

Sunday 16th February 2024 - Know My Name: El Shaddai

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[0 : 00] So we are continuing this series that we've been doing called Know My Name, in which we're exploring the significance of names, names for God, names for ourselves, for places and people in the Bible.

But we're also looking at the importance of names as well, and the role that these names and their meanings can play in helping us to understand things, to understand more about ourselves, life in general, and to understand more about God.

One of the nicest things, I think, about living in such a diverse world as ours are some of the unique words and phrases that different cultures and languages use to describe things in their own way.

For example, in the German language, there's this word, which is Kummerspeck. There's some better German speakers than me, but I think it's Kummerspeck is how we say it.

I know we do Hebrew and Greek sometimes. We want to do some German this morning. We should do Kummerspeck. Oh, one, two, three. Kummerspeck. Excellent, excellent. Now, this word Kummerspeck, I gather, literally translates as grief bacon.

[1 : 15] Okay, grief bacon. And it's used in Germany to describe this, which is excess weight gained from emotional eating. Okay.

I don't know if you can identify with that, but the Germans called it grief bacon, which I guess kind of makes sense. You know, I've put a stone of weight on, ah, that's my grief bacon kicking in there. So, it's a nice word to use. Perhaps at Slimming World you can bring that one up.

Kummerspeck. Kummerspeck. That's Germany. If we hop over to Finland, there's this word here, which is kalsarikanet. It's a Finnish word. Kalsarikanet. You want to say some Finnish today?

A one, two, three. Kalsarikanet. Excellent. And this Finnish word apparently literally means underpant drunkenness.

Because it's used to describe the uniquely Finnish tradition of this, of drinking at home alone, in your underwear, with no intention of going out.

[2 : 17] I like the sound of that myself. Might move to Finland in my later years, I think. There's even been a kalsarikanet beer, which has been released to do just that, a special brand of it. And you'll be unsurprised to know that this particular brand of beer, this was released during lockdown, when there was a lot of underpant drinking going on, I'm sure. So, we've got kummerspeck and kalsarikanet, German and Finnish.

And yes, they literally mean grief-bacon and underpant drunkenness. But that literal translation, obviously, it needs a bit of unpacking and explaining if we're to really understand what those words mean for the culture in which they're used.

But then there are also other words around the world that are pretty much untranslatable for us as well, in that no equivalent word can be found to translate them into another language.

For example, for my money, one of the most beautiful untranslatable words is a Japanese word. And it's this word, komorebi, komorebi. I'm going to say some Japanese today, a one, two, three.

Komorebi, multilingual today. So, komorebi, this describes this particular phenomenon, which is the light and shadows formed by sunlight leaking through the leaves of a tree.

[3 : 48] Komorebi. But more than just a descriptive word, I think in Japanese culture, this komorebi is a feeling as well. It conjures up perhaps a deeper appreciation of nature.

It's a kind of contemplation of what we might describe as the dance between shadows and lights, you know, of the fleeting beauty uniquely created in that dappled, transient, very present moment as we bask under a tree in the sunlight, perhaps. It's something which perhaps we might want to take that idea and apply it to our faith sometimes, that God's light shining down on us in this dappled, transient, but beautiful way that changes moment by moment. It's a beautiful expression, komorebi.

I like it. Expression though, whose meaning we can recognize, but it's a feeling which is hard to describe or put into our own words, particularly in English, and certainly not as concisely as komorebi manages to communicate. Some words there. But what's interesting, I think, is that when we turn to the Bible, and particularly the Hebrew scriptures, what we call our Old Testament, what's interesting is that we're sometimes presented with similar challenges of translation or understanding. So we looked in previous weeks at some of the Hebrew names and titles for God.

Most notably, we looked a few weeks back at this one, Elohim, a title which translates and means God, but in a kind of strong sense. And then you got Yahweh as well, the name by which God is known, which roughly translates as I am in English. Now, Elohim and Yahweh, they're by far the two most common ways in the Old Testament in the Hebrew language, which speak of God. But there's another Hebrew word I'd like us to look at today, which is this one, Shaddai. So we've had German, Finnish, Japanese. Let's do some Hebrew together. A one, two, three, Shaddai. Shaddai, yeah. Now, Shaddai is a name or a title that's used in the Bible for God. And it's sometimes coupled with the Hebrew word for God, El, as in Elohim and so on. So we occasionally get this El Shaddai phrase. And if you've been around as long as me, you might remember an Amy Grant worship song in the 80s called El Shaddai that was big.

At the time. However, as to what the Hebrew word Shaddai actually means, well, we're not totally sure, really. And there's a lot of debate among biblical and Hebrew scholars. It's one of those ancient words whose precise meaning has kind of been lost a bit over time. But there are some theories as to what means. Indeed, one suggestion is that Shaddai means mountains, mainly because in the Akkadian language, which is a really ancient language from which Hebrew developed and borrowed some phrases, the word for mountains is Shadu. And so you can see there could be a link there with Shadu, Shaddai.

[7 : 11] Maybe it kind of morphed into this understanding of El Shaddai, therefore meaning perhaps God of the mountains. And we know from Bible stories that there's a rich history of people encountering God in special ways on top of mountains as well. So there's some reason I think that might be the case.

But arguably the oldest and perhaps most likely meaning of Shaddai is that it means this. It means breasts. Hebrew word for breast is Shad or Shadayim as a plural. So El Shaddai could mean this, the God of breasts or the breastfed God. Now there are obvious reasons you don't need me to explain why mountains and breasts might have a similar root word. But if Shaddai does describe God as the God of breasts, it's a timeless picture really of a God who nurtures and cares and nourishes us. We might say a God who breastfeeds us. And what's interesting is that this idea does tie in with the context in which we find this Shaddai word or El Shaddai being used in the Bible. So for example, one of the first times it appears is Genesis 17.1. When we read this, it says, when Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am El Shaddai. Walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and you and you will greatly increase your numbers. I am El Shaddai, says God.

And the promise in return, it seems for Abraham's faithfulness here, is that God will provide him with offspring. He will greatly increase his numbers. So God here is a picture of a God of blessing, blessing, but also of nurture. That's one example in which it's used. How about this one though, from Genesis 28 verse 1, where we're then told of a particular blessing that Abraham's son Isaac gives to his son Jacob when he says this. He says, may El Shaddai bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. Again, there's language in this particular blessing of fertility. And I guess the picture of a God of breasts, you know, a God of nurture, it fits with this idea. And then further on down the generations, it goes because in time, Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, he then declares this blessing over his son, Joseph. He says this,

Shaddai, who blesses you with blessings of the skies above, blessings of the deep springs below, blessings of the breast and womb. So this God who Jacob here calls Shaddai is again seen as a God of blessing. We might say a God of fertility, of nurture. And there's even perhaps a little play on words here between God's, you know, Shaddai's blessing and the nourishment that breasts, Shaddaiim, give to babies.

Indeed, I guess the obviously feminine imagery used here is an insight perhaps into the willingness of early believers to describe and understand God's nature as being associated with femininity and with nurture.

[11 : 04] It's a universal, very natural, intimate image of seeing God like a mother who cares for us as children at her breast.

Now, in time, God's identity is revealed not just as a title, as in Elohim or El Shaddai, but God reveals his name. And so in Exodus 6 verse 3, we read of God saying, a while after Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and so on, it says this to Moses. He says, I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name, the Lord, this Hebrew word Yahweh, I did not make myself fully known to them, although he did here to Moses. So maybe as the Bible goes on, there's this kind of sense of progression, maybe of maturing, of a God who becomes increasingly personal. But it's like when a child actually clocks the parent's real name. It's a bit like that kind of understanding perhaps which is going on here. Like a parent who wants their children to grow in their understanding of who their parent is without forgetting the nourishing ways by which God, as Shaddai, has nurtured them from birth.

So far, so good, we might think. And I like that kind of imagery. And yet what's more than a little perplexing, therefore, is the way in which these verses describing God as Shaddai or El Shaddai are translated in our English Bibles. Because on each occasion, Shaddai is actually translated into English as this word, Almighty. So if we take that same verse from earlier that we looked at in Genesis 49.25, our English Bibles, in translating this word Shaddai, they say this, they say, the Almighty who blesses you with blessings of the skies above, blessings of the deep springs below, blessings of the breast and womb. Which I find a bit disappointing, really. Because it totally loses that the nurturing, nourishing, more feminine side of God that Shaddai would, in my opinion, have originally implied. So what's going on here? Well, unfortunately, it would seem to me that the original meaning of Shaddai has almost been deliberately lost in translation. You see, as the

Bible goes on, Shaddai is used less and less as a way of describing God, partly because God's name, Yahweh, is used, yeah. But also, I'd suggest, because as time goes on, some of the later biblical writers seem keen to minimize the ways in which God is associated with more feminine imagery and qualities.

Now, why would they do this? Well, partly, perhaps, to distinguish God from other female deities at the time. You've got goddesses like this. This is a little carving of Asherah, who at the time in the Bible was a kind of rival deity to God, you know, a goddess of pagan fertility who was worshipped by a lot of people in the ancient Near East at the time of the Bible. But it also, it seems, people reduced this way of thinking about God as Shaddai because in a time of war and a time of conflict, they wanted to imagine their God to be more of a traditionally masculine, you know, aggressive warrior than a nurturing God with breasts. You know, obviously, a more feminine image. And as I've been researching this, you know, other views are available on this. But for me, as far as I can work out in reading around this, this seems to be nothing more than bad old-fashioned sexism. You know, the patriarchy taking control of the ways in which God is presented and communicated. But why? Why is, or why does Shaddai become almighty in our English Bibles?

[15 : 47] Well, here's the final, I would say, important piece of the jigsaw. And might need to pay attention for this bit. It's a bit of a head mash because it involves different languages. But let's see how we get on. So let me try and do my best to explain this. So when the Hebrew Old Testament was first translated into Greek, the Hebrew word Shaddai was translated as the Greek word pantocrata, which means all sustaining. It's not a bad translation, perhaps, for thinking about a God of breasts. You know, it's nourishing, nurturing, all sustaining God. But in many centuries later, when a guy called Jerome translated the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible into Latin, he mistakenly translated the Greek word pantocrata into the Latin word omnipotens, from where we get the English word omnipotent, which means all powerful, we might say almighty. And so our English Bibles, in taking that Latin lead, they mistakenly translate Shaddai as almighty, which is a real shame, I think, because so much of the nurturing, nurturing, nourishing, sustaining qualities of God are overtaken by this, what I would call mistaken view of seeing God as almighty.

It's a real shame, perhaps, until that is, I think we realise that we have the benefit of seeing the true nature and character of this nurturing, nourishing God revealed in Jesus.

You see, I'd suggest the picture that Jesus paints of God, and indeed the God who Jesus is, is far more about nurture and nourishment than it is about might and muscle, regardless of what some biblical authors or translators would have us believe.

So if we think about Jesus' life, you know, in fact, from his conception in Mary's womb and being fed as a baby at his mother's breast, time and again, we see the nurturing, nourishing God being lived out in the life of Jesus.

So we see Jesus call a varied bunch of people, both men and women, to be his disciples, identifying their potential, nurturing their faith, teaching them how to pray, sharing with them inspiring stories, showing them how to forgive, empowering them to step out in faith, and modelling to them the humble, generous, sacrificial ways in which we might serve others.

[18 : 53] Equally, we see Jesus healing all sorts of diseases and ailments, you know, healings accompanied by real compassion and care for people.

Healings of power, yes, especially when overcoming people's demons and deepest needs, but even these are holistic healings of liberation which restore people not just to full mental and physical health, but to their rightful places in society as well.

Alongside this, Jesus teaches people the ways of God, these which prioritise the needs of the poor, the weak, the hungry, the grieving, the sick, ways which we could say which nourish people's spiritual, emotional, and social well-being.

Equally, Jesus challenges the elites and the unjust while defending the oppressed and the put-down, the outcasts and the ignored, nurturing their awareness of just how seen and loved they are by God.

Equally, Jesus champions and makes a point of empowering women, nourishing their sense of self-worth and enabling them to see both their humanity but also their femininity as reflections of the God in whose image they're made.

[20 : 21] What's more, just like a breast-feeding God, Jesus nourishes people in practical ways too. We're told different occasions feeding 4,000 then 5,000 people with just a few bread and fish turns everyday water into the finest of wines.

He cooks breakfast for his friends on the beach. He also highlights the spiritual nourishment that comes with him too, calling himself the bread of life and the one who provides living water that will never run dry.

so we'll never be spiritually thirsty which is an interesting thought. Most of all by submitting to the persecution and pain of death on the cross Jesus demonstrates that actually it's through weakness not might that God's power is most at work and yet by rising again to new life Jesus also invites us to share in his victory over violence and the internal liberation from sin and death that his resurrection brings about and then by freely giving of his spirit Jesus offers the ongoing nurture and nourishment that enables us to know God's assurance God's guidance God's love enables us to live in line with his ways but then full circle almost enables us to produce fruit that will nourish those around us the good fruit of the spirit fruit that will last see I think what's fascinating is that not once in the gospels not once does Jesus describe God as almighty instead the God who Jesus reveals indeed the God who Jesus is is far more it seems about nurture and nourishment than he is about might and muscle yes there's power in Jesus of course but it's shown in the power of love and of healing and of forgiveness and of redemption and resurrection and life not by the power of physical might or control indeed even in the book of revelation the last book in the bible where we do read in our English translations of God being almighty it's an

English translation of that same Greek word *pantocrata* which as we saw is closer to meaning all sustaining rather than almighty and so it's in this way I would suggest that the title the name of Shaddai is renewed lived out in the life and person of Jesus the one who nurtures and nourishes us just as a mother breastfeeds her children Jesus is the one who ultimately sustains all things by his life and his love and this same Jesus well that's the one he's the one whose life whose death and whose resurrection we're going to celebrate and remember in just a moment as we join together for communion and communion this profound way by which we can all be nurtured and nourished by God in our faith as we receive the bread and wine as we receive the bread and juice these symbols of the eternal nourishment of God

I'd say these are signs and symbols of the timeless way in which God has always been and always will be our provider our sustainer our El Shaddai the one who is life Amen