SHADDAY AS A GODDESS EPITHET

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The name or epithet Shadday (translated as "the Almighty") derives its significance from the Priestly tradition (Exod. vi 3), which identified El Shadday (translated as "God Almighty") as the deity worshipped by the pre-Mosaic patriarchal people, who did not yet know Yahweh (or his name). However, the "etymology and primary meaning of the name [having] long since been forgotten" by the time of the LXX,¹ the identity of the deity it originally represented before being identified with El/Yahweh has also remained obscure.

Third in frequency among the divine names (after Yahweh and Elohim), Shadday occurs 48 times in the Hebrew Bible, mainly in early poetic and late "archaizing" texts. Studies of the name deal with dating, provenance, simple versus compound form, theophoric names, paronomasia, extra-biblical occurrences and etymology.² The many unresolved questions suggest that the identity of the deity will have to

² The simple form šadday occurs in Num. xxiv 4, 16; Ruth i 20, 21; Job v 17-xl 2 (31 times); Ps. lxxviii 14, xci 1; Isa. xiii 6; Ezek. i 24; Joel i 15. The compound form 'el šadday occurs in Gen. xvi 1, xxviii 3, xxxv 11, xliii 14, xlvi 3; Exod. vi 3; Ezek. x 5. The form in Gen. xlix 25 is a matter of debate. The theophoric names are: Ammishadday, Surishadday, Shedeur (Num. i); Sarasaday (Judith viii 1) may be a variant of Surishadday (D. Lauderville, "Zurishaddai", in D.N. Freedman [ed.], Anchor Bible Dictionary [New York, 1992], 6, p. 1176). The two examples of paronomasia are: Shadday/sādāyim ("breasts"), Gen. xlix 25, and šēd miššaddây ("destruction from Shadday"), Isa. xiii 6 and Joel i 5 (the erroneous basis of the translations παντοκράτωρ, omnipotens and "Almighty"), F. Brown, S.R. Driver, C.A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament [Oxford, 1907/1977]). Extra-biblical occurrences are in Egypt (Canaanite name), Thanudic, Deir ‘Alla and Palmyra; cf. L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner et al., Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament IV (Leiden, 1990). The name is generally given a premonarchic or pre-Mosaic date and often a non-Judean provenance. Also see F.M. Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Legend (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), pp. 52-5; M. Weippert, "Saddaj", in E. Jenni and C. Westermann (ed.), THAT 2 (Munich and Zürich, 1976), cols 873-81; H. Niehr and G. Steins, "saddaj", TWAT 7 (Stuttgart, etc., 1993), cols 1078-1104.

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be determined “on the basis of evidence other than that of the biblical formula itself” (Cross [n. 2], p. 50).

Contemporary scholarship generally derives the name from ṭād, a Proto-Semitic word meaning “mountain”, a metaphorical extension of the “primitive meaning . . . [which] is obviously ‘breast’” (Cross [n. 2], p. 55) (Hebrew שָׁדַי). Shadday is thus usually understood to mean “the one of the mountain”, an interpretation supported by the frequent identification of Semitic deities, including both Yahweh and El, with a mountain or as being “of the mountain”. Also, there is reference to “the thunder of the Almighty (ṣadday)” (Ezek. i 24), thunder typically being related to mountain gods. But not all scholars find this interpretation compelling, e.g. “a satisfactory explanation of this term [ṣadday] (significantly enough, Exod vi 3 does not call it a name) is yet to be proposed”.

If, however, in contrast to “mountain”, the etymology “breast” is privileged, then the hypothesis that Shadday was originally the name or epithet of a goddess (“the one of the breast”), before becoming a biblical epithet of El/Yahweh, virtually imposes itself. The first aim of this study is to demonstrate the plausibility of the hypothesis that Shadday is a goddess epithet. Then, since contemporary discussion of the question of goddess worship among the early Israelites focuses on the West Semitic goddess Asherah, the second aim is to explore the likelihood that Shadday is an epithet of Asherah. And last, the third aim is to examine the identification of Shadday as an El epithet.

I. Shadday as a Goddess Epithet

In the ancient Near East, divine and earthly maternity were not strictly parallel. A goddess’s nursing was not simply a maternal, but a divine act, imparting divinity to gods and divine authority and protection to kings. Among ancient Near Eastern goddesses who nursed gods, kings or princes are Ninhursag, Ishtar, Isis, Anat and Asherah.

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