

Exodus 6:3; Genesis 17:1-5, Ruth 1:20-21

There are a couple of instances where the plural form of “shad” sounds similar to “Shaddai.” And some scholars back in the day went “aha! Maybe El Shaddai is trying to highlight God’s nurturing, motherly side.” Now, there are many places throughout scripture where God describes himself in motherly terms (check notes if you’re curious).¹ But in most of those cases,² the name El Shaddai doesn’t show up in the text.

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1. First, **Shaddai** = “**Almighty**”

- o Early Greek translations of the Old Testament that we call the Septuagint sometimes translated El Shaddai with the word pantokrator – panto meaning “all”, kratos meaning “strength” or “power”. That’s the main reason our English texts translate this word as “God Almighty”. But here’s the problem: the Greek translators were pretty inconsistent with how they translated this word, and whenever they get the chance, they leave it untranslated, just as “Theos” (“God”). This seems to indicate that by the time Greek speakers are translating the Hebrew scriptures, they don’t actually know what the word means. Earliest Latin translations follow the Septuagint, using the word “omnipotens” (roughly the same meaning). Modern Bible translators will typically use “Almighty” to reflect this tradition or render the word “Shaddai.”

3. Third, **Shaddai** = “Wilds/Mountains”

- There’s an ancient language called Akkadain that was spoken in the ancient Near East, and it has this word: “shadu” that means mountains. And it comes to be associated with the wild lands. It’s an old language, and an old word. And if I had to pick a theory, this is probably the one I’d lean toward.

4. Bonus if you read the notes: some ancient sources in the ancient near east use the word “sheyd” to refer to minor, unnamed “helping spirits.” Some scholars have proposed a connection, especially because the word shows up in a tablet called the Deit ‘Alla, an ancient Canaanite text that also mentions Balaam (who refers to God as Shaddai in Numbers 24). There are a lot of problems with this theory, and it doesn’t help us make sense of Shaddai as an all-powerful being in the Biblical text.

But we don’t know what the word means. We’ve been trapped in something called the etymological fallacy. This is the idea that in order to understand a word, we need to know where it comes from historically. Often, when we’re trying to understand a word, how it’s used is more important than where it comes from.

II. God Who Binds: The God of Our Ancestors

The name “Shaddai” shows up 48 times in the Hebrew Bible – not a lot compared to the thousands of times that Yahweh or Elohim are used.

Book	# of “Shaddai” Sightings
Genesis	6
Exodus	1
Numbers	2
Ruth	2
Job	31
Psalms	2
Isaiah	1
Ezekiel	2
Joel	1

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What's going on with the book of Job?

The Book starts:

¹ *In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job.* — Job 1:1a

Uz is an ancient nation in Northwest Arabia, and the story of Job is usually understood to have taken place long before Israel became a thing. In the way-way back time.

So when they talk about God, they often refer to Him as Shaddai.

Scholar Robert Alter puts it like this:

“Scholars have been unable to determine the origins or precise meaning of [Shaddai]....What is clear...is that the biblical writers considered it an archaic name of God.”³

If you are an Ancient Israelite person reading Job, it would sort of feel like reading Shakespeare. The name El Shaddai is sort of like putting “ye olde” in front of God’s name.

The God we serve is the God of Ancient people. The God of our spiritual ancestors. The name El Shaddai binds us to a rich history and a great spiritual family. And it reminds us that God has been active in the dark places of history.

El Shaddai, The God of Our Ancestors

a. ...is active in the dark places

We believe in a God who is alive, and has been active throughout history, and there are a few stories we can point to. But probably so many more that we will never know. Job lives in Uz, a nation we know nothing about... but God met him there somehow. How many more people like Job are out there? How many times has El Shaddai shown up to people and places lost in the sands of time?

We don’t know, we can’t know, but we can trust that the God who reveals himself in Jesus. The God who seeks and saves the lost, is far more active than we could ever know.

b. ...connects us to something far bigger than ourselves

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Remember the chorus of the song El Shaddai with all the weird words?

El shaddai, El Shaddai
El-elyon na Adonai
Age to age You're still the same
By the power of the name

“El-elyon” means God most high – another name that often shows up when God is interacting with people in the super old times.

“Age to age you’re still the same.” This name reminds us that we are part of something far older and bigger than ourselves.

¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

— Romans 4:16-17

The family of God is ancient, and we are not. People are going to forget about us after we die. Depressing? Maybe a little. But true. Become part of something that will outlast you.

c. ...draws us into the scriptures

El Shaddai is the God of our ancestors, and their lives matter. The Old Testament helps us learn about this ancient family, their very human struggles and fears. The highs and lows, and what was important to them.

d. ...redefines our lineage

But lineage can have a dark side. Think of family feuds that span generations. Think of genocides, where lineage becomes motivation to erase whole groups of people. So many horrific acts of violence in human history have been built on stories where one lineage is placed over another.

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But as Christians, we are more than just the blood in our veins or the soil we stand on. Paul calls Abraham the “father of us all.” Why? Because our lineage isn’t defined by blood and soil. It’s defined by our trust and allegiance to the one true God. The same kind of faith that Abraham demonstrated.

The lineage that matters for us is the spiritual lineage that Jesus brings us into. The book of Hebrews gives us this beautiful overview of our spiritual heritage in chapter 11, and concludes with this statement:

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

— Hebrews 12:1-2a

III. The God Who Gathers: New Names

The very first place we see the name El Shaddai is Genesis 17, where we read:

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty (El Shaddai); walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

³ Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴ “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. — Genesis 17:1-5

Changing names. What’s up with that? If we read on, God gives Abraham’s wife Sarai a new name. And in Genesis 35, God reveals himself to Jacob, Abraham’s grandson, and give him the new name Israel.

Naming Means Family

In the ancient world, naming things is a big deal. First, naming establishes a relationship.

In the garden of Eden, Adam names the animals to establish his relationship with them and responsibility to care for them. And for us...as well as for most cultures in all of history, naming is something that a parent does.⁴

So, when God reveals himself as El Shaddai and renames Abram, Sarai, and Jacob, it's as though he's adopting them as his kids – bringing them into his world-changing family. The only other time in the Hebrew scriptures where God personally names somebody is when he creates the first man, Adam.⁵

Naming Means Destiny

Names also carry a lot of meaning in the ancient world. Names were meant to speak to a person's essential nature, and in some cases, their destiny. They were often tied to stories about their birth.

For example, the Hebrew prophet Hosea gives names to his children to tell the future of an ancient Israelite kingdom. In this story, El Shaddai, the God we come to know as Yahweh, is changing destinies. He's intervening to alter the course of people's lives for the better, and to eventually bring humanity back from the brink.

When El Shaddai names you, he's not just giving you a cool thing to put on a birth certificate. He's rewriting your story.

⁴⁰ Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus.⁴¹ The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ).⁴² And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter). — John 1:40-42

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Given a new name. Brought into the family. Earlier in the same gospel, John writes:

¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.
— John 1:11-13

The family of Abraham, Sarah, and Israel. The same family as Job, Enoch, and Noah. Of Elijah, Esther, and Daniel. The same family as Peter, Paul, Junia, Perpetua, Augustine, Julian of Norwich. Of William Tyndale and Therese of Lisieux and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The same family of the people around you.

The Outsider Brought to the Table

²⁰ “Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because [Shaddai] has made my life very bitter. ²¹ I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; [Shaddai] has brought misfortune upon me.” — Ruth 1:20-21

Shaddai...the God who gives a new name. Abram and Jacob meet with Shaddai, are blessed, and are given new names. But Naomi is subverting that story – for Naomi, her new life of grief and poverty feel like a curse.

Then there’s Naomi’s Ruth, a Moabite – a complete outsider. And a young widow at that. She’s loyal, she’s eager to join the people of Israel, the family of God.

Then she catches the eye of Boaz, a prominent man in the town. Boaz marries Ruth and brings Naomi under his care. The outsider in the fields, picking up scraps, brought into the house. Sitting at the table.

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And Ruth gets pregnant with a son. And Naomi has gone from this state of utter hopelessness, changing her name, to naming a new child.

¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. ¹⁷ The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!” And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. — Ruth 4:16-17

David...the very line of Jesus. In fact, Ruth gets named in Jesus’ lineage at the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew. The outsider brought in.

All of us have been beggars, picking up the scraps. Living in spiritual poverty. But the door to the family home is open, and the table is set. We are all invited in. Not just to visit, but to belong.

the name



Personal Reflection

1. What is your family history? Have you ever looked into your ancestry? If so, what did you find out?
2. Think of a time where you felt like you were a part of something bigger than yourself. Where were you when you experienced that feeling? What was it like?

Digging In

1. Read **Genesis 17:1-8**. What sticks out to you? Why do you think Abraham is so significant in the Biblical story?
2. Read **Hebrews 11**. Are there any people in this chapter that you identify with? What does it mean for you to be part of the same spiritual family as these figures?
3. Read **John 1:11-13**. What does it mean to become a child of God? How does this identity affect how you treat other Christians? How does it affect how you view yourself?

Prayer

Pray for others in our spiritual family who are hurting, in our community, and our world. Pray for unity in the family of God, and that we would be people who reflect the heart of El Shaddai, who gathers the outsider and binds us together.

REFLECTION

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- ¹ Hos 11:3-4; 13:8; Deut 32:11-12, 18; Is 42:14; 49:15; 66:13; Ps. 131:2
² Psalm 91 uses bird imagery that could be motherly.
³ The Five Books of Moses, 53
⁴ There are also suzerain ruler connotations where newly installed kings in an empire would be given new governing names as a symbol of their authority. See Walton et. al. comment on Gen 17:5
⁵ In cases like Ishmael (Gen 16:11), Isaac (Gen 17:19), Is 8:3-4, Hos 1:6, 9, God tells the parents what to name the child. In 2 Sam 12:24, 25, Solomon's name is changed through a prophet. Only in Gen 2, 17, and 35 do we see God personally naming people without any mediator.