

Almighty or nearest of all?

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Introduction

In our morning worship at home in 2008 we have been following the weekly sidra (Torah portion), reading it from the *Naardense bijbel*.¹ That was quite an experience. We have read parts from the Torah that we had never heard before and we read overly familiar parts in a fresh and sometimes surprising way, thanks to the living and careful Dutch translation by Pieter Oussoren. Until... Gen. 17:1 'the Almighty'. Oops, was he still around?

I was already searching for Oussoren's e-mail address, when I realised it would be more useful first to have a closer look at these almighty-texts myself. When translations read 'Almighty' the Old Testament always has the word שְׁדַי (shaddai). Using the relatively simple tools I have close at hand as a minister – Bible texts, concordances, lexicons and commentaries – I explored the backgrounds of this word. For the searching part I used my beloved BibleWorks.² So I could quite easily tabulate what ancient and new translations³ had made out of this Hebrew word. Even the internet, although potentially deceitful, was helpful: I found a useful recent article on the subject out there.

The New Testament word behind 'Almighty' is παντοκράτωρ (*pantokrator*) and there is no doubt about the correct translation. But of course that cannot be read isolated from – or worse: as a replacement for – all that was written previously in the Old Testament. And שְׁדַי (shaddai) bears heavy with history. Apart from that παντοκράτωρ (*pantokrator*) only appears 10x in the whole of the New Testament, almost exclusively in the book of Revelation. In the Apocrypha the παντοκράτωρ (*pantokrator*) is omnipresent again, but I will not explore that in this article.

Actually, I thought this was an outdated discussion. Yet, at the same time, I realised how strongly 'the Almighty' is still present in worship and in the minds of people. Ironically those who have left church and faith furthest behind seem to be the ones who stumble most over God's supposed omnipotence. And is it not this same omnipotence that forms the background of all those wishlists we keep sending up to the Eternal One?

In this article I will first say a few things about the context in which we read, before I expand on the backgrounds of the word שְׁדַי (shaddai) and explore what various translations have done with it. Finally I will draw up a balance.

¹ *De Naardense Bijbel*. [the Bible translated into Dutch by Pieter Oussoren] (Vught: Skandalon, 2004). Information about our morning worship on our website: www.marnel.org.uk.

² BibleWorks 5. Meanwhile version 8 is out already (and getting cheaper with the dollar staying low). I assume the reader knows the ins & outs of searching with this programme.

³ Ancient: Septuaginta, ed. Rahlf; Vulgata, ed. Weber et al. English: Authorised Version (1611); Young's Literal Translation (1898); TaNaKH (1985); New Jerusalem Bible (1985); New Revised Standard Version (1989). Dutch: Statenvertaling (1637); Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling (2004); Naardense Bijbel (2004). French: Louis Segond (1910); Traduction oecuménique (1988). German: Einheitsübersetzung (1980), Revidierte Elberfelder (1993).

⁴ This process is

The context

Just to highlight an obvious fact which we often tend to evade in daily life: we always read the Bible – as any other text – through a set of spectacles with a particular focus. These are provided to us by culture and tradition and both are strongly coloured by Western civilization and particularly by the Enlightenment. This has made our way of reading the Bible highly conceptual and profoundly influenced by dogmatic thinking. But the historic-critical approach of the Bible too, although it has often clashed with the church's traditional doctrines, is equally captured within the reason of Enlightenment. And both approaches are in similar ways reacting to what has culturally preceded that in the Middle Ages.

This means that the concept of 'God Almighty', as a supreme being that is the ultimate cause of everything happening to us, is deeply embedded in our consciousness. It is very difficult for us to let that go. We read the Bible text and take it for granted that God is called 'Almighty'. But, as we will see, in the Old Testament it is not at all an obvious or unquestioned issue. On the contrary. Of course our Western idea of omnipotence did not suddenly occur out of the blue. Already in the ancient Hellenistic world the image of the king was strongly divinized and that translated to concepts of God. But to me it seems more likely that especially Germanic influences on christian faith during the period of christianization have been responsible for the appearance of the concept of divine omnipotence as we still know it.⁴ Anyway the concept itself, as well as its rejection, have been strongly influenced by a long tradition.

Our current cultural context should be labelled postmodern to say the least. The idea of God Almighty as an external power intervening in the historical process, has become untenable. Not only for the horror of Auschwitz or the sharpness of French deconstructionist philosophy, but simply because the concept does not work anymore. The word 'almighty' no longer answers any essential question of today. Through a renewed encounter with the actual Bible texts, and by connecting them to our own reality of life, we might come to surprising outcomes. It is not as much a matter of clearing away old dogmatic answers, as of re-phrasing our current fundamental questions. Asking the question right is more important than finding the right answer. Exploring the meaning of the word שְׁדַּי (shaddai) could be a first step to achieve this.

The word שְׁדַּי (shaddai)

That παντοκράτωρ (*pantokrator*), 'omnipotens' and 'Almighty' are no correct translations of שְׁדַּי (shaddai), could already be found in the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew lexicon.⁵ Claus Westermann points out that the *Septuagint* translates the long form אֱלֹהֵי שְׁדַּי (*el shaddai*), traditionally seen as a high divine name, quite modestly as ὁ θεός μου (*ho theos mou*, 'my God'). In this context he quotes a beautiful interpretation of שְׁדַּי (shaddai) by Klaus Koch, when commenting on the book of Job: 'not the Almighty, but the one most near' ("nicht der Allmächtige, sondern der Allernächste").⁶

profoundly analysed in: James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity* (New York [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1994) – really worth reading!

⁵ F. Brown, S.R. Driver, C.A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody [Mass.]: Hendrickson, 1906/2004).

⁶ C. Westermann, *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament, I/2* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981) 309-311.

Over the past two centuries a lot of time and energy has been put in unraveling the word's etymology, not in the least incited by the early observation that already the ancient translations had been struggling with the meaning of the word. In total שְׁדַי (*shaddai*) appears 48x in the Old Testament, of which 7x in the long form אֵל שְׁדַי (*el shaddai*). This places the word third in frequency as a divine name, directly after יְהוָה (YHWH, 'the LORD') and אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*, 'God').⁷ I will now discuss four major aspects of what has been written about שְׁדַי (*shaddai*).

One of the first explanations derives שְׁדַי (*shaddai*) from שָׁדַד (*sjdd*), 'devastate'. Westermann considers that something outdated and according to Weippert the derivation is just grammatically impossible.⁸ Peculiarly two new translations still seem to reflect this older theory: the French *Traduction oecuménique* has 'Dévastateur' twice and the Dutch *Naardense bijbel* uses seven times 'g/Geweldige' ('m/Mighty').⁹

The most common derivation connects the word to the Akkadian word *šadû* ('mountain'). In that case שְׁדַי (*shaddai*) means 'the one of the mountain'. Since gods and mountains were often linked in Antiquity, this explanation has gained most support.¹⁰ Applied to God this can even indicate the title 'Most High', but that is not yet a synonym for our word 'Almighty'.

An older theory, which has recently revived, derives שְׁדַי (*sjaddai*) from שָׁד (*sjad*), 'breast'. That is impossible, says Weippert, because that would apply female qualities to a male God. Oops... Mr Weippert! Fortunately Harriet Lutzky thinks a tad more profound.¹¹ She makes a convincing case, albeit arguably, that שְׁדַי (*shaddai*) once was a epithet or title for a goddess, meaning 'the one of the breasts'. In Antiquity there have been numerous similar goddesses and Lutzky shows how in ancient Israel this epithet was probably connected to Ashera. Recent research reveals Ashera as a consort to יְהוָה (YHWH) which could explain the long form אֵל שְׁדַי (*el shaddai*). If שְׁדַי (*shaddai*) is interpreted as 'she of the breasts' – as opposed to 'he of the mountain' – we see an evolution from an independent goddess שְׁדַי (*shadday*) to a consort of יְהוָה (YHWH) and finally an epithet of אֵל / יְהוָה (*el / YHWH*). This also offers some insight into the biblical struggle with the worship of Ashera. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em...

A Jewish interpretation can be found with Rashi in his commentary on Gen. 17:1.¹² He reads שְׁדַי (*shaddai*) as שְׁדַי (*sheddai*), which leads to the meaning 'what is His will suffice'. From the story's context one should learn how and to what purpose God 'will suffice'. Weippert thinks this is an artificial derivation with very little support, but I think that judgment is too easy. The *Septuagint* for example, pre-dating Rashi by at least 12 centuries, seemed to fancy this solution where it chose ἰκανός (*hikanos*, 'sufficient') as a translation (5x).

To put this digging around a word's history into perspective: Westermann agrees with Koch that finally the etymology is not decisive, but the function of a

⁷ A very useful overview is given by M. Weippert in: *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, II (München [etc.]: Kaiser [etc.], 1984) 873-881. The long form is found in the Priestly text – Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; Ex. 6:3 – and in Ez. 10:5.

⁸ Westermann, *o.c.*, 310; Weippert, *o.c.*, 875v.

⁹ Jes. 13:6; Joël 1:15; resp. Num. 24:4,16; Ruth 1:21v; Ps. 68,15; Ps. 91:1; Joël 1:15.

¹⁰ Weippert, *o.c.*, 877v, 880; Westermann, *o.c.*, 310.

¹¹ Harriet Lutzky, 'Shadday as a Goddess Epithet', *Vetus Testamentum* 48/1 (1998) 15-36. Vgl. Weippert, *o.c.*, 877; Westermann, *o.c.*, 310.

¹² *Rashi: the Torah, with Rashi's commentary.* (LinkBrooklyn, NY: Mesorah, 1995) *בראשית* xvii,1.

word within a particular context. So perhaps Rashi – who is not mentioned by Westermann – did read closer than many modern scholars?

¹³ Weippert, *o.c.*, 880.

One thing all scholars seem to agree on, is, that the original meaning of שְׁדַי (*shaddai*) must have been lost at an early stage. Hence all these efforts to come up with some kind of useful explanation. As we will see, the translations have struggled with this problem from ancient times on.

¹⁴ A tabular overview of the different translations can be found on our website: www.mamel.org.uk

So there is no single clear meaning of the word, not even rudimentary. Yet it will be clear that the translation ‘Almighty’ is no longer a valid one (and has probably never been). To me the associations to ‘mountain (god)’ and ‘(mother’s) breast’ appear to make sense and also Rashi’s way of reading deserves to be kept in mind.

Weippert summarises:¹³ in the first place שְׁדַי (*shaddai*) is an archaic name for God, connected to the times of the patriarchs, and secondly it is a name for God for those who do not know יְהוָה (YHWH, ‘the LORD’), like Bileam or Elihu. Westermann emphasises that שְׁדַי (*shaddai*) is connected to the fertility and growth of Israel as God’s people-to-be.

Ancient translations¹⁴

It is generally assumed that when the **Septuagint**, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, was made the original meaning of שְׁדַי (*shaddai*) was already lost. A complicating factor when assessing the translations in the *Septuagint*, is the uncertainty about which original Hebrew texts have been used exactly. So, all we say is provisional.

The long form אֱלֹהֵי שְׁדַי (*el shaddai*) in Genesis and Exodus is consistently translated by ὁ θεός σου / ὁ θεός μου / θεὸς ὧν αὐτῶν, (*ho theos sou*, ‘your God’ / *ho theos mou*, ‘my God’ / *ho theos auton*, ‘their God’), but notably in the Ezekiel text we find a kind of proper name: θεός Σαδδαι (*theos Saddai*, ‘God *shaddai*’). For the rest there is a number of options in which I cannot really discern a system: θεός (*theos*, ‘God’), κύριος (*kurios*, ‘Lord’), παντοκράτωρ (*pantokrator*, ‘almighty’), ἰκανός (*hikanos*, ‘sufficient’), ὁ ἐπουράνιος (*ho epouranios*, ‘the heavenly’), ὁ θεός τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (*ho theos tou ouranou*, ‘God from heaven’). Once is just says αὐτός (*autos*, ‘him’) and three times the word is obviously omitted.

Careful conclusion: equating שְׁדַי (*shaddai*) to ‘Almighty’ is certainly not an automatism in the *Septuagint*. Particularly the long form is translated in quite a personal way: ‘your/my/their God’. And even if παντοκράτωρ (*pantokrator*, ‘almighty’) is used – 14x in total – we should not forget that in the *Septuagint* this word is also frequently representing the divine name יְהוָה (YHWH). The sheer variety of translations reveals how much the meaning of שְׁדַי (*shaddai*) had already become a problem. The translation ἰκανός (*hikanos*, ‘sufficient’)

seems to link in with Rashi's way of reading.

The **Vulgate**, the Latin translation of the whole Bible, takes a different view. Especially the long form receives without hesitation a heavy translation: *Deus omnipotens* ('God Almighty'). On a total of 48 occasions, 36x it is *omnipotens* ('Almighty') and the alternative ἰκανός (*hikanos*, 'sufficient') has completely disappeared.

The conclusion seems clear to me: it was the *Vulgate* which pushed 'the Almighty' as the dominant translation, far more than the *Septuagint*. A prudent question: would the changing political reality of St Jerome, who completed the Vulgate in the 5th century, have played a role in this? In his days the Germanic people overran the collapsing Roman Empire and could that have influenced the surge for an almighty God who actually interfered? It is a question.

Common translations

Although the Reformation has identified Rome as the source of all evil, the older translations did faithfully translate the *omnipotens* from the *Vulgate*. Moreover, the term has been virtually monopolised. God's omnipotence displays an almighty presence, at least till the end of the 19th century. In German- and English-speaking regions even till this very day.

King James Version, New Revised Standard Version, Statenvertaling, NBG-vertaling, Louis Segond, Lutherbibel, Einheitsübersetzung and **Revidierte Elberfelder** all exclusively read 'the Almighty'. This is the same in older Jewish translations. After the *Deus omnipotens* of the Middle Ages, the translations of modernity have rigorously erased any possible doubt about it. After so many centuries of omnipotence we understandably find it quite difficult to let this concept go. Perhaps that explains why the Dutch **Naardense bijbel** (2004!), which incited this wee exercise, still chose for either 'Almachtige' ('Almighty') or 'g/Geweldige' ('m/Mighty').

Alternative translations

But the exegetical and historical research did gradually change the pattern. Already in **Young's Literal Translation** (1898), and especially in the book of Job, 'the Almighty' has changed into a 'Mighty (One)'. It is just a gradual difference, but it does show that the common translations were no longer taken for granted.

After 1980 some new translations finally abandoned the term 'Almighty': the *New Jerusalem Bible* (including the French original *Bible de Jérusalem*), the Jewish *TANAKH*, the French *Traduction oecuménique* and also the brandnew Dutch *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling*. Nevertheless other translations from the 1990s still contained the common translation, for example the *New Revised Standard*

Version and the German Revidierte Elberfelder.

The most rigorous solution comes with the **New Jerusalem Bible**: '(El) Shaddai' is left untranslated in the Bible text. Only twice in Job we find an alternative: 'God' and 'Yahweh' (I will not get used to the latter). The French **Traduction oecuménique** opts for a careful, but clever solution: the 'Almighty' is consistently replaced by the 'Mighty'. The Dutch **Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling** consistently reads '(God,) de Ontzagwekkende' ('(God,) the Awesome One'). Both solutions still keep the connotation 'mighty' clearly in the picture.

A course slightly different from the *New Jerusalem Bible* is pursued by **TANAKH**, a new Jewish translation (1985). As a rule '(El) Shaddai' is left untranslated in the Bible text, but at places where non-Jews use the term – Balaam in Numbers and in the Elihu speeches in Job – the traditional translation 'Almighty' is applied. I think that is a lucky strike, because this makes it clear that even if the same word is used, it does not necessarily express an identical meaning. Hence the context is included in the translation.

A balance

Time to draw up a balance.

We live and read in postmodern times. Whatever you think about that, it is certainly clear that a concept like 'omnipotence' no longer works. Our fundamental questions are not about a direct intervention from outside the course of history, but rather about the question if and how God could be present in that history, from day to day. In this context we can learn from the word *shaddai*.

That resonates the teaching of Rashi: in any particular situation we should ask how God can 'suffice'. Westermann too emphasises that the function of the word is more important than its (assumed) etymology.

So: how can the word *shaddai* help us to recognise God as Presence? The answers will obviously be multicoloured, depending on the individual and on personal circumstances.

If we consider the identification of *shaddai* with a god who lives high on a mountain, I might recall Ps. 121. When we lift our eyes to the hills and wonder how, for God's sake, we might get over it, God suddenly appears to be sitting on top of our mountain of problems already. That is not omnipotence in the traditional way, but still an expression of a hope strong enough to move mountains.

If we assume that *shaddai* refers to a motherly side of God, there are other associations at hand. God who nourishes and dresses us, as in Job 26:5f for example. If stripped from a mechanistic interpretation I can also see the value of a traditional notion as divine providence in this respect. God as a mother's

breast is a very strong image too: for babies that must represent some kind of 'omnipotence', I would think.

At the same level I am also happy to be taught by Rashi. If you are a Jewish man in the 11th century, when Jews were expelled from Britain and persecuted in the Rhineland and France, and you are able to explain that God 'will suffice', you must have had a strong experience of keeping and trust.

But to think about omnipotence in mechanistic terms is very dangerous. Because if things would be like that, then why doesn't God intervene in all these disasters nature and humanity continue to produce? We plainly cannot read the Bible like that anymore.

I still disagree with the translation in the *Naardense bijbel*. But due to this 'poor shot' I definitely learned something I would not have learned if the translation had been 'correct'. So in the end Johan Cruyff, the Dutch football philosopher, is right: 'every disadvantage has its advantage...'

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