

El Shadday: Its Meaning and Implications

All of the names of God in the Holy Scriptures shed some light on the role of God in His economy. One of the most ancient names, *El Shadday* or *Shadday* (or *Shaddai*), is no different, even though its original meaning has been obscured, and the understanding of its meaning has changed over time. A variety of meanings have been proposed for the name, based on linking *Shadday* etymologically to various cognate words. One view, relating *Shadday* to the noun *shad* (breast, or udder), points to the nourishing, supplying, or nurturing aspects of God. This accords with God's economy, which is His desire to dispense Himself into humanity as life and the life supply. It also corresponds to images of God as a mother, nurturing and sustaining offspring, which occur in a few places in the Bible and have been overlooked until recently in biblical scholarship. In the Old Testament the name *Shadday* was largely superseded by *Jehovah* (which expands and enlarges the notions contained in *Shadday* and has an even deeper and richer significance according to God's economy) as the more common and prevailing name of God.

The Etymology and Use of the Name *Shadday*

The name *Shadday* occurs about forty-eight times in the Old Testament, first appearing in Genesis 17. In the first six out of the seven occurrences noted here it is preceded by the appellative or name 'El, i.e., *El Shadday* (v. 1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; Exo. 6:3; Ezek. 10:5). It is most prevalent in the book of Job, occurring thirty-one times, perhaps indicating either an archaic source or its foreign setting. Appeals to etymology alone have not proven very helpful in discerning the meaning of *Shadday*. As Biale indicates, etymology needs to be combined with a view of "the biblical context in which expressions are used" (242). The etymology of the name variously points to notions of might, height, sufficiency, and nurturing.

Some consider that *Shadday* is related to the verb *shadad*, meaning "to destroy, deal mightily with, or deal violently with." A few, mostly late verses, perhaps corroborate this. Isaiah 13:6, which is repeated in Joel 1:15, contains a play on words, "Howl, for the day of Jehovah has drawn near! / As destruction (*shod*) from the Almighty (*Shadday*), it will come."¹ Job 21:20 places the notion of destruction parallel to *Shadday*: "Let his eyes see his destruction, / And let him drink the wrath of the Almighty." In addition,

Shadday is responsible for scattering the kings in the land (Psa. 68:14), sending arrows of punishment (Job 6:4), chastening (5:17), embittering the soul (27:2), and dealing bitterly and harshly with people (Ruth 1:20-21). He also has a mighty voice like the wings of the cherubim (Ezek. 10:5) and great waters (1:24). Perhaps this notion of might influenced the Septuagint translators to translate *Shadday* using the word παντοκράτωρ (Almighty) (Job 5:17; 8:5; 11:7; 15:25; 22:17, 25; 23:16; 27:2, 11, 13; 32:8; 33:4; 34:10, 12; 35:13). The Vulgate also frequently renders *Shadday* as *Omnipotens*. The notion of "almighty" is also continued in the New Testament with the use of παντοκράτωρ, frequently combined with *Lord* and *God* (2 Cor. 6:18; Rev. 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22).

Another appeal to etymology derives *Shadday* from the Akkadian *shadu* meaning "mountain" or "field" with the *-ay* suffix meaning "of the" (i.e., God of the mountains, or high God). However, Hebrew does have another word 'Elyon (Most High) that has similar notions.² There also does not seem to be much basis from the use of *Shadday* in the Bible for this notion, apart from 1 Kings 20:23, 28 in which the Syrians refer to Jehovah as God of the mountains ('Elohey harim).

A later Rabbinic notion interprets *Shadday* as a compound of the relative *she-* which doubles or lengthens the following consonant and the noun *-day*, meaning "sufficient," i.e., *Shed-day* or *Shad-day* (the One who is sufficient). This notion seems to have influenced the Septuagint translators of Ruth and Job who translated *Shadday* as ικανός (sufficient) (Ruth 1:20-21; Job 21:15; 31:2; 40:2). This interpretation may have influenced the Masoretic pointing of the dalet of *Shadday* with a dagesh indicating lengthening (or doubling).

The earliest occurrences of *Shadday* seem to relate better etymologically to the word *shad* (breast, or udder) and carry the notion of "nurture, sustaining, of intimacy, of benevolence, benefit, and blessing."³ The most striking example occurs in Genesis 49:25: "From the God of your father, who will help you, / And from the All-sufficient One (*Shadday*), who will bless you / With blessings of heaven above, / Blessings of the deep that lies beneath, / Blessings of the breasts (*shadayim*) and of the womb."⁴

God reveals Himself as *'El Shadday*, first to Abraham thirteen years after he had schemed with Sarah to produce an heir through Hagar. He says, "I am the All-sufficient God (*'El Shadday*); / Walk before Me, and be perfect" (Gen. 17:1). Isaac blessed Jacob, "May the All-sufficient God (*'El Shadday*) bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples" (28:3), and God later blessed Jacob in like manner, "I am the All-sufficient God: / Be fruitful and multiply; / A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, / And kings shall come forth from your loins" (35:11; cf. 48:3). Jacob also invoked *'El Shadday* in his prayers for mercy to be granted to his sons and for blessings for them (43:14; 49:25). He appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *'El Shadday* (Exo. 6:3) and also appeared in a vision to Balaam (Num. 24:4, 16). The breath of the Almighty (*Shadday*) gives understanding (Job 32:8) and enlivens (33:4). One can delight oneself in *Shadday* (22:26; 27:10), receive an inheritance from (31:2), abide in the shadow of (Psa. 91:1), speak to (Job 13:3), make supplication to (8:5), let answer (31:35), return to (22:23), serve (21:15), be with (29:5), and have as our gold nuggets (22:25). *Shadday* does not commit iniquity (34:10) or pervert justice (8:3; 34:12), and He does not regard an empty cry (35:13). He is approachable, yet we cannot find Him out (37:23).

Of the meanings given above for the name *Shadday*: "Almighty, high, all-sufficient, and udder," *udder* carries the notion that corresponds best to God's economy. However, the other notions associated with *Shaddai* also have some validity, although the etymological connection may be tenuous. The notion of all-sufficient supply is contained in the notion of udder (as the supply of a mother's milk is to a newborn), and the notions of almightiness and transcendence are reinforced by the association of *Shadday* with the appellative *'El*, the Mighty One.

The Significance of *Shadday* in God's Economy: The Mighty God with an Udder—the All-sufficient Supply

So rather than choosing between etymological meanings, a combination of these meanings can point us toward a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of the name, an understanding that more fully corresponds with God's economy. Witness Lee states his understanding of the title *'El Shadday* as referring to the Mighty God with an udder, who is our all-sufficient supply.

The title of God in [Genesis] 17:1, the all-sufficient God, in Hebrew...is El-Shaddai. El means the Strong One, the Mighty One, and Shaddai, implying the meaning of breast, udder, means all-sufficient. El-Shaddai is the Mighty One with an udder, the Mighty One who has the all-sufficient supply. An udder produces milk, and milk is

the all-sufficient supply, having water, minerals, and many vitamins in it and containing all that we need for our daily living. So El-Shaddai means the all-sufficient Mighty One.

When Abraham did things by his natural self, he forgot the source of his supply. In other words, he forgot God as his all-sufficient source of supply. Therefore, God came to Abraham and seemed to say, "I am the Mighty One with an udder. Are you lacking something? Why don't you come to this udder? Are you hungry or thirsty? Come to this udder. The source of your supply is not your natural self, but I, the Mighty One with an udder. I am the all-sufficient One who can supply everything you need for your living and everything you need for the fulfillment of My eternal purpose. I am the source. You are not the source. You should not live on your own or by yourself. You have to live by Me as the source of your supply."

Why did God require Abraham to be perfect? Because God was and still is the all-sufficient Mighty One. Since He is the all-sufficient Mighty One, there is no reason or excuse for us to be imperfect. Whatever we lack, God is. Do you lack strength? God is strength. Do you need energy? God is energy. God is whatever we need. Thus, God's all-sufficiency requires us to be perfect. There is no reason for us to be poor; we have a large deposit in the heavenly bank. (*Genesis* 630, 632)

This notion of an all-inclusive supply is carried over into the New Testament with the Greek word ἐπιχορηγία, which is translated as "bountiful supply." This word refers to the supplying of all the needs of the chorus by the χορηγός, the leader of the chorus. The word ἐπιχορηγία is associated with the Spirit of Jesus Christ in Philippians 1:19 and with the joints of the Body in Ephesians 4:16, "every joint of the rich supply." The corresponding verb also occurs in Galatians 3:5, Colossians 2:19, 2 Peter 1:5 and 11, and 2 Corinthians 3:9.

The notion of milk as God's supply to sustain His people is also contained in both the Old and New Testaments. God promised and brought the children of Israel into a land flowing with milk and honey as a type of His all-inclusive bountiful supply (e.g., Exo. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev. 20:24; Num. 13:27; 14:8). In the New Testament God supplies spiritual milk to new believers in the New Testament, which is contained in the word (1 Pet. 2:2-3; Heb. 5:12-13). Paul also indicates that he is a nursing mother supplying the believers with spiritual milk (1 Thes. 2:7; 1 Cor. 3:2).

Female Images of God

There are a number of female images of God in the Bible. God is presented as a woman mostly in the sense

of a mother in the stage of pregnancy, travailing in birth, nursing and nourishing, carrying, and comforting.⁵ The notion of nurturing and sustaining is confirmed by female images of God as a mother in other portions of the Bible, especially in the prophets.

In Isaiah 42:14 Jehovah is presented as a travailing woman, saying, “Now I will cry like a woman in travail; / I will gasp and pant at the same time.” Deuteronomy 32:18 also states, “You have neglected the Rock who begot you / And have forgotten the God who travailed with you.” Isaiah 66:7-9 also presents Jehovah as the One who brings to the point of birth and causes to bring forth. Isaiah 46:3 states that the house of Jacob, the remnant of the house of Israel, have been borne from birth and carried from the womb by Jehovah. In 49:15 Jehovah compares Himself to a woman with her nursing child, having compassion on the son of her womb. In Psalm 131:2 and 3 the psalmist compares himself to a weaned child with his mother (Jehovah, the hope of Israel). In Isaiah 66:12-13 Jehovah as a mother comforts Israel, saying,

For thus says Jehovah, / I now am extending to her /
Peace like a river, / And the glory of the nations / Like an
overflowing stream; / And you will nurse, you will be car-
ried on the hip, / And you will be bounced on the knees. /
As one whom his mother comforts, / So will I comfort
you; / And you will be comforted in Jerusalem.

In Hosea 11:3-4 Jehovah states that He took Ephraim in His arms.

It was I who taught Ephraim to walk / (He took them in
His arms), / But they did not know that I healed them. / I
drew them with cords of a man, / With bands of love; /
And I was to them like those / Who lift off the yoke on
their jaws; / And I gently caused them to eat.

Additional images of God as a female are associated with birds. For example, in Matthew 23:37 Jesus stated that He wanted to gather Jerusalem’s children to Himself as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings (and in Luke 13:34). The image of God as a bird with wings also occurs in Ruth 2:12: “May Jehovah recompense your work, and may you have a full reward from Jehovah the God of Israel, under whose wings You have come to take refuge,” and in Psalm 91:4: “With His pinions He will cover You, / And under His wings You will take refuge” (cf. verse 1, which mentions dwelling in the shadow of *Shadday*, the Almighty). Similar imagery of God with protecting, covering wings occurs also in Psalms 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; and 63:7; and with the eagle’s wings hovering and bearing or carrying in Deuteronomy 32:11 and eagles’ wings in Exodus 19:4 (cf. Malachi 4:2 with healing wings). In Genesis 1:2 the Spirit of God brooding

(*merahefet*) over the waters evokes the image of a bird brooding over its young in order to hatch them.

In addition, in Luke 15:8-10 God is depicted as a woman diligently sweeping her house in search of a lost coin and rejoices when she finds it. This parable typifies the Spirit’s working in the heart of sinners to lead them to repentance, which leads to rejoicing in heaven.

Shadday and Its Eclipse by the Name Jehovah

As God’s role in His economy advanced in the Old Testament, the name *Shadday* also appears to have been eclipsed in its use by the name *Jehovah*. According to Exodus 6:3 the name ‘*El Shadday* and its significance were revealed to the patriarchs, whereas the name *YHWH* (*Jehovah*), or the significance of the name *Jehovah*, was revealed to Moses and the children of Israel.⁶ The replacement of the older name *Shadday* with *Jehovah* may also be observed in theophoric names. Those bearing the prefix or suffix *Y(eh)o-* or *-yah* derived from the name *Jehovah* occur in later texts (i.e., from 2 Samuel to Nehemiah). In contrast, there are only three theophoric names bearing the name *Shadday*, and they all occur early, in Numbers. Two names end with *-shaddai*, *Zurishaddai* (my rock is *Shaddai*) (Num. 1:6; 2:12; 7:36, 41; 10:19) and *Ammishaddai* (the people of *Shaddai*, or *Shaddai* is my kinsman) (1:12; 2:25; 7:66, 71; 10:25). One name is prefixed with *Shadday*, which is *Shedeur* (*Shadday* shines, or light of *Shadday*) (1:5; 2:10; 7:30, 35; 10:18).⁷

The fact that the name *Jehovah* eclipsed (*‘El*) *Shadday* as the more prominent name of God may indicate the deeper significance of *Jehovah* in comparison with *Shadday* in the revelation of God in His names. *Jehovah* also expands and enlarges the notions contained in the name *Shadday*. *Shadday* indicates the sufficiency of God in His promising to sustain, whereas *Jehovah* indicates the existence of God as the verb *to be*, even to replace His people with Himself as well as supply them with all that they need. Some have said that *Shaddai* is the God who makes promises (especially to the patriarchs) with the implication of their fulfillment in the name *Shaddai*, and *Jehovah* is the name used for God who fulfills the promises. As Witness Lee states,

Just as *El Shaddai* is God’s name for supply and promise, so *Jehovah* is His name for existence and fulfillment. As *Jehovah*, God is the existing God (Exo. 3:14; John 8:24, 28, 58) and the fulfilling God (Exo. 6:6-8). Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob died without enjoying the fulfillment of the promise (Heb. 11:13). In their experience God was the all-sufficient One, but He was not *Jehovah*. To them, He was the promising God, but He was not the fulfilling God. When God spoke to Moses in 6:1-8, He did not speak as *El Shaddai*, the promising God, but as *Jehovah*,

the fulfilling God. Here God did not make a promise to Moses regarding the good land; rather, He came to fulfill the promise He had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When God was making a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, He indicated in verses 13 and 14 that it would be four hundred years before the promise concerning the good land would be fulfilled. These years were completed when Moses was eighty years of age. This indicates that what was a promise to Abraham was to be a fulfillment to Moses and to the children of Israel. Therefore, in chapter six God came to Moses and to the children of Israel, not as God All-sufficient, but as Jehovah.

In order for God to be the fulfilling God, He must be the existing God; that is, He must be the self-existing One. In a unique sense, the verb to be is applied only to Him. This verb is a basic component of the name Jehovah. In this universe He alone is the self-existing One. As the One who promised, He is El Shaddai; but as the One who fulfills what He has promised, He is Jehovah, the One who is. God's existence is not dependent on anything apart from Himself. He exists eternally, having neither beginning nor ending. As Jehovah, God simply is.

Three times in [John 8] the Lord refers to Himself as "I am" (vv. 24, 28, 58). In verse 58 the Lord Jesus declared, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham came into being, I am." As the great I Am, the Lord is the eternal, ever-existing God. Hence, He is before Abraham. Spiritually speaking, John 8 can be compared to Exodus 3, where the Lord reveals Himself to Moses as the I Am (v. 14).

The name of Jesus means Jehovah the Savior. It does not mean El Shaddai the Savior. The One who came to be our Savior is the ever-existing One, the One who is. He came to fulfill all the promises made by God to His people. Therefore, Jesus came not to promise, but to fulfill. This means that He came not as El Shaddai, but as Jehovah.

In the same principle, God came to Moses as Jehovah, not as El Shaddai. It seems as if the Lord were saying, "Moses, your forefathers knew Me by the name El Shaddai. But now I want you to know Me and to experience Me by another name—by the name Jehovah, the name of the One who is. Whatever I have promised, I shall fulfill." (*Exodus* 162-164)

Jehovah—as the reality of the verb *to be*, as the self-existent and ever-existent One, and as the linking verb to whatever we need, even to the extent of reconstituting our intrinsic being with Himself—supercedes *Shadday* as the all-sufficient supply, the One who promised and who promises to sustain until the fulfillment of those promises. Finally, in New Testament times Jesus comes as the

reality of the name *Jehovah*, the fulfillment of all God's promises as well as the life-giving Spirit of Jesus Christ as the all-inclusive bountiful supply to all His believers to meet their every need and to bountifully supply the members of His Body for the ultimate building up in order to consummate this age.

Conclusion

The name (*'El*) *Shadday* contains a significant revelation concerning God's being. It points toward the nourishing, sustaining, nurturing, and all-inclusive supplying aspects of God, just as an udder supplies nourishing milk as the all-sufficient food of a babe. This is indicated by the use of the name in contexts (especially in early contexts) of promised blessing and the paronomasia, or word play, on the name *Shadday* and *shadayim* in Genesis 49:25. The later understanding of the name as Almighty, while allowing for the notion of all-sufficient supply, stresses more the awesome power of God's omnipotence and an objective, more distant, or transcendent view of God. Perhaps this was driven in part by reluctance to view God in terms of subjective experience and closeness and also a reluctance to attribute to God feminine characteristics. The prophets' portraits of God as a mother, bearing, nourishing, and sustaining His people, may have been an attempt to recover this notion and encourage more subjective experiences of God. The decline in use of *Shadday* relative to *YHWH* or *Jehovah* as the more prevalent name of God also indicates a deeper revelation of God's being as well as His coming as the fulfiller of promises, both in the Old Testament and ultimately in the New Testament in the person of Jesus, processed and consummated as the life-giving Spirit not only to supply but, even more, to carry out His promises in an intrinsic way in the members of His Body for the fulfillment of His purpose.

by Roger Good

Notes

¹As Biale states, "The military imagery from the chapter as a whole suggests Yahweh as a warrior god, from whom destruction and death will come," but

the author's wordplay between *shod* and *Shaddai* should not be taken as a serious etymology, for it is tailored to fit neatly into the military context of the poem. But the fact that *Shaddai* in Isaiah should be a warrior god assumes significance in relation to other texts. (245)

²Mendenhall combines the two notions of mountains and breasts in his chapter, "Who Was God Almighty?" in *Our Misunderstood Bible*, 43-45.

³The noun *shad* probably comes from the triconsonantal root *sh-d-y*, which is closely related to the Arabic word for *breast* (*th-d-y*). This would explain the presence of the yod in

Shadday and is confirmed by its appearing in the dual/plural form *shadayim* (see Kevin Massey and Keith Massey, “God of the Udder: Another Look at El Shaddai”).

⁴Biale also considers that this verse contains “a wordplay suggesting a meaning for the name El Shaddai,” associating “Shaddai with *shadayim* (breasts),” which he qualifies as “a poetic association...not a scientific etymology” (248). But he recognizes 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 El’” by the author(s) of the “various fertility blessings” (248).

⁵Mollenkott includes a number of other images, such as midwife, female pelican, mother bear, shekinah, and wisdom in her book, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*.

⁶See my previous article in *A&C*, “The Purpose of God in the Name of Jehovah,” which addresses the significance of the name of Jehovah and the significance of Exodus 6:3 in more detail.

⁷There is some debate regarding the dating of texts in which the name *Shadday* occurs. Steins for the most part rejects an early date for the use of *Shadday*, considering that “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 reemerging during the exile and becoming common again especially during the postexilic period” (445). 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” (445). He does however acknowledge its “explicit historical-theological association with the patriarchal period (Ex. 6:3),” considering its presence in Job “to serve archaizing purposes” (445-446).

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Footnote from the Recovery Version of the Bible (continued from p. 66)

virtues. Here the grace of the Lord is mentioned first because this book is on the grace of Christ (1:12; 4:15; 6:1; 8:1, 9; 9:8, 14; 12:9). Such a divine attribute of three virtues—love, grace, and fellowship—and such a Triune God of the three divine hypostases—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—were needed by the distracted and confused yet comforted and restored Corinthian believers. Hence, the apostle used all these divine and precious things in one sentence to conclude his lovely and dear Epistle.

This verse is strong proof that the trinity of the Godhead is not for the doctrinal understanding of systematic theology but for the dispensing of God Himself in His trinity into His chosen and redeemed people. In the Bible the Trinity is never revealed merely as a doctrine. It is always revealed or mentioned in regard to the relationship of God with His creatures, especially with man, who was created by Him, and more particularly with His chosen and redeemed people. The first divine title used in the divine revelation, *Elohim* in Hebrew, a title used in relation to God’s creation, is plural in number (Gen. 1:1), implying that God, as the Creator of the heavens and the earth for man, is triune. Concerning His creation of man in His own image, after His own likeness, He used the plural pronouns *Us* and *Our*, referring to His trinity (Gen. 1:26) and implying that He would be one with man and express Himself through man in His trinity. Later, in Gen. 3:22 and 11:7 and Isa. 6:8, He referred to Himself again and again as *Us* in regard to His relationship with man and with His chosen people.

In order to redeem fallen man that He might again have the position to be one with man, He became incarnated (John 1:1, 14) in the Son and through the Spirit (Luke 1:31-35) to be a man, and lived a human life

continued on p. 105