



The God with Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible

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With the exception of the tetragrammaton YHWH, no divine name has generated so much controversy as El Shaddai or Shaddai. The Greek and Latin translators of the Bible agreed that Shaddai must be understood to mean omnipotent (Vulgate: *omnipotens*), while the rabbis' midrashic exegesis suggested self-sufficiency (*she-dai*). On the basis of this tradition, the King James translation rendered the name as the Almighty God, an interpretation, as we shall see, which is not far from the way one biblical tradition understood the name. Modern scholarship, however, has searched in another direction.¹ Since Friedrich Delitzsch (1883)² and particularly William F. Albright in 1935,³ the scholarly consensus is that the name must be a derivative of the Akkadian *shadu*, meaning mountain. Following E. P. Dhorme,⁴ Albright argued that the original meaning of *shadu* was probably

¹ See the list of possibilities in Norman Walker, "A New Interpretation of the Divine Name 'Shaddai,'" *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 72 (1960): 64. The main nineteenth-century interpretations were "my destroyer" (Franz Delitzsch, Dillman, and Stade), "my rain-giver" (Robertson Smith), "my demon" (Nöldeke), and "mountain" (see below). For more recent bibliography, see below and a → Klaus Koch, "Šaddaj," *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (1976): 299–332, esp. 308.

² Friedrich Delitzsch, *Prolegomena eines neuen hebräisch-aramäischen Wörterbuches zum Alten Testament* (Leipzig, 1886), pp. 95–97, and idem, *Assyrisches Handwörterbuch* (Leipzig, 1894–96), pp. 642–43.

→ William F. Albright, "The Names Shaddai and Abram," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54 (1935): 180–93.

⁴ P. Dhorme, "L'Emploi métaphorique des noms de parties du corps en Hébreu et en Akkadien," *Revue Biblique* 31 (1922): 230–31.

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Knauf, DDD, p.749-53: ' 1. God of wilderness, all references in the Bible are exilic or post exilic, he sees this as priestly, iconography ties El Shaddai to the great goddess of the Neolithic period, a mistress of animals, a goddess of the wilderness, and admits the old "lord of the breasts" was a memory at the fringes of Palestine from a time that had passed.

“breast” (*shadwi* in Old Akkadian, *tud* in Ugaritic and Arabic, and *shad* in Hebrew) which, by a psychological association evident to the author of the *Enûma Elish* in ancient times and to Freud in our own, came to mean mountain. The particular form *shaddai* (double “d” and the “ai” suffix) derives not directly from *shadu* (mountain) but from *sadda’u* or *shaddu’a*, meaning “mountaineer.” Hence, this god was originally conceived as “the one of the mountains.” Albright speculates that this god of the mountains was an Amorite god brought to Syria where he became the Canaanite Baal-Hadad, the storm god who was a mountain deity. The patriarchs, themselves probably of Amorite origin, worshiped Shaddai in conjunction with the Canaanite El, but this worship later gave way to the worship of Yahweh. Albright argues that Yahweh, although repeatedly associated with mountains (Sinai, Horeb, Zion, Moriah, etc.), was not essentially a mountain god, and that this attribute was assimilated into Yahwism from the Amorite-Canaanite Shaddai.

Albright’s thesis has been generally adopted by more recent scholars, though they have added various refinements. F. M. Cross strengthened Albright’s philological arguments, while Lloyd Bailey, Jean Ouellette, and E. L. Abel suggested quite persuasively the possibility that El Shaddai derives from the Amorite lunar god *Sin il Amurru* or *Bel Shade*, who was at once a storm and war god and also a god of the mountains.⁵ It was therefore natural for the wandering Amorite patriarchs to identify this god with the Canaanite El and later to transfer the epithet to Yahweh. These scholars believe that the name El Shaddai is extremely ancient and may indeed have been one of the authentic pre-Canaanite epithets for the “god of the fathers” brought along by the patriarchs from their Mesopotamian homeland.⁶

A strong counterargument was proposed in 1961 by Manfred Weippert,⁷ who argued that El Shaddai should rather be understood

→ Frank Moore Cross, “Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs,” *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 244–50; idem, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), pp. 52– → Lloyd Bailey, “Israelite ‘El Shadday and Amorite Bēl Shadē,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87 (1968): 434– → Jean Ouellette, “More on ‘El Shadday and Bel Shade,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 470–71; E. L. Abel, “The Nature of the Patriarchal God ‘El Sadday,” *Numen* 20 (1973): 49–59.

⁶ The classic essays on the “god of the fathers” are by Albrecht Alt, “Der Gott der Väter” (1929), translated in his *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (London, 1966), pp. 3–77, and Julius Lewy, “Les Texte paleo-assyriens et l’Ancien Testament,” *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 110 (1934): 50 ff.

⁷ Manfred Weippert, “Erwägungen zur Etymologie des Gottesnamens ‘El Shaddaj,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 111, n.s. 36 (1961): 42–62. See also Walker, pp. 64–65. Walker departs from the mountain vs. plain argument to suggest the name derives from one of Marduk’s names meaning “the omniscient.” He believes that this derivation is justified on contextual grounds from Gen. 17:1. Such an interpretation stretches the imagination, since, as I show below, the El Shaddai passages are most closely associated with fertility blessings, not divine omniscience.

as El Sade, the god of the plain. Weippert believes that a Canaanite provenance of El Shaddai is much more convincing than the Akkadian. He quotes a Ugaritic royal poem which features “Astarte of the plain” (*trt sh’d*), as well as the late-bronze Canaanite word for plain, namely, *shadä*, from which the Hebrew derives its word for plain by altering the Canaanite sibilant. As a result of these controversies, E. A. Speiser, in his commentary on Genesis in 1964, was forced to conclude that, while the weight of opinion still lies on the side of “god of the mountain,” the jury is still out on the original meaning of El Shaddai.⁸

I do not propose in the following remarks to settle the continuing debate over the Near Eastern origins of the name El Shaddai. The painstaking hunt for Near Eastern cognates of intractable Hebrew expressions occasionally begins to look like a wild goose chase when critics lose sight of the biblical context in which the expressions are used. It is a methodological mistake to assume that the biblical authors knew as much about Near Eastern cultures and languages as do modern philologists. He inherited a language composed of words which had lost their original meanings, and his own writing was often an attempt to impose meanings on such words as a result of his own contemporary concerns. The understanding of a biblical expression must therefore begin by adopting the point of view of the biblical author: What did *he* mean when he used a certain word or phrase? Only then can the search for cognates bear fruit.

As Weippert observes, the original meaning of El Shaddai may well have vanished into the mists of ancient history by the time the compositions incorporating the name were put together. We should not forget that the patriarchal events took place at the latest near the beginning of the second millennium, while the various documents (J, E, P, etc.) adduced by modern scholarship cannot be dated earlier than the tenth century B.C.E., and some would argue for a much later date for at least some of them. It is interesting that the author of the Genesis texts using El Shaddai (usually associated with the Priestly tradition) makes no attempt to decipher the etymology of the name by either a philological gloss or an etiological tale. Moreover, if El Shaddai were originally a lunar god associated with a cosmic mountain—as the Albright school maintains—why is he not attached to any specific mountainous sanctuary in the biblical texts? If, on the other hand, Weippert is correct that the name means “god of the plain,” the biblical authors seem similarly unaware of any plain in which he dwells. Some have suggested that the utter lack of location

⁸ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, N.Y.), p. 124.

Ernst Axel Knauf leaves open the possibility on some of these ideas. See: DDD, pages 749-753.

characteristic of El Shaddai is simply a result of the Priestly theology in which God is universal (see the creation account of Gen. 1).⁹ But surely this argument is self-serving. At the very least, we can conclude that the author of the Genesis texts had no knowledge of a specific dwelling place for El Shaddai, a fact which may have suited his theological purposes but does not prove conscious suppression. The evidence in Genesis, and in all the other passages using this name, suggests that the biblical authors were entirely ignorant of the presumed Amorite or Canaanite origins of El Shaddai. While it may be that authentic traces of the old patriarchal god can be detected in the texts that have come down to us (and we shall follow some of these traces), there is not sufficient proof that the biblical writers ever consciously used El Shaddai in his original context, whatever that might have been.

Our task, therefore, is to try to reconstruct the possible meanings that the old god El Shaddai may have had for the authors of the various passages in which he appears.¹⁰ The problem is made more difficult but also more interesting by the fact that the name has a very peculiar frequency of occurrence, which points to its popularity in certain periods but relative unpopularity in others. It appears six times in Genesis, and once in Exodus 6:3, where the author announces that whereas the patriarchs knew God as El Shaddai, henceforth he will be known as YHWH. Within the Pentateuch, it only appears twice more—in the Balaam oracles of Numbers 24—and it also appears in several theophoric names in the Priestly lists in Numbers. It is completely absent from the historical books, but appears twice in Psalms (68:15 and 91:1), in identical passages in Isaiah 13:6 and Joel 1:15, twice in Ezekiel (1:24 and 10:5), twice in Ruth (1:20, 21), and thirty-one times in Job. Without prejudicing the question of the date of the Priestly document from Genesis and Exodus to which we shall return, we can say quite safely that the name Shaddai or El Shaddai is certainly an early name in Israelite literature, since it occurs in three early poems: the Testament of Jacob (Gen. 49:25), the Balaam oracles, and Psalm 68—all of which

⁹ Weippert (p. 56) assumes that this theology was taken from the cult of the “god of the fathers,” which, similarly, had no specific geographical location.

¹⁰ The only Old Testament critic to have attempted such a contextual analysis is Klaus Koch (see pp. 299–332, esp. p. 309). But, as I shall argue below, Koch fails to discern the actual meanings of the name in the exilic and postexilic (Isaiah-Job) tradition and in the Genesis tradition. He does not see that two traditions are at work with very different interpretations. Moreover, his dating of the Priestly materials is postexilic, which leads him to some conclusions quite at variance with those presented here.

date from the tenth century B.C.E. at the latest.¹¹ In addition, its appearance in the lists of names in Numbers also suggests, though it does not establish, its antiquity, since the names there seem very old.¹² At the same time, we can say with certainty that Shaddai achieved great popularity in the late literature, since Ezekiel, Ruth, and Job (where it appears in total disproportion to all its other occurrences) are all books from the sixth century at the earliest.¹³ It is very likely, as a preliminary hypothesis, that Shaddai was an ancient divine name which was more or less abandoned, but not entirely forgotten, after the literary activity of the early monarchy, only to become popular once again in late texts with definite archaizing tendencies.

Complicating the problem is the fact that the name sometimes occurs in its compound form, El Shaddai (meaning probably either "the god of Shaddai," the "god Shaddai" or "El who is also known as Shaddai") and sometimes simply as Shaddai. The Genesis texts and their Exodus postscript all have El Shaddai, as does Ezekiel 10. But every other occurrence uses Shaddai alone. What sense can we make of this distribution? Albright argued that Shaddai must have been the original name since it appears as such in the early poetry. However, this argument is by no means definitive, since Genesis 49 has El Shaddai, according to the best textual traditions,¹⁴ and the Balaam oracles use Shaddai in parallelism with El. Only Psalm 68, of all the manifestly early material, has Shaddai by itself. Moreover, if the contention that our divine name originated with the Amorite *il amurru* is correct, we would not be surprised if El Shaddai were the original biblical usage and that later occurrences without the preceding

¹¹ On the dating of the Testament of Jacob, see B. Vawter, "The Canaanite Background to Gen. 49," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 17 (1955): 1-18; on the Balaam oracles see W. F. Albright, "Balaam," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 4, cols. 120-23; → idem, "The Oracles of Balaam," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63 (1944): 207-33; on Psalm 68, see idem, "A Catalogue of Early Hebrew Lyric Poems (Psalm 68)," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 23 (1950-51): 1-39.

¹² Martin Noth, *Die israelitische Personennamen in Rahmen der Gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* (Stuttgart, 1928), pp. 130-31, and Albright, "The Names Shaddai and Abram," p. 188, n. 55.

¹³ The dating of Job is, of course, still hotly debated. I am in agreement with the mainstream of opinion, represented by Albright, that Job stems from the sixth or fifth centuries. See his "Some Canaanite-Phoenician Sources of Hebrew Wisdom," *Vetus Testamentum*, suppl. 3 (1960), p. 14. See also M. H. Segal "Parallels in the Book of Job" (Hebrew), in *Tarbiz* 20 (1950): 35-40, where he argues for the priority of Deutero-Isaiah over Job. A strong counterargument has been made by M. H. Pope, *Job* (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), pp. xxxiii-xxxiv. For the probable postexilic date of Ruth, see Sellin-Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, Tenn., 1968), pp. 249-52 and the bibliography therein.

¹⁴ See the Greek, Samaritan, and Syriac translations. The Masoretic has *ve-et*, which is contextually less convincing than *ve-el*.

El were either ignorant archaisms or a shorthand form presuming El.¹⁵ While these speculations by no means settle the question, it will be important to our argument that the occurrence of El Shaddai does *not* prove a late text and may, in fact, point to an early one.

We now turn to the pressing question of whether any pattern of meaning or meanings can be detected from the various occurrences of El Shaddai and Shaddai. As I have suggested, very few scholars have taken up this question. However, in his recent book on *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, Frank Moore Cross points out a number of similarities between some of the exilic texts.¹⁶ Isaiah 13 is a prophecy against the Babylonians and therefore stems from the author of Deutero-Isaiah. Verse 6, which appears in similar form in Joel 1:15, reads: "Cry out because the day of Yahweh is close, because destruction [*ke-shod*] will come from Shaddai." The military imagery from the chapter as a whole suggests Yahweh as a warrior god, from whom destruction and death will come. Now, 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. Cross points out that Ezekiel speaks of a "noise like the voice of Shaddai," suggesting to him a reminiscence of the Amorite storm and war god, *il amurru*. These associations are strengthened by the frequent occurrence of Shaddai in Job, where storm and even warlike descriptions of the deity are common. Cross therefore concludes from this evidence that "in the sixth century, Ezekiel, Job and second Isaiah resurrected the ancient symbols and mythic forms of the storm theophony in descriptions of Yahweh's appearances and in war songs describing his universal victory in the new age. It may be that Shaddai received the traits of the storm god from Shaddai's assimilation to Yahweh."¹⁷

I am in agreement with Cross's argument, that the meaning given to Shaddai in the sixth century was of a storm and war god and that this meaning was part and parcel of the image of Yahweh in the exilic and postexilic period. To be sure, not all the late texts support the interpretation of Shaddai as a warrior god, but if we generalize this image, we find that the understanding of Shaddai does correspond closely to Israelite theology in this period. In books like Job,

¹⁵ In Job, Shaddai appears sixteen times out of 31 in parallel with El. See Koch, p. 307. On these occurrences, Pope comments (pp. 44–45): "The use of the word el along with Shaddai as the designation of the deity has all the earmarks of authentic early terminology."

¹⁶ F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), pp. 52–60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Ecclesiastes, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah, God often appears as a remote, mysterious and even destructive deity. All of the contexts in which Shaddai is attested suggest such an incomprehensible and transcendent God.

The most important late work in which Shaddai appears frequently is the book of Job. The first systematic analysis of the use of Shaddai in Job was undertaken recently by Klaus Koch.¹⁸ He concludes that Shaddai represents the personal aspect of the deity to whom Job appeals for comfort. This argument is only tenable if the relevant verses are stretched beyond their plain sense. The image of God in Job is of a remote, incomprehensible deity with whom man has no contact. As in Ruth's lament,¹⁹ this God is inexplicably malevolent: "For Shaddai's barbs pierce me" (Job 6:4). The author of Job uses different names for God (most commonly El, Eloah, and Shaddai; less frequently Elohim and Yahweh), but—as opposed to Koch's interpretation—does not seem to associate different meanings with these different names. The names are used interchangeably and their main function seems to be to impart an archaic, patriarchal flavor to the book.

Hence, in the late texts, Shaddai—used as a substitute for Yahweh—has the associations common to late Israelite theology: awe and veneration at best, fear and hostility at worst. In the context of all this material, it is no surprise that in his description of the terrible day of Yahweh to come, Deutero-Isaiah should pun that "destruction comes from Shaddai." It is equally understandable that the Septuagint and the Vulgate should render Shaddai as the "Almighty."

Was the tradition understanding Shaddai as the almighty God invented in the sixth century or borrowed from earlier sources? The authors of the late tradition might have drawn on the Balaam oracles of Numbers 24, but it is not clear whether Balaam intended to praise the Hebrew God as a warrior or, as seems more probable, to glorify the military and political might of the Israelites themselves. A better source might be Psalm 68, which is a military poem based, as Albright has shown, on Ugaritic sources. Shaddai appears as he who "scatters kings." In both the Balaam oracles and Psalm 68, Shaddai appears together with other divine names—El, Elyon, and Yahweh. Hence, if Shaddai was associated with an early tradition of warrior god, it was not the only divine name in this tradition. The tradition of

¹⁸ Koch, pp. 309–16.

¹⁹ The duplicate line (1:20, 21) in which Shaddai appears in Ruth reads either "for Shaddai has embittered me" or "Shaddai has done evil to me." Significantly, one verse of Job (27:2) has almost the same reading as Ruth 1:20: "Shaddai has embittered my soul."

Nephi blends this use as well. See: 1 Ne. 1.14 (not mixed), The 'piercing eye' of Shaddai - Jac. 2.10, 2 Ne. 28.15, 2 Ne. 9.46, Mosiah 11.23, Hel. 10.11- Yahweh & Shaddai combined, Shaddai & El Elyon combined - 3 Ne. 4.32, Nephi commands in Shaddai's name - 1 Ne. 17.48, In the baptismal covenant in connection w/"Spirit of the Lord," - Mosiah 18.13.

Shaddai as a remote, powerful, warrior god may therefore have its roots in early Israelite poetry influenced by the Canaanites, but it is primarily a late tradition.

The tradition of Shaddai as “the almighty God” is not the only interpretation of Shaddai in the Bible. As Koch has recently pointed out,²⁰ all of the passages using El Shaddai in Genesis, with one exception, are fertility blessings. An examination of these texts demonstrates that a tradition, which I believe to have been early, understood El Shaddai as a fertility god, an understanding which has startling consequences. El Shaddai occurs six times in Genesis and once in Exodus. 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 passages presumed written by P, four are fertility blessings using the “be fruitful and multiply” formula of Genesis 1 and 9 or varying it slightly. In Genesis 17, God introduces himself to Abram as El Shaddai and promises to “increase” (*ve-arbeh*) and “fructify” (*vehifreti*) Abram’s progeny. In Gen. 28:3, Isaac invokes El Shaddai in blessing Jacob when he sends him to Paddan-aram to acquire a wife and thus become fertile: “And El Shaddai will bless you and fructify and increase you and you will become a community of nations.” In Gen. 35:9–12, God appears to Jacob in a passage which seems to refer to his successful escape from Laban. As with Abraham, Jacob receives a new name and God says (verse 11): “I am El Shaddai, be fruitful and increase (*preh u-reveh*). . . .” Finally, when Jacob blesses Ephraim and Manasseh in Gen. 48:3-4, he says: “El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the Land of Canaan and he blessed me. And he said to me: ‘Behold, I am fructifying you and I have increased you. . . .’” Only in the Joseph story (Gen. 43:14) is El Shaddai invoked in a blessing of protection rather than fertility, but here, too, we might suggest that the author senses the association between *rahamim* (mercy) and *rehem* (womb). Moreover, the verse is implicitly connected with fertility, for it is uttered by Jacob when he sends Benjamin to Joseph, and the last phrase (“for if I must suffer bereavement I will suffer it”) suggests that if El Shaddai does not protect Benjamin, then given Joseph’s presumed death, Rachel’s line will vanish.

There is only one other occurrence of El Shaddai in Genesis and it is the crucial one, for it suggests how the fertility tradition of El

²⁰ Koch, p. 323.

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Shaddai understood the name. This occurrence is in the Joseph blessing of the Testament of Jacob, a text which is not associated with any of the main documents and which is usually dated to the very early monarchy, although probably based on poems from the period of the Judges. The relevant passage is Gen. 49:25: “and El Shaddai will bless you with the blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep lying below, blessings of breasts [*shadayim*] and womb [*rahem*].” Here we have not only a fertility blessing similar to the others noted above, but also a wordplay suggesting a meaning for the name El Shaddai. The author associates Shaddai with *shadayim* (breasts). As with the wordplay between *shod* (destruction) and Shaddai in Isaiah and Joel, we cannot assume that the author of this text actually believed that *shadayim* was the correct etymology of Shaddai; a poetic association is not a scientific etymology. But given the persistent fertility traditions in which El Shaddai appears in Genesis, the association is contextually and phonetically reasonable, if not scientifically persuasive.

I am trying to suggest that the author or authors of the various fertility blessings in Genesis may well have understood El Shaddai in the same way as the author of the Joseph blessing, regardless of the original meaning of the name. These traditions, which I will try to prove date from the early monarchy, may or may not have received the divine epithet from patriarchal provenance, but they interpreted it in their own way. Albright points out that its grammatical form resembles many early Hebrew personal names with a gentilic-adjectival ending.²¹ In this case, the author might have understood the name to mean “El with breasts” or “the breasted El.” But it may even have been interpreted as “El with two breasts,” following Ezek. 13:18 in which the same form means “two hands.”²²

It is at this point that the search for ancient cognates might prove helpful. Albright argued in 1935 that the “primitive” meaning of the Akkadian *shadu* is “breast.”²³ The root then came to mean “moun-

²¹ Albright, “The Names Shaddai and Abram,” p. 187.

²² My colleague Saul Levin was kind enough to point out the similarity with Ezek. 13:18. The main difficulty in deriving Shaddai from *shadayim* is the doubling of the *dalet*. Albright solves this problem by assuming that the doubling already occurred in Akkadian (“mountain” to “mountaineer”). I do not have a suitable solution to this problem in Hebrew. Would the doubling have made a poetic derivation from *shadayim* or *shod* impossible for a biblical author? Is the strengthening of the consonant a later Masoretic invention or a feature of the original Hebrew? My guess is that the doubled *dalet*, whatever its origins or true meaning, did not interfere with the poetic associations of the two traditions of El Shaddai.

²³ Albright suggests that Shaddai could not have been derived directly from any of

tain.” Now, there is no apparent reason for assuming that one meaning of *shadu* is primitive and the other “secondary.” They could certainly have coexisted.²⁴ In fact, it appears that the biblical author may well have associated breasts with mountains, for the “blessings of breasts and womb” of Genesis 49 are immediately followed by “blessings of ancient mountains; bounty of everlasting hills” (verse 26). It is, however, unimportant whether or not this refers to some unidentified cosmic mountain, as Cross thinks,²⁵ for the association with breasts is the critical one here since it fits into the fertility context. In any event, if the name Shaddai has an Akkadian provenance, breasts would not contradict its original context. But perhaps a better place to search for a cognate would not be in Akkadian, but in Egyptian, where *shdi* is a verb meaning “to suckle.”²⁶ Here, it is not even necessary to tinker with the suffix, since it is identical to the Hebrew. In this case, El Shaddai might be better rendered as “El who suckles” of “the suckling El.”

Whether derived from Akkadian or Egyptian, the God with breasts is a natural interpretation of the fertility deity in Genesis. Yet the argument has a certain weakness. The mainstream of biblical criticism still agrees with Graf and Wellhausen that the Priestly document is postexilic.²⁷ If the Priestly blessings are late, it would be hard to argue that the early meaning of El Shaddai was “the god of fertility,” later to be supplanted by the “almighty God.” Moreover, I have presumed that the Priestly tradition was aware of the poetic association between Shaddai and breasts which we identified in Genesis 49. It is therefore necessary (1) to establish the connection between the Testament of Jacob and the Priestly fertility blessings in Genesis and (2) to show that the date of the “God with breasts” tradition is early. There are several internal considerations which would argue for a date during the monarchy for all the Genesis blessings. First, I suggested above that the compound form of the name is more likely

the Semitic roots for breast because of the suffix. Hence, he was led to his “mountaineer” interpretation. The argument is not, however, based on philology but on phonetic association which could easily ignore the problematic suffix, even if Albright could not (“The Names Shaddai and Abraham,” p. 184).

²⁴ Such an argument was made by Zoller in *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 13, no. 73: 5. See Albright, “The Names Shaddai and Abram,” p. 184 (n. 23 above).

²⁵ Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, p. 56.

²⁶ I thank my colleague Gerald Kadish for drawing this possibility to my attention.

²⁷ Both Cross and Koch, among those writing on Shaddai, adopt this assumption, although they both admit that the Priestly tradition is based on earlier sources. Nevertheless, the acceptance of this dating leads to conclusions inconsistent with the fertility contexts in which we find El Shaddai in Genesis.

the early form, with Shaddai by itself an inaccurate, late archaism. Second, two of the fertility blessings (Gen. 17:6 and 35:11) promise the patriarchs that the consequence of their fertility will be the issue of kings, suggesting that they originated in monarchic circles. It can readily be demonstrated that the two uncontested early uses of El Shaddai (the Testament of Jacob and the Balaam oracles) were both compiled in their present form in the period of David and Solomon. The Balaam oracles are replete with monarchical allusions and references to David's conquest of Moab and Edom. The Testament of Jacob, although probably composed of tribal poems from the time of the Judges, strongly suggests the ascendancy of the tribe of Judah over its brothers (verses 8–11)—the situation characteristic of the period of David and Solomon. The “scepter” (*shevet*) and “mace” (*mehokek*) which Judah holds, though probably relics of the tribal system, suggest the monarchy in their present context. In particular, the “mace between his legs” appears to be a metaphorical rather than a literal staff, representing the sexual organ of Judah, and promising the continuation of the royal line. The blessing is therefore in part a fertility blessing reflecting the special covenant which the royal theology believed existed between God and David's progeny.

There is an additional similarity between the Priestly blessings and the Testament of Jacob that has hitherto not been noticed. The blessing Jacob gives to Ephraim and Manasseh contains one of the El Shaddai fertility blessings and is explicitly tied to the rest of the El Shaddai tradition.²⁸ Hence, it is possible to speculate that the author of this tradition may have had a special affection for the northern Joseph tribes. The Testament of Jacob bears a similar bias. The blessing accorded to Joseph which contains the El Shaddai reference is by far the longest and most positive of all the blessings in the Testament, suggesting Joseph's superiority over his brothers as a *nazir*.

In contrast, Judah's blessing contains evidence of the author's reluctance to give full support to that tribe. The royal scepter will remain in Judah's hands, but the verse ends with what appears to be a qualification: *ad-ki-yavo shiloh*. This phrase, the classic sticky wicket of Genesis criticism,²⁹ can best be interpreted without mutilating the

²⁸ Gen. 48:3; “El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the country of Canaan” refers to Gen. 35 which is, in turn, cast in the same language as Gen. 17. Hence, the author of Gen. 48, even if he wrote after the other patriarchal El Shaddai traditions were written down, reveals his debt to them.

²⁹ For a discussion of some of the interpretations and a possible solution, see Speiser, *Genesis*, pp. 365–66, n. 10.

El Shaddai may have strong connections to Elohist traditions... which fits into the Joseph priority of the BPlates...

Masoretic text as “until it (the mace) comes to Shiloh.” I therefore understand the text to mean that Judah will remain the dominant tribe controlling the monarchy until the “staff” or “mace” of monarchy is transferred to the cultic site of Shiloh in the province of Ephraim. If this interpretation is correct, then we may conclude that the compiler of the Testament of Jacob was an Ephraimite who supported the principle of monarchy but preferred a king from his own tribe. He probably wrote before the secession of the northern tribes following the death of Solomon, for by then Ephraim did indeed acquire its own king. Or, alternatively, the key phrase analyzed above may have been composed as a prophecy *ex eventu* shortly after the secession of the north.

The Priestly El Shaddai blessings elsewhere in Genesis seem to follow in the same tradition: we find a bias for Ephraim and an intimate connection with the idea of monarchy. While we cannot reach a conclusion as to when these blessings were written down in their present form, the evidence does point to their close affinity with the Testament of Jacob, and we might thus reasonably suppose that the tradition understanding El Shaddai as a fertility god—a god with breasts—began in the early monarchy in a circle of Ephraimite authors.

It is interesting that the author or authors of the fertility blessings in Genesis should restrict the use of the name El Shaddai to the stories of the patriarchs. The author of Exodus 6 insists that God was known to the patriarchs as El Shaddai but shall henceforth be known as Yahweh, and he is also careful to use the name Elohim in the prepatriarchal stories he writes, some of which contain identical fertility blessings (Gen. 1 and 9). It may well be that this author possessed an authentic tradition according to which the patriarchs worshipped a god named El Shaddai, whom he wishes to associate with Yahweh. But more importantly, his use of a special divine name in conjunction with fertility blessings for the patriarchs is a result of his view of the patriarchal legends, a view seemingly shared by the other literary schools. The repeated emphasis in Genesis on the miraculous birth of sons and the unnatural preference of the younger son (Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph and Benjamin over their brothers, and Ephraim over Manasseh) suggest the necessity of God’s intervention in the process of reproduction to guarantee the future of the Israelite nation. Nowhere else in the Bible is fertility such a persistent focus of concern; nowhere is it so central to the theological and historical message of the text. The purpose of the Genesis stories, for P as well as perhaps for the other authors, is to demonstrate that the covenant between God and his people is the

consequence of the deity's active intervention in the family affairs of the patriarchs. Given his well-known interest in genealogies, it makes sense that the Priestly author might use a special divine fertility name in the patriarchal stories.³⁰

This concern with fertility illuminates the association in Genesis 49 between the "God of your father" and El Shaddai. The cult of the god of the father, which Alt has shown to have been central to the patriarchal religion, was intrinsically preoccupied with the biological future of the clan. Whether or not the patriarchs actually worshiped El Shaddai as a fertility god, it is no surprise that a later author would see the connection between the cult of the god of the father and the divine name he associated with fertility.

It is additionally no surprise that when the Priestly author introduces God by the name **El Shaddai in Genesis 17**, Abraham is promised many progeny (symbolized by his name change) and is commanded to circumcise his sons. This passage is striking evidence of the connection between fertility and the rite of circumcision, which may be understood as a symbolic sacrifice in gratitude for God's blessing of fertility.³¹ For P, circumcision is both an act of thanksgiving for sons in each generation and also a remembrance of God's primal act of fertility intervention in the days of the patriarchs. According to this view, circumcision is both a personal gesture and a sign of a national covenant.

The conception of the Hebrew God as a fertility god in general and as represented by breasts in specific has support in both biblical and extrabiblical sources. God's role as a partner in fertility is attested in virtually all the patriarchal stories, as well as in stories of the births of Samson and Samuel.³² God is portrayed as giving birth in Deut. 32:18 and in Isa. 49:15 and 66:7-9.³³ Deutero-Isaiah says that the Israelites will be forced to "suck milk from the nations and nurse

³⁰ On the Priestly theology, see Walter Brueggemann, "The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84 (1972): 397-413, and Koch, pp. 316-32.

³¹ It may be possible to interpret another of the circumcision stories (Exod. 4:24-26) in this light. Moses' sin may have consisted in not offering the proper sacrifice (his son's foreskin) in gratitude for his wife's fertility. It may well be that the enigmatic *hatan damim* (bridegroom of blood) should rather be read as *hoten damim* (father-in-law of blood), suggesting that the deity is, quite literally, the "godfather" in the birth of (male?) children.

³² It might be argued that the law of the *sotah* in Num. 5 is also evidence of God's role in reproduction. The text seems to suggest that if the woman has committed adultery, the "water of bitterness" which she drinks will induce a miscarriage. Here, God seems to abort pregnancy instead of promote it.

³³ P. Tribble has collected a variety of sources attesting to female imagery applied to God in the Bible. See "God, Nature of, in the OT," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, suppl. vol. (Nashville, Tenn., 1976), pp. 368-69.

from the breast of kings" (60:16), implying that this experience will teach Israel to return to the "breast" of the true God. Similarly, Hosea curses the Israelites: "What shall you give them, Yahweh? Give them a womb which miscarries and dried-up breasts" (9:14). By implication, when God favors Israel, he will give them the blessing contrary to this curse, namely, the "blessing of breasts and womb." It is just possible that Hosea, a prophet from Ephraim, might have derived his fertility images from the El Shaddai tradition of earlier Ephraimite writers.

There is remarkable evidence that these fertility traditions may have derived from Canaanite sources. As Raphael Patai has admirably demonstrated in *The Hebrew Goddess*,³⁴ the worship of the Canaanite fertility goddess Asherah was widespread and persistent from the period of the Judges to the seventh century, when it was finally stamped out by the Deuteronomic reforms. Unlike Baal, who aroused the wrath of the orthodox Yahwists quite early in the period of the divided monarchy, Asherah was a much more legitimate part of popular Israelite worship and was even represented by a statue in the Jerusalem temple. When Elijah persecuted the prophets of Baal, he did not take similar action against the prophets of Asherah mentioned in the text. The archeological evidence from Tel Beit Mirsim (the biblical Devir) suggests that the worship of Anat during the Canaanite period was replaced by the worship of Asherah figurines during the subsequent Israelite period.³⁵ A seventh-century Hebrew incantation text found in Arslan Tash invokes the help of Asherah in childbirth, which some believe may throw light on Leah's naming of Asher (Gen. 30:13).³⁶ Finally, and most significantly for our purposes, the inscriptions found at Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the Sinai record blessings to "YHWH . . . and to his Asherah."³⁷ Later monotheism notwithstanding, this ninth- or eighth-century text seems to suggest that the Hebrew God had a Canaanite consort.

As is well known, Asherah was typically depicted as a goddess with prominent breasts, which represent her powers of fertility. She is referred to together with Anat as "the wet nurses of the gods" (*mshnqt ilm*).³⁸ The Ugaritic record contains numerous references to

³⁴ Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (New York, 1967), pp. 29–52.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60; W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine and the Bible* (New York, 1932), p. 110.

³⁶ Patai, p. 35, and William Reed, *The Asherah in the Old Testament* (Fort Worth, Tex., 1949), pp. 80–81, 87.

³⁷ Zeev Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud. A Religious Centre from the Time of the Judaean Monarchy on the Border of Sinai* (Israel Museum, Jerusalem, spring 1978, catalog no. 175). Meshel convincingly dates the texts to the period after Jehoshaphat.

³⁸ Cyrus Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature* (Rome, 1949), p. 75. Text 128:¶25–28.

A priestly authorial edit, of mixing of the gods of ancient Israel during or after the exile. This is fundamental to his argument and unraveling the complexities of the text.

“the nipples of Asherah’s breasts” and “the divine breasts, the breasts of Asherah and Raḥam.”³⁹ The latter reference looks suspiciously like the biblical “blessings of breasts and womb,” and indeed, as Cross notes, Genesis 49 seems to betray knowledge of the epithet of El’s consort *Rahmay*, as well as of other Canaanite mythological characters such as the *tehom*.⁴⁰ In addition, the “Astarte of the plain” (*trrt šhd*) may have been understood by the Israelites as “Astarte of the breast,” although such a reading would have been laughed out of court by a native speaker of Ugaritic for whom breast was *td* rather than *šhd*. Hence, there is abundant evidence that the fertility tradition of El Shaddai may have originated with the Israelite interest in the figure of Asherah, the fertility goddess represented by breasts.

The Priestly school represents a significant stage in the development of Israelite monotheism. As the text of Exodus 6 demonstrates, the Priestly author was concerned to assimilate all of the patriarchal gods, including the Canaanite El, to Yahweh. It would make sense that he would have wanted to give Yahweh the fertility functions of El’s consort, Asherah, who was so venerated by the Israelites. Hence, it is possible that, just as El was assimilated to Yahweh, so Asherah was adopted into Priestly Yahwism by a surreptitious sex change: the Canaanite “wet nurse of the gods” was reincarnated as El Shaddai, the God with breasts. Such a view of Yahweh as both male and female would symbolize neatly the miraculous fertility relationship between the deity and the patriarchs. In fact, this “androgynous monotheism” can already be discerned in the first chapter of Genesis where we learn that “God created Adam in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.” If the first man was androgynous—as the Jewish midrash thought⁴¹—so must be the God who created “him.”

The Canaanite background to the fertility tradition of El Shaddai may help us to understand why the fertility interpretation was suppressed and replaced by the “almighty God” of the sixth century.

We know that the seventh century witnessed a radical attack on all vestiges of Canaanite religion. The fertility cult, which had evidently found a place in Israelite religion, was mercilessly stamped out by Josiah, especially in his slaughter of the ritual prostitutes and the destruction of the Asherahs. The psychological associations between El Shaddai and Asherah must have become embarrassing and even

³⁹ The first is a refrain in Text 52 (Gordon, pp. 59–62). The second (52:28) is debatable. Gordon translates “fields,” but Vawter (“Canaanite Background of Genesis 49”) translates “breasts.” Raḥam probably stands for Anat (Gordon, p. 57).

⁴⁰ Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, pp. 55–56, n. 44.

⁴¹ *Genesis Rabba* 8.1. See also Rashi and Ibn Ezra on Gen. 1:27.

dangerous. Yet, the old divine name could not be utterly suppressed. Instead, it was given a new meaning, perhaps based on the old Psalm 68. This new meaning, in which Shaddai came to represent Yahweh variously as remote, mysterious, and destructive, was not entirely arbitrary. It is possible that it was adopted precisely because it so thoroughly contradicted the fertility interpretation.

It is even possible, although the evidence remains sketchy, that the attack on the fertility traditions which one school associated with El Shaddai may have reflected hostility to the role of women in cultic matters. A number of sixth-century texts refer in unflattering terms to women as the purveyors of alien worship. Jeremiah 44 seems to blame primarily women for the worship of the "Queen of heaven," an epithet of Astarte or Anat. In 2 Kings 23:7 there is a description of how Josiah destroyed the house in the Temple "where the women wove clothes for Asherah." It would not be surprising if women were particularly interested in fertility rites and if they were therefore one of the targets of the Deuteronomic reforms. If women were blamed for these rituals, we can better understand Ezra's uncompromising attack in the fifth century on marrying foreign women, a Deuteronomic ban unknown earlier in the First Temple period.

The transformation of the "god of breasts" into the "almighty god of war" may have received an additional impetus from the Canaanite sources themselves. The chief enemy of the Yahwists was Baal, and the Yahwists must have been aware of Baal's sister and consort, the goddess Anat, although the Bible scarcely mentions her. Anat shared many of Asherah's fertility characteristics, notably the prominence of breasts in the iconography. Indeed, the Ugaritic literature, as well as other Near Eastern sources, often confuse the two. But Anat was a much more complex goddess than the relatively benign Asherah. Not only was she a goddess of fertility, but she was also a goddess of war and destruction. The epic poems about her are replete with unspeakable and bloody deeds which she commits in defeating Mot, the enemy of Baal. Anat was therefore a thoroughly ambiguous figure: at once the giver of life and purveyor of death, a mediator between fertility and mortality. One of the poems dedicated to her begins with a totally enigmatic introduction which seems to suggest this ambiguity: "He arose, took portions and gave him to eat / He cut up a breast before him / With a suckling sword, a nipple of a fatling."⁴² Here the laceration and eating of the breast and the peculiar image of the "suckling sword" seem to symbolize the combination of fertility and

⁴² This is the translation suggested by U. Cassuto in *The Goddess Anath*, English ed. (Jerusalem, 1971), pp. 84–85, 108.

destruction in Anat. Is it possible that in suppressing the fertility cult, the Yahwists of the seventh century, confusing Anat with Asherah, exploited the destructive side of her personality as a source for their interpretation of Shaddai? The inversion of the meaning attributed to Shaddai would therefore have a historical as well as psychological rationale through the mediation of the paradoxical figure of Anat.

The transformation of El Shaddai from a fertility god with feminine characteristics to a seemingly male god of war makes great theological and even psychological sense, for what better way to suppress one interpretation of a god than by substituting its opposite? But it is startling that one of the two traditions of El Shaddai should have remained forgotten to the present day; only recently have we become aware of the feminine characteristics which the Israelites sometimes allowed their God to possess. It is well known that postbiblical monotheism contains numerous fertility notions connected to the image of an androgynous God. The Christian Gnostics in the second century frequently conceived of God as a composite of male and female, and even the orthodox Clement of Alexandria wrote that "to those infants who seek the Word, the Father's loving breasts supply milk."⁴³ In the Middle Ages, Jewish mysticism portrayed the emanations of God (*sefirot*) as a dynamic interaction between male and female principles.⁴⁴ None of these traditions derives explicitly from the suppressed biblical God with breasts. Yet, the possibility that God reflects the whole human condition—and not just its masculine aspect—was already evident to some biblical authors. From its very beginnings to the present day, monotheism has persistently, if not always successfully, resisted a purely masculine interpretation.

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⁴³ Clement of Alexandria *Paidagogos* 1.6, in Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York, 1979), p. 67. On the androgynous themes in orthodox and gnostic Christianity, see Pagels, pp. 48–69, → W. A. Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *History of Religions* 13 (1974): 165–208.

⁴⁴ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1961), p. 229, and idem, *Elements of the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, Hebrew ed. (Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 259–307.