

GOD OF THE UDDER: ANOTHER LOOK AT EL SHADDAI

BY KEITH MASSEY AND KEVIN MASSEY

1 - Introduction

Students of the Hebrew language and Bible are familiar with various theories about the original meaning of the word *šadday*, found mainly in the construction El Shaddai.¹ The phrase is traditionally rendered "God Almighty," reading with Greek *pantokrator*. This understanding of the word is thought to arise from the assumed derivation of the term from the relative particle *she-* coupled with the word *day*, 'sufficient', producing, 'the one who is sufficient', i.e., 'able to do all'. W. F. Albright argued for a meaning of 'the one of mountain', deriving the word from Akkadian *šadû*.² More recently, Walter Wifall has remarshalled the evidence for an understanding of the term as 'the one of the fields'.³

Among the more controversial assertions in biblical studies is that put forth by David Biale in which El Shaddai is interpreted as

¹ For the common term 'El Shaddai' we will use the familiar spelling. All other representations of lexical items will be phonetic.

² W. F. Albright, "The Names Shaddai and Abram", JBL 54 (1935), 173-182.

³ W. Wifall, "El Shaddai or El of the Fields", ZAW (1980), 24-33.

"the god with breasts."⁴ Deriving the term from the common Semitic word **tady* (Hebrew, *šad* [sg.] *šadayim* [dual] 'breasts'), Biale points to strong circumstantial evidence which consistently links the use of the term with language and promises of prosperity. We believe that Biale has worked toward the proper understanding of the term, but that a more precise interpretation of the actual form *šadday* will produce a more sensible (though no less controversial) result.

2 - Biale's 'the god with breasts'

Biale asserts that *šadday* is a form of the Hebrew word *šad* "breast," with a gentilic-adjectival yod ending, probably what is known in Arabic studies as a 'nisba' ending.⁵ Another possibility he suggests is that it could be a cognate of an Egyptian root meaning "to suckle."⁶ Therefore, Biale asserts that El Shaddai originally meant "the god with breasts." This "god with breasts" he connects to the wider milieu of the Canaanite fertility cults.⁷

Biale's work, while short on the forms of the term, is long on the contextual evidence. Biale arrives at this suggestion mainly by noting that *šadday* occurs in quite specific contexts:

El Shaddai occurs six times in Genesis and once in Exodus.

⁴ D. Biale, "The God with Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible", *History of Religions* 20 (1982), 240-256.

⁵ D. Biale, "The God with Breasts", 248.

⁶ D. Biale, "The God with Breasts", 249.

⁷ D. Biale, "The God with Breasts", 252.

Five of the Genesis occurrences and the passage in Exodus are usually attributed to the Priestly author, while the sixth Genesis text—in the Testament of Jacob (Gen. 49)—stands outside the accepted typologies. 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. Of the five passage [sic] presumed written by P, four are fertility blessings using the "be fruitful and multiply" formula of Genesis 1 and 9 or varying it slightly.⁸

Biale's observation is quite significant. In the wider contexts in which it occurs, the word does seem closely connected to the concepts of growth and productivity. Yet it is the actual forms and cognates relating to this idea of shaddai as "breast" that need to be examined more closely. A different picture appears when this is done.

3 - Comparison of Related and Cognate Forms

The Arabic cognate to Hebrew *šad* is *ṭadyun*. We provide the Arabic word in its nominative form with nunation, "-un" to show that the third radical of the word is consonantal ya'. Below is a list of several nouns of this class in both Arabic and Hebrew:

ARABIC			HEBREW		
Term	Root	Meaning	Term	Root	Meaning
<i>jadyun</i>	j-d-y	"goat kid"	<i>g^edi</i>	g-d-y	"goat kid"

⁸ D. Biale, "The God with Breasts", 247.

<i>lahyun</i>	l- <u>h</u> -y	"jaw"	<i>le_hi</i>	l- <u>h</u> -y	"(animal) jaw"
<i>labwa</i>	l-b-w(*y?)	"lioness"	<i>le_bi</i>	l-b-y	"lion"
<i>zabyun</i>	<u>z</u> -b-y	"gazelle"	<i>se_bi</i>	<u>s</u> -b-y	"gazelle"

It is intriguing that so many nouns in this class, quite stable in form and meaning, concern pastoral life. Yet this should not be so surprising. Nouns with connection to rural concerns are often more conservative than are other noun classes. Arabic *jirrah* "cud" matches Hebrew *gerah* "cud." This leads to our closer examination of Hebrew *šad*.

4 - Irregularities in Lamed-Yod words

On the basis of Arabic *tadyun*, we can assume that Hebrew *šad* has lost an original consonantal yod in the singular. The plural and dual forms of *šad* is *šadayim*, written with a consonantal yod. The Semitic languages have the noted tendency to do away with final consonantal yods. In Arabic, many final yaa's have become *alif maksoora*, that is, pronounced as an alif yet written with an unmarked anachronistic yaa'. For example, Classical Arabic *mata*, 'when', is cognate to Hebrew *matay*, 'when', which has preserved the consonantal yod.

With an eye toward this tendency, we can confidently reconstruct the singular form of *šad* through a proto-form **šadæh*,⁹ from an original form **šedi*. This form **šedi* matches the

⁹ Note earlier Hebrew *beki* and the later (only Ezra 10:1) *bækæh*.

corresponding Arabic term *tadyun*.

5 - Meanings of *tadyun*/**šedi*

The singular form of Arabic *tadyun* can mean "udder" as well as "breast." It has this meaning in the construct *tadyu-l-hayawa an* 'animal's udder'. Hebrew *šad* in the singular also means this:

gam tannin hal^esu šad heniqu gureyhæn

Even jackals offer the teat and nurse their young. (Lam 4:3)

When the word occurs in the singular, then, it should be assumed to refer to the teat or udder of an animal because with reference to humans the word naturally tends toward the dual:

ani homa wa-šaday ka-migdalot (Can 8:10)

"I am a wall and my (two) breasts are like towers."

Since **šedi* in singular indicates animal reference, we assert that the primary meaning of the exact form *šad*/**šedi* to be 'udder'.

6 - El Shaddai Re-examined

The Masoretes pointed the consonants š-d-y with patalh under the shin, the dalet doubled and carrying a patah creating a diphthong with the yod (šadday). As noted earlier, this pointing seems to reflect the interpretation of the term as a compound of the relative particle *ša-* or *še-*, which doubles the following consonant; and the term *day* "(self-)sufficient." It is this understanding that likely brings about the Septuagint translation *pantokrator* and the Vulgate *omnipotens*.

Obviously this interpretation predates the Masoretic vocalization, because it was already influencing the Septuagint before the common era.

The connection between El Shaddai and the concepts of increase and productivity are well demonstrated by Biale's statistics noted above. But Biale's attempt to connect *šadday* to *šad* is only complicated by calling the yod a gentilic-adjectival ending or by referring to some Egyptian root. The reason for explaining the yod in any of those ways comes from the fact that if the yod of the form is taken as a part of the root, an interpretation of (human) breast is practically *excluded*. The form can not be a plural or a dual in that environment since the final mimation would appear. As in the use seen in Can 8;10, the form *šaday* can only refer to human breasts as a dual with the 1st person possessive suffix. None of these tenuous assertions is necessary, however, when we note that without the Masoretic pointing, š-d-y is also the spelling for the simple singular form **šedi* "udder."

7 - The God of the Udder

All the contextual evidence which demonstrates that El Shaddai means "the god with breasts" can also be used, with perhaps even more strength, to demonstrate that El Shaddai originally meant "the God of the Udder." One passage in particular, Gen 49: 25, supports this understanding. We will here render Shaddai traditionally:

By the God of your father who will help you, by God Almighty

(*El Shaddai)¹⁰ who will bless you, blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep lying beneath, blessings of udders (*šadayim*) and the womb (*rah̄am*).

The blessings here seem to be connected more with pastoral success, large and healthy flocks and herds, than with human fertility. Further, the proximity of *šadday* and *šadayim* suggests a connection. This could be a simple word play but Biale's statistics would indicate otherwise.

Biale connects his "god with breasts" with the wider Ancient Near Eastern fertility cults.¹¹ This step is not at all necessary when El Shaddai is understood as the "God of the Udder." An El Ralham could be seen as a fertility god, but *'el *šedi* would not be. Blessings of the udder meant an ample food supply to an ancient pastoral people. Blessings of the udder meant the 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.

It is possible to see some shadows of this understanding of El Shaddai when we see the form that idolatry and apostasy in Israel takes. The Israelites in the Sinai made an idol of a calf (Ex 32). The enigmatic depictions of "Yahweh and his Asherah" from Kuntillet Ajrud seem to represent the deity as a Bull with horns.

¹⁰ Codex Leningradensis in this verse reads *'et shadday*, which we correct to *'el shadday*, reading with other Masoretic manuscripts, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Septuagint.

¹¹ D. Biale, "The God with Breasts", 253.

8 - Summary and Conclusion

We have provided linguistic evidence that Hebrew *šad* had a singular proto-form **šedi*. This proto-form provides the best fit as the word lying behind Masoretic *šadday*, thus El Shaddai would have originally meant "the God of the Udder." Linguistic evidence focusing on the forms of nouns certainly tends toward our interpretation. Contextual evidence supporting an understanding of El Shaddai as "the god with breasts" supports the translation "the God of the udder" as well, if not better.