithet *El Shadday* (translated as God Almighty) and the *Yahweh* name when it was realised that in order to do the subject justice the epithet required separate treatment. The problem is that no academic consensus¹ has been reached on the meaning of the title therefore philological and etymological approaches alone are not sufficient to reach a decisive conclusion. Indeed James Barr has been critical of the traditional emphasis on comparative and etymological study because of its unfortunate semantic effects and admits (using rare Hebrew words as case examples) that... literary questions are relevant and one cannot proceed purely linguistically”.² The case put forward here is therefore largely associative and contextually based however supporting philological and etymological evidence will be provided from recent studies.

¹ A brief survey of scholarship demonstrates a lack of consensus on the meaning and origin of this name; “*Shaddai*” comes from the Babylonian “*Sadda’u*,” the gentilic of *Sadu*, *Saddu*, the regular word for **mountain**; William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (The Johns Hopkins press,1940),180 ff., or from the root *sadad* “**to be strong**” or “**powerful**”; Gustave Friedrich Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (Zondervan Publishing House,1962), or from the root *sadad* “**to destroy**” or “**to terrify**”; Edward Mack, (*International Standard Encyclopedia: The Howard Severance Co.*),1266, 1267 or from a compound word which in Hebrew means “**sufficiency**”; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses: vol 1*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Co., 1971), 126 or from *sad* which has primary reference to the female **breast** signifying nourishment; C. I. Scofield (Editor) *Scofield Reference Bible*, (Oxford University Press,1917), 26. Recent studies also emphasise the feminine aspect: David Biale, *The God with Breasts: “El Shaddai in the Bible”*, *History of Religions* XXI.3,(Feb.1982),240-256 and “**the one of the Breast**”, Harriet Lutzky, *Shadday as a Goddess Epithet*,(Brill NV, Leiden,1998) or Kevin and Keith Massey, *God of the Udder: Another Look at El Shaddai*,(*Mysteries of History!! Solved! Massey Electronic Publishing*, 2000),Online 12 Feb 2009 <http://home.att.net/~phaistosdisk/mystery.PDF>

² James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament: Limitations of Etymology as a Lexicographical Instrument in Biblical Hebrew*,(Eisenbrauns, 2001),423 See also, James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press,1961)

Survey of OT usage

Šhadday occurs 48 times in the Hebrew Bible the distribution is as follows:

| Distribution | Book | Usage | Form | Description |
|--------------|--|-------|----------------------|---|
| Pentateuch | Genesis 28.3; 43.14;48.3 | 3 | אל שדי ʔēl šadday | Compound form (God Almighty) |
| | Genesis 17.1: 35.11 | 2 | אל שדי ʔēl šadday | Compound form: self-introductory formula - ʔānî-ʔēl šadday (I am God Almighty) |
| | Genesis 49.25 | 1 | את שדי ʔēt šadday | The form is still debated - Paronomasia: šadday... šāḏāyim (Almighty... breast) |
| | Exodus 6.3 | 1 | אל שדי ʔēl šadday | Compound form (God Almighty) |
| | Numbers 24.4,16 | 2 | שדי šadday | Simple form |
| Writings | Ruth 1.20,21 | 2 | שדי šadday | Simple form |
| | Job 5.17; 6.4,14;8.3,5; 11.7; 13.3;15.25; 21.15,20; 22.3, 17,23,25,26;23.16; 24.1; 27.2,10,11,13; 29.5; 31.2,35; 32.8; | 31 | שדי šadday | Simple form |

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|----------|---------------------------------------|---|-------------------------|--|
| | 33.4; 34.10,12; 35.13; 37.23; 40:2 | | | |
| | Psalms 68.14;91.1 | 2 | שְׁדַי šadday | Simple form |
| Prophets | Ezekiel 1.24 | 1 | שְׁדַי šadday | Simple form |
| | Ezekiel 10.5 | 1 | אֵל שְׁדַי ēl šadday | Compound form (God Almighty) |
| | Isaiah 13.6 | 1 | שְׁדַי šadday | Simple form- paronomasia: šōd miššadday (destruction from the Almighty) |
| | Joel 1.15 | 1 | שְׁדַי šadday | Simple form- paronomasia: šōd miššadday (destruction from the Almighty) |

The theophoric names are: **Zurishaddai**³ (my rock is *Shadday* - Num 1:6; 2:12; 7:36, 41; 10:19), **Ammishaddai** (the people of *Shadday*, or *Shadday* is my kinsman - Num 1:12; 2:25; 7:66, 71; 10:25). One name is pre-fixed with *Shadday*, which is **Shedeur** (*Shadday* shines, or light of *Shadday* - Num 1:5; 2:10; 7:30, 35; 10:18).

³ Sarasadai (Judith 8.1 RSV) may be a variant of Zurishaddai - see D. Launderville, "Zurishaddai", in D.N. Freedman [ed.], *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York, 1992, vol.6),1176

Analysis

Shadday in Genesis

The first use of the epithet is also the self-introductory formula, “I *am* God Almighty” found in Genesis 17:1;

And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him: “I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be thou wholehearted. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly”(Gen 17:1-2 JPS).⁴

The title is linked with the promise to multiply Abram exceedingly indeed he will become Abraham the father of a nation. The combination “fruitful and multiply” is found *a further three times* in Genesis (28:3; 35:11; 48:4) in the context of the blessings of *El Shadday*. This is similar to the pre-patriarchal blessing formula “God blessedbe fruitful and multiply” found in Gen 1:22, 28; 9:1. The patriarchal *El Shadday* is therefore a further development of the creation and antediluvian blessing formula but with added emphasis on feminine aspects as becomes apparent from the paronomasia in Gen 49:25;

“By the God of your father who will help you, And by the Almighty (šadday) who will bless you *With* blessings of heaven above, Blessings of the deep that lies beneath, Blessings of the breasts (šāḏāyim) and of the womb”.

Shadday seems to be related to the Hebrew *shad* (breast) - Biale (1982:248) states that, “given the persistent fertility traditions in which El Shaddai appears in Genesis, the association is contextually and phonetically reasonable, if not scientifically persuasive” to be understood as “El with breasts” or the “breasted

⁴ I have chosen the Jewish Publication Society OT (1917) version because this translation renders the Hebrew syntax correctly as, “I am God Almighty” instead of “I am Almighty God” (the NKJ and most other translations).

El” by the author (s) of the various fertility blessings. However, Baile himself admits that it is “a poetic association...not a scientific etymology”. Similar to Lutzky, Baile (1982:253) attempts to link the epithet to the wider ANE fertility cults.

However rather than the noun *shad* coming from the triconsonantal root *sh-d-y* Kevin and Keith Massey argue for a derivation from the closely related Arabic word for breast (*th-d-y*) which in the singular form (*th-d*) also means “udder”. This explains the presence of the final yod (*y*) in *Shadday* and is confirmed by its appearing in the dual/plural form *shadayim*. According to the Massey’s the unpointed *sh-d-y* has the same spelling as the Hebrew for “udder” (2000:94). They conclude; “Blessings of the udder meant an ample food supply to an ancient pastoral people. Blessings of the udder meant assurance that the flocks and herds would grow. Thus “God of the Udder” would best be understood as a “prosperity” God rather than as a fertility God”(2000:95).

All the occurrences of *Shadday* in Genesis are associated with blessing or covenant formulas indicating prosperity and fecundity with the exception of Gen 43:14 where it is deliberately contrasted by Jacob with “bereavement of children”.

Shadday in Exodus

Along with many other scholars Biale (2000:247) dismisses the singular occurrence of *El Shadday* in Exodus 6:3, “The Exodus text may be dismissed from the discussion because it is most probably a late editorial note explaining the change in God’s name from El Shaddai to Yahweh”. Although Biale is keen to stress “the biblical context in which expressions are used”(1982:242) he has neglected to apply this to Ex 6:3 because there is no immediate reference point but this is only true if

the wider context of Genesis/Exodus is ignored. The first chapter of Exodus employs many of the same markers as the blessing formulas found in Genesis:

Exodus 1:7 But the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them.

The markers are repeated in Ex 1:10, 12 and vv. 20 - the irony of the situation is that the divine *El Shadday* blessing of Genesis is so abundant that it causes problems for the descendants of Abraham. The epithet of Ex 6.3 must therefore be understood within the wider context – full exegesis will be treated in a separate article.

Shadday in Numbers

Both occurrences of *Shadday* in Numbers 24.4,16 are in the context of the “blessing” of the people by Balaam/God which stresses the fecundity and supremacy of Jacob (23:10; 24:6, 7). The theophoric names are of interest, particularly *Zurishaddai* (my rock is *Shadday*) which suggests “bringing water for them out of the rock” (Num 20:8) – a rock that provides nourishment in a fashion similar to a breast/udder (cf. the poetic - “He made him draw honey from the rock, And oil from the flinty rock”) but the nation that suckled on the rock grew fat and kicked (Deut 32:13-15).⁵

⁵ Compare the context of *Shadday* in Job 29:3-6 “the rock poured out rivers of oil for me” (cf. *Zurishaddai*) and “by His light I walked” (cf. *Shedeur*) and note that Job is reminiscing of the time when his “children” were still with him.

Shadday in Ruth

The use of the epithet in Ruth is by way of contrast as Naomi “went out full and returned empty” thus implying that the *Shadday* epithet had not lived up to the promised blessing of fecundity and prosperity as she was returning without children and therefore without a means to redeem her deceased husband’s name and estate. This is the first use of *Shadday* in a negative context. It is possible to posit that we are dealing with an inversion of the meaning as from this point onwards *Shadday* is predominantly used in a context of destruction rather than blessing. However, rather than inversion or broadening of the semantic range of the epithet the new development can be explained by changing literary conventions with *Shadday* used in an antonymic manner – deliberately contrasting the epithet with the context for literary effect.

Shadday in the Psalms

When the Almighty scattered kings in it, It was *white* as snow in Zalmon.
(Psalm 68:14)

The first occurrence in the Psalms is enigmatic and the context in the early part of the psalm (vv. 1-18) is probably a reminiscence of Israel’s wilderness journey. If this is the case then Zalmon is the Zalmonah of Num. 33:41 and the “kings” a reference to Num 21:1-3 or to Num 21:33-35 where Bashan is also mentioned (cf. Ps 68:15). The Septuagint (LXX) translators struggled with this verse and instead of the usual “Almighty” - *pantokrator* (παντοκράτωρ) they opted for “heavenly (ἐπουράνιον) [One]”.⁶ This suggests the possibility that the LXX translators either

⁶ LXX **Psalm 67:15** ἐν τῷ διαστέλλειν τὸν ἐπουράνιον βασιλεῖς ἐπ’ αὐτῆς χιονωθήσονται ἐν Σελμων Even the English translation struggles to make sense of the Greek: LXXE **Psalm 68:14** When the heavenly One scatters kings upon it, they shall be made snow-white in Selmon. There is an obvious poetic play between the white snow and the dark/shady Selmon (Zalmonah) – an

read the Hebrew *shadday* as *shamayim* (heavens) or that they were working from a Hebrew original that varied from the MT. In any case it is difficult to reach any conclusion from the context.

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High Shall abide under
the shadow of the Almighty. (Psalm 91:1 NKJ)

Similar to Psalm 90 this is probably also a “Psalm of Moses” reflecting the wilderness experience. References to the “secret place” and the “shadow of the Almighty” imply protection in the inner sanctum under the overspreading wings of the cherubim (cf. Ps 61:4). Psalm 27:5 likens this to being “set high upon a rock” and is reminiscent of Moses being hidden in the cleft of the rock when the Yahweh name was declared (Ex 33:22).

The love poem Song 2:14 is based on the same experience; “O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, In the secret places of the cliff, Let me see your face, Let me hear your voice; For your voice is sweet, And your face is lovely.” The suggestion here is that the “cleft of the rock” is euphemistic for the “bosom” and this is picked up by the Evangelist: “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (John 1:18 NKJ). *Shadday* in Psalm 91:1 is therefore linked with protection and intimacy, a fitting prospect for the younger generation that survived the wilderness and were about to enter the land.

alternative suggestion could be; “When the heavenly king commands the dark one becomes white as snow”. J. Adey has suggested that the translator simply introduced a current inter-testamental period formula for God - see 2 Macc 3:39; 3 Macc 6:28; 7:6; Ps 67:15; Odes 14:11-12 and Tobit 5:16-17 where *pantokrator* (Almighty) is juxtaposed with ‘heavenly one’.

Shadday in Job

Shadday occurs thirty one times in Job,⁷ El some fifty times, a dozen in parallel with *Shadday*. Equally interesting, **Yahweh is never used in the dialogues of Job**, only in the prologue and epilogue apart from the introduction to the Speeches of Yahweh (Job 38:1; 40:1), and one isolated reference in the poetic dialogue (Job 12:9) which is disputed.⁸ The presence of the title in Job is thought “to serve archaizing purposes” as the book of Job is considered to be postexilic. Steins,⁹ for example, believes that *Shadday* is a late epithet; “advocates of an early dating must deal with the observation that although this divine name was already familiar in Israel during a very early period, its use then completely receded for about five hundred years (!), the name then re-emerging during the exile and becoming common again especially during the postexilic period. He considers that this “unexplainable lacuna....disappears” with the view that “the divine name was not picked up before the exile and that more recent scholarship accords a late date to the disputed passages even though he acknowledges “explicit historical-theological association with the patriarchal period (Ex 6:3).

This conclusion only stands if one accords a late (postexilic) date to Job and the prophetic books Isaiah/Joel. However, the consensus on the late dating of these books is shifting and A. Perry has presented compelling inter-textual evidence for

⁷ The speakers employ *Shadday* with the following frequency: Eliaphaz (7x), Bildad (2x), Zophar (1x), Job (14x), Elihu (6x), Yahweh (1x)(as self-reference)

⁸ E. Dhorme draws attention to Eloah in a few Hebrew MSS, and claims that the original text was changed to YHWH due to the reminiscence of Isa.41:20. He notes that, “the entire book excludes the name Yahweh, accepts only very rarely and as if reluctantly that of Elohim, uses in the main only three names, El, Eloah, Shaddai, and subjects its use of these names to certain laws, the most obvious of which is the parallelism of Shaddai with one or other of the two other names”. Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job*, (first published 1926, trans. by Harold Knight, London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd.,1967),174,70

⁹ H. Niehr and G. Steins, *Šadday*, (Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Vol.14. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 418-446),445

an eight century dating of Isaiah/Joel, moreover he presents a parabolic reading of Job as coming from the same period – a dramatization of Hezekiah’s situation.¹⁰ If Perry’s approach is correct (and I believe it is) then Job reflects a situation where the reforming king Hezekiah is about to die without an heir to the throne. The Abrahamic and Davidic covenants would therefore be disannulled. This dire situation is worsened by the Assyrian invasion of Sennacherib with his burnt earth policy. The blessings of *Shadday* which include prosperity and children are therefore reversed;

“Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!”(Job 1:10-11NKJ)

Hezekiah faces the loss of possessions and “children” (the 200,000 captives taken by Sennacherib) and the end of the Davidic dynasty. This explains why the central portion of Job exclusively employs *Shadday* instead of Yahweh. If the nation is destitute and depopulated then the promise implicit in the Yahweh name cannot be fulfilled. We argue here that *Shadday* is employed ironically for literary effect. The *Shadday* blessing had implicitly promised not only prosperity and fecundity but kingship - the Davidic monarchy is anticipated in two of the patriarchal *El Shadday* sayings to Abraham and Jacob; “kings shall come from your body” (Gen 36:11 cf. Gen 17:6 with 17:1).¹¹ For Job/Hezekiah the failure of the *Shadday* blessing was unfathomable and undeserved after his efforts to court the northern tribes and reform the Yahweh cult. Fittingly, Job/Hezekiah is restored and his blessing is doubled but this time not by *Shadday* **but by Yahweh** (Job 42:12).

¹⁰ A. Perry, Job,(Willow Publications,2009); A. Perry, Joel (Willow Publications,2009)

¹¹ The mention of “kings” so early in Genesis anticipates the Davidic monarchy (not the kings of Israel): “The sceptre shall not depart from Judah...”(Gen 49:10). This was most definitely in the mind of Hezekiah/Job....“Look to Abraham your father, And to Sarah who bore you; for I called him alone, and blessed him and increased him.”(Isa 51:2)

D.N. Freedman and W. F. Albright¹² argue for a northern (non-Judean) origin of the book of Job but any northern linguistic influences can be explained by Hezekiah's reformation that specifically targeted these tribes and by the influx of refugees from the Assyrian invasion.

If this is the case then all of the *Shadday* occurrences after the patriarchal period are of Judean provenance, namely Ruth (the ancestor of David), Job (Hezekiah?), Isaiah/Joel (Judah under Assyrian domination) and Ezekiel (early period of Judean captivity in Babylon).

The usage of *Shadday* in Job is significant - particularly considering that Yahweh is absent in the dialogues. If Job is a "dramatization" of the Hezekiah situation set in the "patriarchal" period then the use of *Shadday* (fecundity/blessing/kings/children etc) promised to the patriarchs is in direct contrast with Job's situation. This is not just an "archaizing" feature (which it is) but also a deliberate reminder that the patriarchal blessing has been reversed.

Shadday in Isaiah/Joel

Isaiah and Joel are to extant contemporaries and both employ the title (Isa 13:6; Joel 1:15) as a paronomasia; "Wail, for the day of the LORD *is* at hand! It will come as destruction from the Almighty"(šōd miššadday). The context is similar to that of Job and the suggestion is that the title is used ironically – The God who showers his people with blessings of fecundity and prosperity now rains down destruction. The background of Joel is the destruction of the agricultural

¹²D.N. Freedman and W. F. Albright, Orthographic Peculiarities in the Book of Job, (*Eretz Israel*, 9, 1969,35-44),61

infrastructure and the threat to Ahaz of the removal of the Davidic dynasty¹³ - the opposite of what *Shadday* implies.

Shadday in Ezekiel

Ezekiel associates the simple and compound forms with the “wings of the cherubim” (1:24; 10:5) and the “living creatures”. The glory residing among the “living creatures” is symbolic of divine creative work in both a natural and spiritual sense. The withdrawal of the *Shekinah* from between the cherubim wings on the Ark of the Covenant symbolised the reversal of the *Shadday* blessing of prosperity and fecundity for the nation. Only the poorest people would be left and the neglected land would degenerate into a wilderness.

Conclusion

The Septuagint (LXX) translators¹⁴ struggled to translate *Shadday* into Greek¹⁵ and settled for *pantokrator* (παντοκράτωρ) which sentiment the Latin Vulgate translators followed with their choice of *omnipotens* rendered by the King James translators as Almighty.¹⁶

¹³ “If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established” (Isa 7:9) and the promise of “Immanuel” (7:14)

¹⁴ The rabbis’ midrashic exegesis suggested self-sufficiency (*she-dai*)

¹⁵ So Albright, “etymology and primary meaning of the name [having] been long since forgotten” W. F. Albright, “The names Shaddai and Abraham”, *JBL* 54 (1935),180

¹⁶ For the erroneous basis of the translations of παντοκράτωρ, *omnipotens* and “Almighty”, F. Brown, S.R. Driver, C.A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford, 1907/1977]

None of these translations is correct and philological/etymological approaches alone have proved inconclusive. However, when philological/etymological methodologies are combined with literary/contextual exegesis new understandings can be reached. Recent studies have highlighted fertility as a common factor and to the history of religions school of thought this has suggested syncretism with Canaanite fertility cults. While recognising that the epithet has definite feminine overtones this article rejects the view that its origins should be sought in native fertility cults¹⁷ and hesitates to translate the epithet as “God of the breasts (or udder)” as some suggest.

However, the ideas of prosperity/nourishment/fertility are all present – and these related ideas are difficult to sum up in one phrase, therefore a tentative translation for *El Shadday* would be the “God who blesses {with offspring} and nourishes.”

¹⁷ H. A. Whittaker suggests that Psalm 106:37 is a deliberate play on *Shadday* in opposition to the Canaanite fertility cults “..... in an allusion to Israel’s apostasy in the time of the Judges: “They sacrificed their sons and daughters to devils (*shedim*, gods of destruction) (Ps.106:37). Their God-given fertility was laid waste to false gods”. H. A. Whittaker, Bible Studies: An Anthology,(Biblia,1987),362-3