

“The Many Breasted God” // Joe Heikman
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There’s a [novel written by John Bunyan](#), called *The Holy War*. You’ve probably heard of *Pilgrim’s Progress*--same writer, from the 1700s. When I was a kid, my family had an [audio version](#) of the story, and I listened to it over and over again. (My peers were watching *GI Joe* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, but my parents didn’t want us to watch TV so instead I listened to 300 year-old classic Christian allegories... I had quite a peculiar childhood!)

As you’d expect, *The Holy War* is a story of conquest and conflict. The setting is a city called *Mansoul*, obviously meant to represent a human soul. The city was founded and ruled by a king named *Shaddai*, but the citizens of the city struggled with divided allegiances. They were enticed by the promises of *Diabolus*, leader of a rival kingdom, who promises great wealth and prosperity and freedom if they’ll just let him into the city.

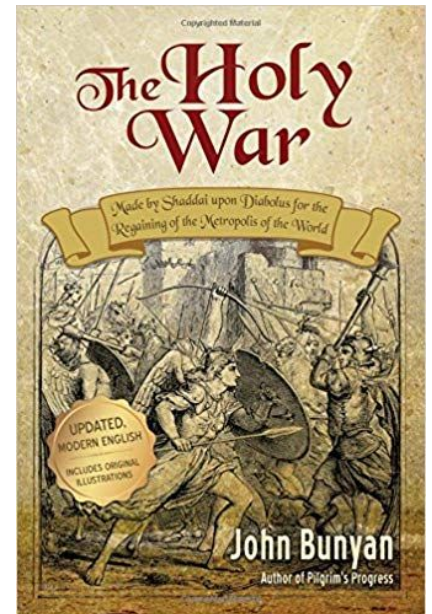
And the leaders of the city give in to the temptations, and *Diabolus* comes in with his gifts. But the pleasure is short-lived, and *Diabolus* is a cruel ruler. Life in the city devolves as the excess and freedom leads only to self-indulgence and conflict and misery.

So the people cry out to *Shaddai* to rescue them, and the One True King sends his army of truth and conviction to recapture the city. There is a great battle, but *Diabolus* is no match for the power of *Shaddai* and his son, *Emmanuel*. The city falls, *Diabolus* is vanquished, and the people rush to kneel at the feet of their conquering king.

As you no doubt figured out, *The Holy War* is the struggle between Satan as *Diabolus* and God as *Shaddai*, the Almighty.

The name *Shaddai* is drawn straight from the Hebrew Bible. Usually, *Shaddai* is translated as “Almighty” in most English versions, as “God Almighty” when the Hebrew says *El Shaddai* (*El* for God, *Shaddai* for Almighty).

King *Shaddai* from *The Holy War*, that was the picture I had of God in my childhood, especially when reading about God as “Almighty.” King *Shaddai* is not to be messed with: by command, by guilt, and ultimately by violence, King *Shaddai* gets what King *Shaddai* wants.



And that's for the best, the story emphasizes, because Shaddai knows best. Shaddai has all the power, and has all the wisdom, so Shaddai gets to make the rules--we *want* Shaddai to make the rules. As humans, the best thing we can do is to learn what Shaddai wants and fall in line.

That's an oversimplification, of course, as allegories tend to be. But for a lot of people, that's the image of God that comes to mind when they read about *God Almighty*. Omnipotent, having all the power, which ultimately means that God can do whatever God wants.

One of the [dictionary definitions](#) of power is "the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events." That's usually what we mean about power in relationships, in families, in business and politics. Power means getting someone else to do what I want to do, to live according to my rules and the values of my group. So much of the news cycle is driven by the struggle for power, because we have so many competing values and visions of how we want the world to be, and power is about doing whatever it takes to influence the world in my direction.

For some, the name *Almighty* means that God is at the top of that heap. God is controlling the action and calling the shots--if not now, then at some point God is going to get what God wants. God has to, for God is *Almighty*.

Except, that's not what *El Shaddai* really means.

What *El Shaddai* really means, is closer to this:



"The Many Breasted God"

Shaddai is the plural of the Hebrew root word *Shad*, meaning breast.

El Shaddai, the Many Breasted God, or *The Breasted One*.

Now obviously this is probably not exactly the image that the biblical writers had in mind when they referred to God as the Many Breasted One. The ancient Hebrews weren't too fond of pigs. But I settled on this image because this pig pretty strongly illustrates the point... and there are some things you just don't want to type into a Google Image search. Especially when you're using a church computer! :)

El Shaddai, the God who provides and sustains, the Giver of Life, who draws us close and nourishes us with the gift of her own body.

I like this footnote from [The Inclusive Bible](#) (Genesis 17:1)

The name El Shaddai is usually translated "the Almighty," under the assumption that it derives either from the word shadad, which means "burly" or "powerful," or from shadah, which means "mountain," making the name mean "God of the mountains." There is growing opinion, however, that Shaddai may derive from the word shad or "breast"—thus El Shaddai may be a feminine image of God meaning "the Breasted God." Then again, since mountains are frequently shaped like breasts, these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

What do you think? I'm not a Hebrew scholar either, but I know enough to recognize that the similarities between those words, *shad*, for breast, *shadah*, for mountain, and *shadad*, for burly or powerful, those connections are not coincidental.

Mountains are powerful and strong. And while I wouldn't dare to refer to any woman as "burly," breasts are also powerful.

I've heard some of my female friends who have breastfed their children talk about realizing their feminine superpower, literally keeping another human being alive for like a year and half or more--entirely with their bodies.

Breasts provide the stuff of life, nourishment and nutrition, even antibodies to ward off disease while an infant develops their own immune system.

Beyond the physical, a mother's breasts offer comfort, connection, assurance. I've been the father to two infants, and while I'd like to think I was pretty decent at caring for the little ones, sometimes at 2am there is just no substitute for what momma has to offer...

Life-giving, nurturing, comforting, creating space for growth and flourishing, offering the stability and connection needed for thriving, that is also power! Parenting in all its forms takes incredible strength. Caring, attending, empowering, these are also forms of influence and authority.

And so, like *The Inclusive Bible* suggests, “Almighty” is not a bad translation, for the Many Breasted God is indeed powerful. But it’s a different kind of power than the dominating, controlling power of the “King Shaddai” image.

Our scripture reading today came from [Genesis 49](#), the story of Jacob, Patriarch of Israel, and his sons. As Jacob neared his death, he gathered his twelve sons around him and gave each of them a final blessing, words of wisdom and admonishment.

When it was the turn of his favourite son, Joseph, Jacob called for Joseph to grow and flourish like a vine, specifically naming the power of *Shaddai*:

*through the God of your ancestors who aids you,
by the Breasted One who blesses you:
the blessings of Heaven on high,
the blessings of the Deep down below,
the blessings of breasts and womb*

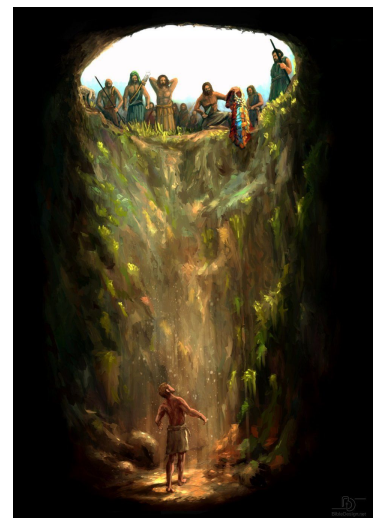
What does that mean, the blessings of breasts and womb? What is the Breasted One doing in the story of Joseph?

This is a familiar story for many of us. Joseph, the favoured son, he of the “[technicolor dreamcoat](#).” Because Jacob loved Joseph’s mother better than his other wives, because of Joseph’s dreams, Joseph thought he was better than his brothers and loudly told them that someday he would be their master.

So his brothers, older and stronger by far, punished him by throwing him in a pit and then selling him to slave traders headed for Egypt.

In Egypt, Joseph worked hard for his new master and eventually rose to a position of authority in his master’s house. But then he got caught up in a scandal, apparently through no fault of his own, and was thrown into prison and forgotten.

But in prison, Joseph again worked hard and gained the favour of the chief jailor. And he also earned a reputation as something of a fortune-teller for his ability to interpret the dreams of his fellow



prisoners. Eventually, one of those prisoners recommended Joseph-the-dream-teller to the Pharaoh of all Egypt.

Joseph went before the king and interpreted Pharaoh's dream. Pharaoh was so impressed that he released Joseph from prison and put him in charge of preparing all of Egypt for the coming famine his dreams had predicted.

Eventually, the famine affected the family of Jacob, still living in the land of Canaan. And so Jacob sent his sons to the only place that still had food for sale, in Egypt. Long story short, eventually Joseph's brothers find themselves standing in front of their brother, now an Egyptian lord, who holds their lives in his hands.

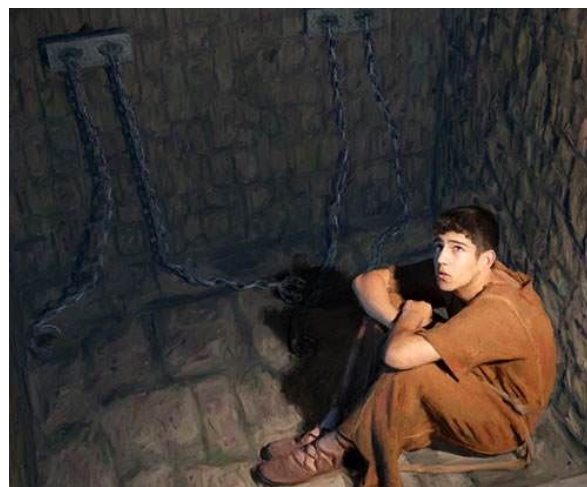
And they begged for his mercy, that he wouldn't take revenge on them for what they did to him. And Joseph forgave them, saying "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God used it for good, in order to preserve a large number of people, and that's what's happening now."

Where is *El Shaddai* in that story?

If *Almighty* is about controlling power, that places God above the action, like a chess-master moving the pieces around the board to get the desired outcome.

That's was how I was taught to read this story, that God knew there was a famine coming and so God manipulated events to get Joseph sold into slavery, and thrown in prison, so that at just the right time he could rise to impress Pharaoh and save the day! The whole thing was part of God's master plan.

But what does that say about the pain of Joseph's life--was the pain of separation, of slavery, of prison, was all of that justified because it was necessary to serve the purpose of the happy ending that God wanted? What about the collateral damage, all of those nameless people who suffered and starved along the way, while God was manipulating Joseph's story to get Jacob's family down to Egypt to set the stage for the *next* story of suffering and slavery?



While the Almighty label is supposed to be about God's great power, that perspective actually limits God quite a bit, because, apparently, when faced with a coming famine, God couldn't, or didn't want to, you know, stop the famine.

When you put God above the action, controlling the storyline, if that's what God's Almighty power means, then that makes God responsible for everything that happens in the story--for better and for worse.

But instead of controlling power, let's read Joseph's story from the perspective of the Many Breasted God.

In my imagination, that puts God not above the story, but underneath it. What if Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery because he was, well, acting like a jerk, and they were jealous? But instead of devastation, God caught Joseph, held him, gave him strength for the journey.

And in his master's house, Joseph thrived because that's what happens sometimes when someone works hard. And he got caught up in a scandal, because that's also what happens sometimes among people used to getting their own way. And again, even in prison, God was with Joseph, hearing his desperate cries, giving him strength to keep holding on.

And so on, through dreams and betrayals and famine, God isn't above Joseph, pulling the strings, but underneath, picking up the pieces, providing comfort, offering nourishment, bringing hope, glimpses of wisdom, surrounding him with love.

That seems to me a much more satisfying reading of the story. And that's in line with what Jacob described in his blessing (Gen 49), of Joseph being held "by the hands of the Strong One," not as a chess piece but as a vine who was offered the water and dirt needed to grow, the arbor wall on which to climb and bear fruit.

From that perspective, God didn't remove the obstacles from Joseph's life, but provided the elements he needed to grow and thrive.

To me, that's is the blessing of the Breasted One, who transforms even the most hostile environment into a womb of potential growth.





Another story of *El Shaddai*, also a famine story, the story of Ruth and Naomi.

Also a familiar story. Naomi was a widow, living as a refugee in the land of Moab. Just as her husband died, Naomi's two sons also died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law alone and vulnerable. Naomi chose to return to her home in Bethlehem, and Ruth chose to go with her.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, Naomi's friends greeted her, but she spat back at them: "don't call me *Naomi* [which means 'delightful'], but call me *Mara* [meaning 'bitter'] because *El Shaddai* has given me bitterness--I was full when I went out, but God has returned me with emptiness."

(If any of you are considering getting a degree in biblical Hebrew, there's a master's thesis in there somewhere with the wordplay about the Breasted God giving bitterness and emptiness).

Naomi's gripe is similar to what I was raising with the story of Joseph--if *God Almighty* in control, well, this stinks. Famine, dead husband, two dead sons, and zero hope for the future.

Except, Ruth. Ruth, whose name means "friend" or "beloved."

Ruth, who refused to do the customary thing and abandon Naomi and return to her own people.

Ruth, who practically carried Naomi back to Bethlehem and put up with her grumbling the whole way.

Ruth, who at Naomi's instruction took the most humiliating job in Bethlehem, the only available job, gathering the leavings of wheat that the harvesters skipped over.

Ruth, who, again at Naomi's instruction, seduced a stranger in the hopes that she would (ahem) *convince* him to do the customary thing and marry her.

Ruth, who gave birth to *Obed*, a child who Naomi quickly claimed as her own--and spoke not a word more about that Mara/bitterness business...

At the birth of Naomi's grandson, the women of the village gathered around and this time they spoke not of bitterness, but of how this child would be a "restorer of life and nourisher" in Naomi's old age.

Naomi's journey came full circle, from bitter emptiness to full restoration and nourishment. That is the work of the Many Breasted God, as embodied in Ruth.



From the perspective of control and will-power, Ruth is the unlikeliest of characters to look like God. She has no status, no way to influence anyone, and no agenda. The only goal she's supposed to have, her ability to marry and have children, she surrenders that to Naomi from the get-go.

Ruth doesn't desire or manipulate for her own ends; Ruth follows. She fetches. She serves. She encourages, she lifts up, she invites. She bears, and hopes, and believes, and endures, always.

And that, my friends, is powerful! Ruth is highly effective, bringing goodness and light for everyone in her circle. The Breasted One did not abandon Naomi, but brought her the sustenance she longed for in the person of Ruth.

There are other examples of the nourishing strength of the Many Breasted God in the Bible, from the Hebrew midwives of Exodus to Mordecai and Esther to Jesus himself, kneeling to wash the feet of his followers.

But perhaps the thing I think of most often when I think of the Many Breasted God, when I read about Ruth, is the funerals I've been to of Mennonite grandmothers. Nourishing power is not exclusively the realm of females, but that has often been the role of women in most Mennonite families. A lot of these women prefer to humbly fly under the radar, but at their funerals the fruits of their nourishing love are on full display.

I'm thinking of stories about candy dishes and small treats slipped to grandchildren while their parents looked the other way.

I'm thinking of hospitality, of open tables filled with food, in family holiday celebrations and church potluck, inviting anyone and everyone to "help yourselves to a few more mashed potatoes."



I'm thinking of countless quiet prayers, of encouraging notes and words of wisdom, of gardens and quilts and knitted mittens and dishcloths. Of recycled margarine containers and MCC thrift stores, of gentle hands and gentle humor, of warm embraces and open kitchens.

That's "Oma Power"! The blessings of the Many Breasted God. And they seem like small things, but those kinds of things have shaped my world more than any ruler or warrior or conventional authority figure. My guess is that's true for many of you as well.

I do believe that God is *Almighty*, that God does get what God wants. But what God wants is for us to flourish as God's Offspring, with God's Spirit alive in us and with us and through us. And God's power is expressed not in dominating us from above, but in supporting us from beneath, in the arms of love.

And so I pray that you may know today the power of *El Shaddai*, the blessings of the Breasted One, the blessings of Heaven on high, the blessings of the Deep down below, the blessings of breasts and womb, surrounding, sustaining, and bringing life to you. And through you, to all who come under your care.

Amen.