The Helpful God: A Reevaluation of the Etymology and Character of (ʾēl) šadday

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Abstract

Both the role of the deity (El) Shadday in the religions of ancient Israel and the etymology of the name šadday remain poorly understood. In this article, I will propose a new etymology for the name šadday and then leverage this etymology into a better understanding of (El) Shadday's character. I argue that šadday is a nomen agentis from the root sdy ‘to help’ and originated as an epithet of the deity El, which highlighted his benevolent qualities. A comparison of El in the Ugaritic epics and El Shadday in the Priestly Source (P) suggests that El Shadday was thought to help his worshippers by providing them with children. El Shadday thus represents one way in which the deity El survived in the religions of ancient Israel.

Keywords

El Shadday – Israelite Religions – P

Very little is known about the deity (El) Shadday and his role in the religions of ancient Israel. Even the etymology of his name remains opaque, although scholars have proposed at least seven different etymologies for it. In this paper, I will use comparative Semitic linguistics as a window onto the religious world of ancient Israel. I will begin by reviewing the biblical and extra-biblical attestations of Shadday as well as previous etymologies for this name. I will then propose a new etymology for šadday¹ and triangulate this etymology with re-

¹ A note on nomenclature: in this paper, “Shadday” refers to the deity (or deities) of this name, and šadday refers specifically to the Hebrew form of this name as preserved in the Masoretic Text.
igious data from the Ugaritic epics and the Priestly Source (P) in order to gain a better understanding of the deity El Shadday. According to my interpretation, šadday is a nomen agentis from the root sdy meaning ‘the helper’ or ‘the helpful’. It originated as an epithet of the deity El and served to highlight his benevolent qualities. In part, it emphasized his power over human fertility and his ability to grant children to his worshippers. El Shadday was thus associated with the daily routines of family life—what today would encompass issues of family planning—and represents one of the ways the deity El survived within the religions of ancient Israel.

I Review of the Evidence

The divine name or title šadday appears 48 times in the Hebrew Bible. In seven cases—all of them in P or in priestly texts—it appears in combination with ʾēl, which could be either a divine name or an appellative noun. The combined name ʾēl šadday thus means either ‘El Shadday’ or ‘the god Shadday’. In another fifteen cases, šadday occurs in poetic parallelism with ʾēl, which provides additional evidence for the combined divine name ʾēl šadday; and in the remaining twenty-six examples, šadday appears by itself. šadday also occurs in the personal names sūrīšaddāy ‘Shadday is my rock’ (Num 1:6; 2:12; 7:36, 41; 10:19),ʾammīšaddāy ‘Shadday is my kinsman’ (Num 1:12; 2:25; 7:66, 71; 10:25), and potentially šēdêʾūr (Num 1:5; 2:10; 7:30, 35; 10:18), which seems to be a mispointing of either šaddayʾūr ‘Shadday is light’ or šēdīʾūr ‘my protective spirit is light’. The transcription of this personal name as Σεδιουρ in the Septuagint supports the second interpretation.

The name Shadday also appears outside the Hebrew Bible, but the extent of its extra-biblical attestations has been exaggerated. Scholars have claimed to find Shadday in a Thamudic graffito, a Palmyrene dedicatory text, a Semitic personal name in Egyptian transcription, two Ugaritic god lists, and the Deir ‘Alla plaster texts. Most of these extra-biblical attestations are either problematic or ambiguous. In what follows, I review all of these suggestions, starting with the least plausible.

In 1950, A. van den Branden discovered the divine name ʾl sdy in the 6th-century BCE Thamudic B inscription JSTham 255 and attributed its appearance

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2 Gen 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; Exod 6:3. Outside of P, ʾēl šadday appears once in Ezek 10:5, a priestly text.
in this Ancient North Arabian text to a Jewish author. Modifying van den Branden’s suggestion, E. A. Knauf has argued that ūl šady is an Ancient North Arabian cognate of ūel šadday. Similarly, T. Römer has suggested that P referred to the god of the patriarchs as El Shadday in order to evoke contemporary Arabian religious practices and add an exotic flavor to his composition. Ultimately, van den Branden’s reading of JSTham 255 cannot bear the weight of these arguments. JSTham 255 should actually be read as ‘O Shamed, save us from the hands of the enemy!’(h s2md wqy-n yd s3n’); the name ūl šady only appears when the inscription is read backwards and the penultimate n is interpreted as an l. Furthermore, Thamudic s2 corresponds to Hebrew š and so Knauf must posit an irregular correspondence between Hebrew šadday and the alleged Thamudic šady.

A Palmyrene text found in the temple of Bel at Palmyra mentions šdy alongside the common Palmyrene deity bwlsstr (PAT 2749:6, 9). The meaning of šdy in this inscription is unclear. It could be the name Shadday with the definite article – (which would indicate that Shadday had a nominal origin) or the emphatic plural of the noun šd ‘protective spirit’ originally borrowed from Akkadian. Because the inscription is so short and šdy only appears once in the Palmyrene corpus, it is impossible to decide between the two options. Therefore, it is best to bracket this inscription when discussing the deity Shadday until more Palmyrene evidence is forthcoming.

Shadday may also appear as a theophoric element in a Semitic personal name written in Egyptian script from the 14th century BCE: sꜢ-d-j- (ˤ)-m-j-j. In his study of Semitic names in group writing, T. Schneider interprets this name as šadī-ʿammī ‘my (divine) kinsman is my mountain’, but W. F. Albright and

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4 A. van den Branden, Les inscriptions thamoudéennes (Bibliothèque du Muséon; Louvain, 1950), p. 12.
7 I would like to thank Ahmad Al-Jallad for his insight on this inscription and Ancient North Arabian inscriptions in general.
9 The Arabian deity šʿd(w) appears twice in the Palmyrene corpus (PAT 1700:3; 2239). The name of this deity is cognate with Akkadian šedu but was most likely loaned into Palmyrene from an Ancient North Arabian language. Hillers, Palmyrene Aramaic Texts, p. 416.
Knauf treat it as an early variant of Hebrew ‘amburger. Again, it is difficult to decide between the two options given the available information: both names are linguistically plausible interpretations of the Egyptian transcription. Thus, it is best to set this piece of evidence aside until more data are forthcoming.

Shadday appears in one or possibly two texts from Ugarit: KTU 1.108 and KTU 1.179. The first text describes a divine drinking ritual and mentions several deities including the enigmatic il šdyṣdmlk in line 12. The appearance of Shadday in KTU 1.108 depends in part on how one divides the final eight letters of the line, which are not separated by a word divider, and more specifically how one treats the y. D. Pardee parses this sequence of letters as il šdyṣdmlk “the god Shaddayuu, the hunter (of) Milku”. He does so because grouping the y with ṣd would create a verb, and the preserved portions of the text do not contain any unambiguous verbal forms. Although Pardee’s reading is plausible and will be adopted here, his vocalization of šdy is problematic. As I will demonstrate in section III, Hebrew šadday cannot reflect the underlying form *šaddayyu and so a more plausible vocalization of Ugaritic šdy would be šaddayu. Furthermore, Pardee’s translation of il šdy as ‘the god Shaddayyyu’ instead of ‘El Shaddayuu’ requires revision in light of the evidence presented in section IV. In any case, the spelling of Shadday as šdy in Ugaritic shows that the underlying form of šadday began with an etymological s and not an etymological ţ since Ugaritic orthography distinguished between these two consonants.

Shadday may also appear at Ugarit in KTU 1.179, which contains a list of astral deities. Line 11 of the inscription mentions the bipartite deity ydd w šd ‘beloved and šd’. As in the Palmyrene and Egyptian examples, the meaning of šd in this text is ambiguous. It could be either a borrowing of Akkadian šēdu or a Ugaritic form of šaddayu that underwent contraction of the final triphthong, and without more information, it is difficult to decide between the two options.

11 It is unclear whether šd mlk was an epithet of il šdy or an independent deity. The lack of word dividers in the consonantal sequence šdyṣdmlk may support the first option.
14 J. Tropper, Ugaritische Grammatik, p. 198.
The Deir ‘Alla plaster text furnishes another reference to Shadday outside the Hebrew Bible. In lines 5 and 6 of combination 1, the plural noun šdyn appears in parallel to ḫln ‘gods’ in the phrase “the gods gathered together // the Shaddayin stood in assembly” ([ ctxt ]n ḫḥd w. wnšbw. šdyn. mw’d). In her seminal translation and interpretation of the Deir ‘Alla texts, J. A. Hackett argues that šdyn refers to a group of deities associated with the god Shadday, for whom they are named. In this regard, they resemble the Kôtharat-goddesses ( ktrt; KTU 1.118:12), Baal-gods ( bˤlm; KTU 1.118:5-10), and Reshep-gods ( ršpm; KTU 1.91:11) from Ugarit and point to the existence of the deity Shadday at Deir ‘Alla even though this deity never appears in the Deir ‘Alla text. The poetic parallelism between šdyn and ḫln in this text also constitutes indirect evidence for the combination of El and Shadday at Deir ‘Alla just like the parallelism between the singular forms ṣēl and šadday does in the biblical text.

At the very least, the divine name Shadday or its derivatives are attested in Biblical Hebrew, Ugaritic, and the language of the Deir ‘Alla plaster text. This distribution suggests that Shadday was a Northwest Semitic deity, which would also fit the ambiguous Palmyrene data. Unfortunately, the distribution of the evidence has not helped winnow the etymological possibilities for šadday. To date, seven different etymologies have been proposed for šadday, none of which has won universal acceptance. In the following sections, I will review and critique these etymologies and then propose my own.

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II Previous Etymologies

One of the most popular etymologies of šadday is to derive it from the noun šādê ‘field’ or its less common alloform šāday.¹⁹ At first glance, this etymology is particularly attractive because Athtart bears the epithet ʾṯrr šd ‘Ahtart of the field’ at Ugarit (KTU 1.48:16; 1.91:10-11; 1.148:18).²⁰ Under this interpretation, ʾēl šadday would mean ‘El of the field’. Despite the potential parallels, however, this etymology runs into several phonological problems. First, the noun šādê begins with Proto-Semitic š, while šadday begins with Proto-Semitic s. Because of the mismatch between sibilants, proponents of this etymology must either posit a systematic mispointing of the name šadday in the Masoretic text or suggest that šadday is a loanword from a language where š merged with s, such as Ugaritic. While not impossible, such suggestions complicate this derivation. Second, this etymology cannot explain the gemination in šadday. Some scholars claim that the gemination in šadday is secondary on the basis of the Septuagint transcriptions of šadday as Σαδαι in the personal names ṣûrîšaddāy and ʾammīšaddāy (Num 1:6, 12; 2:12, 25; 7:36, 41, 66; 10:19, 25), but according to J. Krašovec the Septuagint “originally transliterated Semitic consonants consistently using single consonants”.²¹ Thus, the Septuagint cannot be used uncritically as evidence for the absence of gemination in Hebrew.

Another popular etymology for šadday is to relate it to Akkadian šadû ‘mountain’ (Old Assyrian šadwum). W. F. Albright, for example, compared šadday with the rare Akkadian noun šaddāˀu (variant šaddûˀa) ‘mountain-dweller’ and argued that Hebrew speakers borrowed this noun during the early 2nd millennium BCE to refer to Yahweh.²² Albright’s student, F. M. Cross took a slightly different tack. He argued that šadday was cognate to Akkadian šadû ‘mountain’ and Ugaritic ʿtd ‘mountain’ as well as the common Semitic word

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²⁰ For an overview of this goddess and her role at Ugarit see A. M. Wilson-Wright, Athtart: The Transmission and Transformation of a Goddess in the Late Bronze Age, (FAT II 90; Tübingen, 2016), pp. 108-115.

²¹ J. Krašovec, The Transformation of Biblical Proper Names, (New York, 2010), p. 101. I would like to thank Benjamin P. Kantor for this reference and for his insight into the transcription of proper names in the Septuagint.

for ‘breast’ *taday. Both variants of this etymology fall short. It is unclear whether Hebrew was a distinct Semitic language during the early 2nd millennium let alone whether Hebrew speakers were in contact with Akkadian during this time period. Furthermore, Cross’s etymology relies on the assumption that Akkadian šadû comes from the root tdw. The only evidence for this assumption, however, is the putative Ugaritic cognate ṭd ‘mountain,’ which has been exposed as a ghost word and exorcised from the most recent Ugaritic dictionary. The most likely cognates of Akkadian šadû are Hebrew šādê ‘field’ and Ugaritic ṣd ‘field,’ and as noted above, šādê begins with a different sibilant in Hebrew than šadday.

P. Haupt and D. Biale derive šadday from the isolated Proto-West Semitic noun *taday ‘breast’ and translate šadday as ‘the god with breasts.’ In support of this etymology, they cite Gen 49:25, where Jacob invokes šēl šadday to confer “blessings of breasts and womb” (birkōt šādayim wā-rāḥam) upon Joseph along with other natural bounties: “by El, your father, that he may help you and El Shadday that he may bless you with blessing of heaven above,

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26 The Samaritan Pentateuch, Septuagint, and Peshitta read ḫēl where the Masoretic text reads ḫēt. Despite the overwhelming evidence in favor of ḫēl, M. Köckert, Vätergott und Väterverheissungen: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Albrecht Alt und seinen Erben (Göttingen, 1988), p. 79 n. 154, and R. de Hoop, Genesis 49 in Its Literary and Historical Context, (Leiden, 1999), pp. 206-207, among others, have argued that ḫēt is the preferred reading since it supposedly provides a semantic parallel for the preposition min- that introduces ḫēl ḥābıkā in the previous hemistich. This argument is linguistically and text critically problematic. By itself, the preposition ḫēt means ‘with’ or ‘together with,’ not ‘by’ or ‘from.’ Theoretically, we could translate mēʾēl ḥābıkā wa-yāzīrēkā wa-ʾēt šadday as ‘from El, your father, that he may help you, together with Shadday . . . ’, but the wāw-conjunctive that precedes ḫēt makes such a translation difficult. Furthermore, the text critical data do not support this line of argumentation. The Septuagint, Samaritan Pentateuch, and Peshitta (which was translated from a proto-Masoretic text) represent three independent
blessings of the deep lying beneath, blessings of breast and womb”. This etymology, however, cannot explain the gemination in šadday and therefore remains implausible.

T. Nöldeke, H. Vorländer, and B. Lang derive šadday from the Akkadian term šēdu ‘protective spirit’,²⁷ but they are divided on whether šadday is cognate with šēdu or simply borrowed from it.²⁸ Neither option is particularly persuasive. It is unlikely that šadday represents a borrowing of Akkadian šēdu since the latter word was borrowed into Hebrew as *šēd (šēdim in Deut 32:17; Ps 106:37).²⁹ Nor can šadday be cognate with Akkadian šēdu since the Akkadian term comes from a 11-ך root. Akkadian šēdu is cognate with Classical Arabic saʾd ‘luck’ and saʾida ‘to be or become prosperous, fortunate, happy’, Sabaic saʾḏ; ‘to grant a favor (deity as subject), beneficence’, Safaitic saʾḏ; ‘good fortune, aid’, and the Palymerene divine name šʾḏ(w). The native Hebrew reflex of this word would be *šaʾad not šadday.

text traditions. Köckert and de Hoop’s argument requires us to posit changes in three independent text traditions rather than a single change in some exemplars of the Masoretic text tradition.


²⁸ Nöldeke sees šadday as a cognate of Akkadian šēdu, while Vorländer favors borrowing. Lang does not explain how he conceptualizes the relationship between šadday and šēdu.

²⁹ P. V. Mankowski, Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew (HSS 47; Winona Lake, 2000), pp. 138-140, suggests that these verses originally referred to the Shadday-gods like lines 1:5-6 of the Deir ‘Alla plaster text, but were later repointed under the influence of the term šēd. The Septuagint renders šēdim as δαιμόνιον, which has prompted many scholars to translate šēdim as ‘demon’. Such a translation, however, does not fit the Akkadian and Greek evidence. By itself, the Akkadian source of šēdim never means ‘demon’ or ‘evil spirit’; it only assumes these meanings when modified by the adjective lemnu ‘evil’. And until the early Christian era, Greek δαιμόνιον could refer to benevolent or at least morally-neutral spirits (see, for example, Acts 17:18). Thus, Hebrew šēdim most likely refers to “protective spirits”. If Deuteronomy 32:17 did not originally refer to Shadday-gods, as Mankowski argues, then it criticized the Israelites for sacrificing to an inferior class of divine being: “they sacrificed to protective spirits, not G/god”. The rest of this verse would then polemicly cast these spirits as recent additions to the Israelite pantheon: “deities which they had not known // new ones recently arrived // whom your fathers had not feared.”
D. Redford argues that šadday derives from the Egyptian epithet and divine name šdj ‘the savior’, which comes from the Egyptian verb šdj ‘to save’.³⁰ This term was originally used as a divine epithet that could be applied to a variety of gods, but in the New Kingdom it came to refer to an independent deity. Although Redford did not elaborate on his suggestion, M. Görg and M. Neumann have subsequently advanced religious historical and iconographic arguments in favor of his proposal.³¹ Such supporting arguments cannot make up for the phonological problems with this etymology, however. In all of the other secure Egyptian loanwords into Hebrew, Egyptian d corresponds to š not d.³² Furthermore, šite, the Coptic reflex of šdj, suggests that šdj was originally pronounced śidVy.³³ Depending on the quality of the final vowel, the Hebrew outcome of such a form would be *šēṭV̂.

M. Noth argued that šadday means ‘the strong one’ on the basis of the Arabic adjective šadīd ‘strong’.³⁴ Such a derivation is phonologically unlikely, however. Arabic šadīd comes from the root *śdd, which would appear in Hebrew as *šdd, not šdd. As in the case of šādē, Noth must posit a systematic mispointing of the Masoretic text or suggest that šadday is a loanword from a language where s and š merged in order to account for this mismatch in sibilants. Moreover, this derivation cannot easily explain the final –y of šadday. In Hebrew, final –ay could be either the dual ending –ay or the alternative feminine ending of the same form, but neither morpheme suits the name of a male deity.

Finally, F. Schwally and E. Lipiński argue that šadday is related to the Aramaic verb šdy ‘to throw, to rain’ and means either ‘the thrower (of lightning)’ or ‘the rainmaker’.³⁵ Initially, this etymology seems promising. Syriac even contains a nomen agentis of šdy, which takes the form šaddāy and means ‘one who throws stones or seeds’. Upon closer inspection, however, this etymology appears less plausible. The Aramaic root šdy does not develop the meanings ‘to rain’ until

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late in the history of Aramaic and then only in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic. If šadday came from the root šdy, it would simply mean ‘the thrower’, an improbable name for a deity.

III A New Etymology

The previously proposed etymologies of šadday all suffer from serious linguistic problems including the inability to explain the gemination of the medial consonant and the reliance on roots containing the wrong sibilant. A more plausible etymology, I argue, is to treat šadday as a qattal noun from the root sdy attested in other West Semitic languages like Ethio-Semitic and Arabic. Such an etymology has one, easily overcome problem: the normal reflex of qattal nouns in Biblical Hebrew is qattāl—even for III-y roots (e.g., dawwāy ‘sick’) —since singly-closed final syllables undergo tonic lengthening in Biblical Hebrew. As I will demonstrate in the following paragraphs, alternate attempts to explain the morphology of šadday—such as deriving šadday from *šaddayyu—fall short, while comparison with the personal name šāray suggests that šadday does reflect a qattal pattern.

There are two possible ways to analyze *šaddayyu: as a qattal noun or as a nisbe form of šadd in –ayy. Because Biblical Hebrew does not preserve any qattal nouns, several scholars derive šadday from the putative nisbe form *šaddayyu. Yet none of the Semitic languages preserve unequivocal evidence for an ending of the form –ayy. Jewish Palestinian Aramaic and Akkadian provide the best evidence for this ending, but the data are either ambiguous or susceptible to other explanations. In Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, the nisbe

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37 Semitic divine names usually express something fundamental about the character of the deities that they represent. Some deities, like Shamash ‘sun’ and Hadad ‘lightning’, are named after the natural phenomenon they were thought to control; others, like Rakka-El ‘El’s charioteer’, refer to the social role or attributes of the deity. ‘Thrower’ tout court does not easily fit these categories.
ending regularly takes the form –ay, which becomes –āy in pause. The alternation of the two forms, however, suggests that the –ay ending was either an orthographic variant or the result of an otherwise obscure sound change *āC > aC / _#. In cuneiform orthography, –Cāy and –CayyV are written C-a-a, making it impossible to tell whether the nisbe ending was –āy or –āyy. Most Assyriologists, however, do not reconstruct –ayy as a nisbe ending for Akkadian due to the absence of this ending from the other Semitic languages. Overall, the ambiguity of the evidence suggests that the Semitic languages did not possess a nisbe ending in –ayy, which means that šadday cannot reflect the underlying form *šaddayyu.

Comparison of šadday with the personal name šāray, by contrast, suggests that šadday could come from a qattal pattern. The name šāray comes from the primary noun *şarr- ‘prince’ with the addition of the alternative feminine suffix –ay. In the Masoretic vocalization, r cannot be geminated and triggers compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel (*šarray > šāray), but gemination can still be seen in the Akkadian cognate šarratu ‘queen’. šāray thus assumes the form of a qattal noun from a III-y root, although it was originally composed of two separate morphemes. But, unlike other qattal nouns, šāray did not undergo tonic lengthening even though its final syllable was only singly closed. The reasons for this linguistic conservatism are unclear. Perhaps the name *šarray did not take case endings in Pre-Proto-Hebrew, which would have left the final syllable closed and blocked tonic lengthening in the

44 A. M. Butts, “The Etymology and Derivation of the Syriac Adverbial Ending *–ɔʼiθ*, *JNES* 69 (2010), pp. 81-85, comes to a similar conclusion when he reconstructs the Proto-Semitic nisbe endings as *–ɔy* and *–ỹy*.
45 This suffix is only productive in Arabic, but it is found vestigially in Hebrew, Syriac, and Ethiopic. Apart from šāray, the –ay feminine suffix appears in Hebrew as part of the word for ‘eleven’ ָאֱסַי ָאָשָּר < *qast-ay ָאָשָּר according to A. M. Wilson-Wright, “The Word for One in Proto-Semitic”, *JSS* (2014), p. 8. It may also appear on the noun gobay ‘locusts’ although John Huehnergard, p.c., interprets this word as an example of the qutall nominal pattern.
Masoretic vocalization. In any case, proper nouns are often more linguistically conservative than common ones, so it is not surprising that šāray does not appear to follow Masoretic sound rules. Because šadday itself is a proper noun, I argue that it too reflects the qattal pattern without tonic lengthening.46

Comparison with the personal name šāray suggests that šadday is an anomalous qattal noun from the root sdy. In Biblical Hebrew, the qattal pattern usually serves as the nomen agentis or denotes habitual action, so šadday most likely comes from a verbal root.47 Of all the Semitic verbal roots in sdy, Ethio-Semitic and Arabic sdy preserves the most plausible meaning for a divine name.48 In the Ethio-Semitic languages Ge‘ez and Tigrē, this root means ‘to help, encourage, sustain’;49 the semantics of the Arabic root are more complicated. In the G stem, it means ‘to stretch one's arm(s) or leg(s)’ or ‘to move randomly’, while, in the C stem and occasionally the D stem, it means ‘to help, confer a benefit’.50 The semantic connection between the meaning of sadā in the G stem and its meaning in the derived stems is opaque. Perhaps Arabic sadā comes from two different verbs that fell together.51 Or perhaps stretching the arms and legs was a way of signaling for help and the G meaning of the Arabic verb reflects this social convention. In any case, Arabic sadā is likely related to Ethio-Semitic sadaya since it shares both form and meaning with the Ethio-Semitic forms. As a qattal noun from this root, šadday means something like ‘the helper’ or ‘the helpful one’.

IV Implications for the Study of Israelite Religious Traditions

The new etymology that I have proposed provides insight into Shadday’s character: his worshippers considered him to be a helpful deity. But it cannot clarify the relationship between El and Shadday. In particular, it remains unclear whether Shadday originated as an epithet of El, meaning something

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46 The personal name ḥaggay may also reflect an anomalous qattal pattern.
47 J. Fox, Semitic Noun Patterns (HSS 52; Winona Lake, 2003), p. 256.
48 The other possibilities are Ugaritic šdy ‘to pour’, Aramaic šdy ‘to throw’, and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic šdy ‘to spin, twist thread’, all of which reflect original *sdy.
51 In this case, the G stem form of the verb could be cognate to Aramaic šdy ‘to throw’.
like ‘El the helper’ or ‘Helpful El’, or whether the two terms were combined at a later period into a compound divine name. Fortunately, religious and literary data can help solve this problem. A comparison of El Shadday in P with the deity El (ʾîl) in the Ugaritic epics suggests that El Shadday represents a survival of an earlier El tradition and that Shadday originated as an epithet of El highlighting his ability to grant children.

Many of the Ugaritic texts emphasize El’s benevolent character and his ability to grant children to childless individuals. In both the Kirta and Aqhat epics, El blesses his devotees and helps them acquire offspring. In the Aqhat epic, El blesses king Danel at the behest of Baal and promises him a son (KTU 1.17.1:34-48), while in the Kirta epic, El appears to Kirta in a dream and tells him how to find a new wife after his wife and children die (KTU 1.14.2:6-3:49). Later, he blesses Kirta in the divine council and states that his new wife will bear eight children: “He blesses [his servant]; El blesses Kirta [the noble, prosp]ers the Pleasant One, Lad of El: ‘the w[ife you have tak]en, Kirta, the wife you’ve taken to your palace, the girl you’ve brought to your court, seven children will she bear to you and an eighth she’ll add!’” (KTU 1.15:18-25).

In the literary conception of P, ʾēl šadday behaves much like El from the Ugaritic texts. Like his Ugaritic counterpart, he confers blessings on his worshippers and helps them acquire offspring. The promise to Abraham in Gen 17:1-22 provides the clearest example of this behavior, but the other references to El Shadday in P fit this pattern as well. In Gen 17, El Shadday appears to the elderly and childless Abraham and promises him that his wife Sarah will bear a son (Gen 17:16). Subsequent episodes emphasize El Shadday’s ability to provide abundant offspring as expressed in the verbal pair pry and ṛby. In Gen 28:3, for example, Isaac invokes El Shadday to bless Jacob, stating: “May El Shadday bless you and make you fruitful and numerous so that you become a company of nations.” Later, Jacob encounters El Shadday at Luz, where he fulfills this blessing: “Be fruitful and numerous. A nation and a company of nations will come from you and kings shall issue from your loins” (Gen 35:11).

52 It is even possible that ʾēl šadday meant ‘the god Shadday’. Compare, for example, the use of ʾlh at Elephantine in phrases like ‘the priests of Yahû, the god’ (khnyʾ zy yhw ʾlh; TAD A4 3:1).
54 N. Fredman, “The Divine Name E-l Shad-dai: He Who Created Families”, Dor le Dor 9 (1980), pp. 73-74, also notes this pattern but does not connect it to the Ugaritic epics.
55 Unlike the blessings of Ugaritic El, El Shadday’s blessings also include the promise of land.
56 In the P narrative, he shares this ability with ʾēlōhîm (Gen 1:28; 9:21), but only El Shadday provides individual children.
And, on his deathbed, Jacob tells Joseph about this encounter and reports that El Shadday said: “I am about to make you fruitful and numerous and make you into a company of nations” (Gen 48:4). Outside of this cycle of blessing promised, blessing fulfilled, and blessing recounted, Jacob invokes El Shadday to ensure the safe return of his sons Benjamin and Judah from Egypt: “may El Shadday grant you mercy before the man so that he sends your other brother and Benjamin” (Gen 43:14). This episode shows that El Shadday not only provided children but was thought to protect them as well.

Even the reference to El Shadday in Gen 49:25, which stands outside P, fits this pattern. In this verse, Jacob invokes El Shadday to confer “blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep, lying beneath, blessings of breasts and womb” (birkōt šāmayim mē-ʾāl birkōt tēhôm rōbeṣet tāḥat birkōt šādayim wārāḥam) upon Joseph. The “blessings of breast and womb” in this verse most likely refer to human fertility, which suggests that the author of this verse considered El Shadday to be an effective guarantor of human reproduction.

The parallels between the depiction of El in the Ugaritic epics and the representation of El Shadday in P and Genesis 49:25 suggest that the name El

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57 J. van Seters, “The Religion of the Patriarchs in Genesis”, Biblica 61 (1980), pp. 226-227, argues that the blessing of Joseph in Gen 49:22-26 is a late priestly adaptation of Deut 33:13-17. Yet the two poems are sufficiently different to rule out direct literary dependence. Other than the similar formulae “heaven // deep below” (šāmayim ... tēhôm rōbeṣet tāḥat Gen 49:25; šāmayim ... tēhôm rōbeṣet tāḥat Deut 33:33), “eternal mountains // everlasting hills” (harārē ṭad [emended from hōrā ṭad] ... gibʾōt ʾēlām Gen 49:26; harārē- qedem ... gibʾōt ʾēlām Deut 33:35), and “may these come upon the head of Joseph, upon the brow of the chosen one of his brother” (tābō (“tā la-rō (?)) sūṣēp ū-la-qodqōd nāzūr ʾēhāyw Gen 49:26; tābō (“tā la-rō (?)) sūṣēp ū-la-qodqōd nāzūr ʾēhāyw Deut 33:26), the two poems have little in common. More recently, Karin Schöpfelin, “Jakob segnet seinen Sohnen: Genesis 49,1-28 im Kontext von Josefs- und Vätergeschichte”, ZAW 115 (2003), pp. 501-523, has argued that the blessing of Joseph is an independent poem which dates before the fall of the Northern Kingdom.

Shadday is associated with an earlier El tradition in these texts.59 This, in turn, suggests that Shadday originated as an epithet of El that served to highlight his benevolent qualities. In this regard, Shadday resembles the title lṭpn il d pid “sagacious El, the kind-hearted,” which appears fifteen times in the Ugaritic corpus (e.g., KTU 1.4.4:58; 1.6.3:4, 10, 14; 1.16.5:23) and is often associated with El’s oversight of human fertility (e.g., KTU 1.15.2:13-14)60 El Shadday thus represents a form of the deity El who corresponded to the daily routines of family life such as family planning and inheritance. Over time, Shadday came to be used as separate name for El, but the full title survived in Ugaritic, P, Ezek 10:5, and the Septuagint, Samaritan, and Peshitta versions of Gen 49:25, and left traces in the poetic parallelism between ʾēl and šadday in the Hebrew Bible and ʾlhnn and šdyn in the Deir ‘Alla plaster text.

Biblical scholars have long argued that Yahweh absorbed the attributes of El early in the history of Israelite religions and, as a result, independent manifestations of El did not survive apart from Yahweh.61 The case of El Shadday challenges this long-held notion. The P source uses the name El Shadday to refer to Yahweh prior to the revelation at the burning bush in Exod 3. This usage suggests that—for the Priestly author at least—El Shadday and Yahweh were one and the same deity.62 But at the same time it points an earlier religious distinction between El Shadday and Yahweh, especially given the distinctive portrayal of El Shadday and the use of El Shadday and Yahweh in separate narrative domains within P. In the literary conception of P, El Shadday is the god of the patriarchs and ensures the continuity of their lineage by promoting human fertility and providing his worshippers with offspring. He is a familial god.63 Yahweh, by contrast, is the god of the fledgling Israelite nation and helps

59 It is unclear why other biblical texts that employ the name El Shadday do not preserve relics of this tradition.
his followers by providing all the necessities of a polity including military victory (Exod 14:1-4, *8-10, 15-17, *21-23, *26-29), and a centralized cult (Exod 25-31, 45-40). He is a national god. P thus preserves relics of earlier religious traditions about Yahweh and El Shadday while, at the same time, subsuming these relics into a monotheistic framework.

Ps 68:14 could support this earlier distinction between Yahweh and El Shadday. This verse belongs to a larger unit within Ps 68 which describes Yahweh (called ʿēlōhîm64 and ʿādōnāy in the rest of the psalm) bringing rain and routing his worshippers’ enemies:

My Lord gives the command. The bearers of good news are a great company:
“The leaders of the armies, they flee, they flee!”
The grazing places at home divide the spoil,
though, they lie among the sheepfolds—
the wings of a dove covered with silver, its pinions with green gold.

Verse 14 describes the final act of this battle:
bĕ-pārēš šadday mĕlāḵîm bāh tašlēg bĕ-ṣalmôn “When Shadday scattered generals on it, tašlēg on Zalmon.” The meaning of this verse—and the potential distinction between Shadday and Yahweh—hinges on the meaning of the verb tašlēg. In terms of morphology, tašlēg is either a 3fs or 2ms hiphil jussive/preterit from the root šlg ‘to snow’.65 Most translations of this verse, including the Septuagint and Vulgate,

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64 Ps 68 belongs to the Elohist Psalter, a collection of Psalms where the common noun ʿēlōhîm replaces the divine name Yahweh. Near parallel passages in Ps 68 and Jud 5 provide additional evidence for this replacement. Compare, for example, Jud 5:5 and Ps 68:9: “before Yahweh, the one of Sinai, before Yahweh, the god of Israel” mip-panê yhwh zeh sînay mip-panê yhwh ʿēlōhē yiśrâʾēl (Jud 5:5) and “before God, the one of Sinai, before God, the god of Israel” mip-panê ʿēlōhîm zeh sînay mip-panê ʿēlōhē yiśrâʾēl (Ps 68:9).

65 In the Central Semitic languages, the short form of the prefix conjugation expressed the jussive and occasionally the preterit. In Hebrew, however, the preterit meaning of the short prefix conjugation was largely restricted to syntactic environments following a conjunction, although it occasionally occurs by itself in poetry as it does here. J. A. Hackett,
render tašlēg as an impersonal verb meaning ‘it snowed’.66 Such a rendering is not consistent with typical Hebrew usage, however. When other verbs of precipitation (mṭr, gšm, nwp) appear in the C stem, they do not have an impersonal meaning, but instead take a deity as an explicit or implicit subject. In Gen 7:4, for example, God informs Noah that “I will cause it to rain (mamṭîr) upon the earth for forty days and forty nights”, while in Jer 14:22, the prophet asks rhetorically, “Can the idols of the nations cause it to rain (magšīmâm)?” And a mere four verses before Ps 68:14, the psalmist states, “You caused rain to drip freely (gešem nədābôt tānîp), O God.” Based on these parallels, we would expect tašlēg to have a causative meaning and take a deity as its subject. I argue therefore that tašlēg is a 2ms causative form of šlg and signals a shift in person from Shadday to a 2nd person divine addressee: “When Shadday scattered generals on it, you caused it to snow on Zalmon.” The identity of this 2nd person addressee is unclear, but given the references to Yahweh in previous verses—at least in earlier versions of the psalm before the name Elohim replaced Yahweh—it is possible that Yahweh was the implicit subject of tašlēg.67 If this interpretation proves accurate, then this verse distinguishes between Shadday and Yahweh and attests to a different, potentially militaristic role for Shadday in the religions of Israel.68 He would be depicted helping Yahweh rout the leaders of Israel’s enemies during a battle on Mt. Zalmon. This could suggest that El Shadday was also thought to provide help in battle, an attribute which may shed light on the enigmatic phrase “for the name of El on the day of w[ar] …” (lšm ’l bym mlḥ[mt]) in Kuntillet ‘Ajrud inscription 4.2:6.69

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66 Theoretically, šlg could have been an a ~ i class verb that was secondarily reinterpreted as a hiphil due to the similarity between the prefix form of this verb class and the hiphil prefix form (both yaqtil). In the history of the Hebrew language, this similarity led to the creation of several secondary hiphil verbs, such as hiškîm. It is unknown, however, whether šlg originally belonged to the a ~ i verb class. Most of the languages that preserve a verbal form of the root ṣlg only preserve the suffix form of the verb or its equivalent.

67 It is also possible that the switch in person reflects a direct address to Shadday, but it would be strange to switch person between two coordinated clauses.

68 Unfortunately, the dating of Ps 68 is highly disputed, with estimates ranging from the 12th century BCE to the exilic period, so it is unclear how long the distinction between Yahweh and Shadday survived. It is beyond the scope of this paper to decide between these different options.

V Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed a new etymology for the divine name (El) Shadday and sought to clarify the role of this deity in the religions of ancient Israel through comparative linguistic and religious means. In my estimation, šadday is a nomen agentis from the root sdy ‘to help, encourage’ meaning ‘the helper’ or ‘the helpful’. Comparison of El Shadday in P with El in the Ugaritic epics suggests that Shadday originated as an epithet of El, which served to highlight his benevolent qualities much like the Ugaritic epithet ltpn ỉl d pỉd ‘benevolent El, the kind-hearted’. Like Ugaritic El, El Shadday conferred blessings on his devotees and provided them with children. He thus represents a form of El who was associated with the daily routines of family life in the religious traditions of ancient Israel.

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