

Christopher B. Hays*

Enlil, Isaiah, and the Origins of the *ʿēlîlîm*: A Reassessment

<https://doi.org/10.1515/zaw-2020-2002>

Among the Hebrew terms used to describe false gods and idols in the Bible is *ʿēlîlîm* (עֲלִילִים). Like similar pejorative terms, it has a complex history. Its etymology is incorrectly explained in a number of standard reference works, and its origins are barely addressed at all in recent critical commentaries on Isaiah, where the term is used most often. The present article picks up an older and neglected suggestion about etymology and explains the process by which the term came to have its meaning.

Underlying most analyses of *ʿēlîlîm* is the argument that it originated as an adjective meaning something like »weak, powerless« and was substantivized in the plural to describe false gods. However, there is no attestation of such a term in any Semitic language prior to the influence of the Bible. There is a phantom Ugaritic cognate from the Baal Myth which is cited widely, and which originated with the text's initial publication: Charles Virolleaud read a line from the myth as *wtd' . ill . kmtt* (now KTU³ 1.5 v 16–17), and translated, »you will know nothingness when [or: because] you are dead.«¹ Versions of this were followed by Gordon, Driver, Gibson and Gray.² The reading *ill*, however, was mistaken. It was corrected

1 Original: »tu connaîtrais le néant quand (ou puisque) tu seras mort«; Charles Virolleaud, »La mort de Baal: Poème de Ras-Shamra (I AB)«, *Syria* 15 (1934) 325 f.

2 Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), 179; 359; John C. L. Gibson and Godfrey Rolles Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (London: T & T Clark International, 1977), 72 n. 7; John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan: The Ras Shamra Texts and Their Relevance to the Old Testament*, VTSup 5 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1957), 60.

Article note: I am grateful to Shawn Z. Aster and David Allen Michelson for their dialogue about this note. I am a research associate of the Department of Old Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. The present article was inspired by a dialogue with Matthew Lynch around the manuscript of his forthcoming book, *First Isaiah and the Disappearance of the Gods*. While we have come to different conclusions about the development of the term *אֲלִילִים*, I am thankful for his friendship and collegiality.

***Kontakt:** Christopher B. Hays, Fuller Theological Seminary, 135 N Oakland Ave, Pasadena, CA 91101, USA, E-Mail: hays@fuller.edu

to *ilm* as early as Herdner's 1963 edition,³ and the most recent translations all read *ilm*.⁴ The reading is no longer marked as uncertain in KTU³; and there is no other attestation of a term *ill* in Ugaritic.⁵

Not only there is no Ugaritic cognate for an adjective *ʾlīl*, outside the Bible there is no evidence that such a word existed in any West Semitic language prior to the Common Era; indeed, the only cognates proposed are from much later Syriac and Arabic, which probably do not shed light on the etymology of the biblical occurrences.⁶ Consistent with this data, it will be shown farther along that the biblical occurrences of *ʾlīl* as an adjective are later than some of the nominal ones in Isaiah, which poses a problem for the theory that the noun developed as a dysphemism based on such an adjective.⁷

In the Iron Age II, Akkadian influence suggests itself as a possibility. However, the Akkadian cognate usually cited—*ulālu*, »powerless«—also suffers from significant weaknesses. The vocalization differs significantly from BH *ʾlīl*, and *ulālu* is used almost exclusively as a noun for »a weakling«, »a simpleton« or someone otherwise susceptible to oppression.⁸ It is most often used sympathetically, in contexts of social justice or divine blessing, e. g.,: »you (Marduk) lift up the weak, strengthen the powerless, support the helpless, and shepherd the feeble (*ulāla*).«⁹ The *ulālu* is thus something like the widow or the orphan. It is not

3 Andrée Herdner, *Corpus des Tablettes en Cunéiformes Alphabétiques Découvertes à Ras Shamra-Ugarit de 1929 à 1939*, Mission de Ras Shamra 10 (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1963), 36.

4 Pardee: »the gods will know that you are dead« (COS 1.86, p. 266); »you will know, O God, that you are dead« (Smith in Parker, UNP, 148); »may the gods know that you are dead« (DULAT³, 588). Smith and Pitard have not yet published their VTSup edition of the passage.

5 See DULAT³, 54.

6 It is not attested in any NW Semitic text; nor in biblical, Judean or Babylonian Aramaic. Cognates are sometimes proposed in other late Semitic languages. Syriac *ʾallil*, »weak«, is likely to be influenced by the biblical usage. Arabic *ʾalīl*, »robbed«, and *ʾalāl*, »useless« are later still, and their derivation uncertain. The term *ʾlīl* occurs a few times in the extrabiblical Qumran texts, all of which are obviously influenced by the biblical usage, and all of which are nominal (1QpHab XII,12[=Hab 2:18]; 1QM XIV,1; 1Q22 1i8; and in Aramaic, 4Q198 1,13[=Tob 14:6]).

7 This is the view briefly endorsed by H. G. M. Williamson (*Isaiah 1–5*, ICC [London: T&T Clark, 2006], 216), who is followed by Matthew Lynch, *First Isaiah and the Disappearance of the Gods*; CSHB (Eisenbrauns/PSU, forthcoming).

8 Hayim ben Yosef Tawil noticed the problem that Akk. *ulālu* is employed »mainly to describe the socially deprived, a worthless and weak person«, but pressed the issue no further (*An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew* [Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2009], 21).

9 *tazaqqap enša pīnuqa turappaš tattanašši la lēʾamma tereʾi ulāla* (AfO 19 65 iii 14); cited in CAD U/W, 70.

used in any theological or mythological way to describe divinities in Akkadian—pejoratively or otherwise.

* * *

This unsatisfying etymological picture is not so uncommon, of course. Were there not a better explanation, one might have to accept it as a best guess. As it happens, however, a better suggestion was advanced in 1907 by A. T. Clay, who noted in passing that »[t]he origin of אֱלִילִים, the word translated ›idols‹ in the Old Testament [...] is probably to be found in the name of the Nippurian deity Ellil.«¹⁰

The deity commonly called Enlil was indeed particularly associated with the city of Nippur, but his history is a good deal more complex than was understood at the beginning of the 20th century. His name was known far and wide throughout the ancient Near East, and in syllabic cuneiform it was written as Illil (e. g., ^dī-li-lu);¹¹ this is taken to be a contracted form based on a doubling of the word *ilu*, »god«, i. e. *il-ilū*, »god of gods«.¹² This vocalization Illilu and its equation with Enlil are attested already in bilingual texts from Ebla. In fact, it is now commonly argued that the Sumerian writing of his name, ^dEN.LÍL (»Lord Wind«) was derived from the Semitic name, since he does not seem to have been commonly associated with weather phenomena.¹³ By the reign of Samsi-Adad I (1807–1775 BCE),

10 Albert T. Clay, »Ellil, the God of Nippur«, *AJSL* 23 (1907) 277.

11 Francesco Pomponio and Paolo Xella, *Les Dieux d'Ebla: Étude Analytique des Divinités Éblaïtes à l'Époque des Archives Royales du IIIe Millénaire*, AOAT 245 (Münster: Ugarit, 1997), 170 f.; Knut Leonard Tallqvist *Akkadische Götterepitheta*, *Studia Orientalia* 7 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1974), 25; Ivan Hruša, *Ancient Mesopotamian Religion: A Descriptive Introduction* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2015), 41.

12 It should be noted, however, that this doubling theory works only in Akkadian; אֱלִיל cannot be explained as originally a reduplicated Hebrew form. Most obviously, it is never written אֱלִילֵאל. One who has advanced this theory is H. D. Preuss, *TWAT* I:306. The very theory that certain reduplicated noun forms carry a diminutive meaning in classical Hebrew—on the basis of the nouns אֲדָמָדִים, אֲדָמָדִים, אֲדָמָדִים, אֲדָמָדִים, אֲדָמָדִים, אֲדָמָדִים—could be doubted (some of these are discussed in James L. Sagarin, *Hebrew Noun Patterns (Mishqalim): Morphology, Semantics, and Lexicon* [Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987], 146 f.). This set includes two terms for skin conditions and three *hapax legomena* whose meaning and derivation are uncertain. Furthermore, the set includes different noun patterns, basically אֲדָמָדִים and אֲדָמָדִים, neither of which matches אֱלִילֵאל. No conclusions about אֱלִיל should be drawn from these data. (The idea of a »diminutive *lamedh*« ending is, if anything, even more speculative.)

13 Piotr Michalowski suggested interpreting the name Enlil as the Sumerianisation, by dissimilation (Illil > Enlil): »The Unbearable Lightness of Enlil«, in *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East: Papers Presented at the 43rd Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Prague, July 1–5, 1996*, ed. Jiří Prosecký (Prague: Oriental Institute, 1998) 241. For discussion, see Lluís Feliu, »Concern-

the national god of Assyria, Aššur, was already being equated with Enlil/Illil and his abstract lordship was being emphasized far more than any weather associations.¹⁴

Because lordship itself was Illil's defining characteristic, and because lordship among the gods was always being contested, additional terms emerged from this process: Akkadian terms such as *illilu*, »god of the highest rank« and *illilūtu*, »divine supremacy« (literally »Enlil-ship«).¹⁵ In addition to Aššur, *illilūtu* was ascribed to various other deities over the centuries, including Šamaš, Marduk, Šin and Nabû, each of whom was called *illilu* at various times.¹⁶ This background is significant to the biblical use of אֱלִיל, since it too arguably began with a specific reference to Illil, but was also applied to other divinities.

* * *

One might expect commentators on the book of Isaiah to have taken an interest in the origins of אֱלִיל, since the term occurs eight times in the book—nearly half the total biblical attestations—and since the Mesopotamian backgrounds of some of Isaiah's rhetoric has been the subject of considerable focus.¹⁷ That does not seem to be the case, however; among commentaries that can (at a stretch) be called recent, only Wildberger even touches on the question of the term's etymology, and he mentions Clay's theory only in passing.¹⁸

ing the Etymology of Enlil: the An=Anum Approach«, in *Šapal tibnim mû illak: Studies Presented to Joaquín Sanmartín on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Gregorio del Olmo Lete, Lluís Feliu, Adelina Millet Albà, AuOrSup 22 (Barcelona: AUSA, 2006) 229–246; and Xianhua Wang, *The Metamorphosis of Enlil in Early Mesopotamia*, AOAT 385 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011), 101 f.; 245.

¹⁴ Stefan M. Maul, »Marduk, Nabû und der assyrische Enlil: Die Geschichte eines sumerischen Su'ilas« in *Festschrift für Rykle Borger zu seinem 65. Geburtstag am 24. Mai 1994: Tikip Santakki Mala Bašmu*, ed. idem, Cuneiform Monographs 10 (Groningen: Styx, 1998) 191 f.

¹⁵ CAD I/J, 85–86; Simo Parpola et al., *Assyrian-English-Assyrian Dictionary* (University of Helsinki, 2007), 40.

¹⁶ Hruša, *Ancient Mesopotamian Religion*, 42; CAD I/J, 85.

¹⁷ A few examples in addition to those cited below include Shawn Zelig Aster, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1–39: Responses to Assyrian Ideology*, SBLANEM 19 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2017); Peter Machinist, »Assyria and Its Image in First Isaiah«, *JAOS* 103 (1983) 719–737; idem, »The Rab Šāqēh at the Wall of Jerusalem: Israelite Identity in the Face of the Assyrian »Other««, *Hebrew Studies* 41 (2000) 151–168; Stéphanie Anthonioz, *À qui me comparerez-vous? Is 40,25: La polémique contre l'idolâtrie dans le Deutéro-Isaïe* (Paris: Cerf, 2011); Michael B. Dick, *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999).

¹⁸ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 109. Preuss (*TWAT* I:306) seems to have been largely dependent on Wildberger's judgment about etymology. In addition, see Williamson in n 7.

An analysis of the biblical texts suggests that the term אָלִיל was adopted into Hebrew by Isaiah or one of his early tradents. The occurrence that is likely to have been earliest is placed on the lips of the Assyrian king in Isa 10:10:

האליל
whose images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria ...
כאשר מצאה ידי לממלכת האליל¹⁹ ופסיליהם מירושלם ומשמרון:

It has been demonstrated repeatedly that the language of Isa 10:5–34 reflects and inverts specific Assyrian rhetoric, and plausibly participate in the political dynamics of the eighth century.²⁰ Peter Machinist has written that Isa 10:5–15 is »replete with echoes of the actual royal inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period.«²¹ For example, it has been widely recognized that Isa 10:8, in which the Assyrian king says: »Are not my commanders all kings?« (הלא שרי יחדו מלכים), plays with the meanings of Akkadian *šarru* and *malku* and »reflects the Assyrian practice of replacing local vassal kings with Assyrian officers.«²²

Machinist notes that the Assyrian provincialization of the cities listed in 10:9 spanned from ca. 740 to 717 BCE, so the list does not refer to the conquests of a single king, let alone a single military campaign. Rather, it refers to a state of alike-ness among colonized city-states, and so is a more general representation of propagandistic Assyrian rhetoric: *You may think you're special, but every city and nation winds up the same*. The boast that all provinces were alike is in line with the well-known Assyrian claims that they had imposed one language and one set of cultural mores on defeated peoples.²³ This very species of rhetoric is used

¹⁹ The variant אלילים, attested only in 1QIsa^a, was probably influenced by the other BH usage of the term and the ensuing plural פסיליהם. The singular is clearly *lectio difficilior*.

²⁰ For a fairly recent survey of literature see Michael J. Chan, »Rhetorical Reversal and Usurpation: Isaiah 10:5–34 and the Use of Neo-Assyrian Royal Idiom in the Construction of an Anti-Assyrian Theology«, *JBL* 128 (2009) 717–733; Aster, *Reflections*, 173–237. All of this is contrary to an older opinion that much of Isa 10 is relatively late, on the basis of literary analysis: Isaiah 10 is of course part of a larger dialogue about kingship in Isaiah 1–39, is often discussed in connection with the Deuteronomistic stories of Sennacherib's siege in chaps. 36–37; but that need not mean that they derive from the same period.

²¹ Peter Machinist, »Ah, Assyria...« (Isaiah 10:5 ff.): Isaiah's Assyrian Polemic Revisited«, in *Not Only History. Proceedings of the Conference in Honor of Mario Liverani held in Sapienza – Università di Roma, Dipartimento di scienze dell'antichità, 20–21 April 2009*, eds. Gilda Bartoloni, Maria Giovanna Biga and Armando Bramanti (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016) 196.

²² *Ibid.*, 199; Aster, *Reflections*, 184–190.

²³ On the Assyrians' imposition of cultural uniformity on subject peoples, see Bustenay Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1979)

in Assyrian inscriptions mentioning the submission of every one of the specific nations in 10:9.²⁴

In light of Assyrian propaganda, the singular use of אֱלִיל in 10:10 is telling. Rather than referring back to the small, regional kingdoms listed in v. 9 (in which case one would expect the plural אֱלִילִים), it more likely refers to Sennacherib's victories in Babylonia. In multiple inscriptions, beginning in 702, Sennacherib boasted of his conquest of southern Mesopotamia—including Illil's home city, Nippur, and various other southern Mesopotamian (and Aramean) cities—in lengthy lists of rebellious peoples;²⁵ and he goes on to characterize all the peoples ruled by Assyria as »subjects of the god Illil« (*ba'ulāt Illil*).²⁶ (The Assyrians had by that point taken over both the city of Illil and the religious rhetoric associated with Illil.) That is to say, in this reflection of Assyrian rhetoric, the king's boast in Isa 10:10 is that he has seized »the kingdoms of Illil«.²⁷ Insofar as this boast became a standard element in numerous inscriptions from that point on, it is likely that it was also used in diplomatic rhetoric, as part of the Assyrians' notorious use of terrorizing propaganda to avoid having to fight battles.²⁸

esp. 81–91; Christoph Uehlinger, *Weltreich und ›Eine Rede‹: Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzählung (Gen 11, 1–9)*, OBO 101 (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1990).

24 The following examples are taken from Hayim Tadmor and Shigeo Yamada, *The Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 BC) and Shalmaneser V (726–722 BC), Kings of Assyria*, RINAP 1 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011): Carchemish: 27.4; Calno (Akk. *Kunalia/Kullani*): 12.6'; Arpad 12.2'; Hamath 13.10; and a single list mentions the receipt of payments from Samaria, Damascus, Carchemish and Hamath (14.10–11).

25 A. K. Grayson and Jamie R. Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704–681 BC)*, RINAP 3/1 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 1; 15; 52; etc.

26 RINAP 3/1, 1.66, etc. In some respects, Sargon II used very similar rhetoric to Sennacherib's, referring to all Assyrians as »subjects of Enlil« and himself as the agent of Enlil (see Andreas Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargons II aus Khorsabad* [Göttingen: Cuvillier, 1994], 289; 293; etc.). However, in other respects they differ: Although Sargon also campaigned against Babylonia, he repeatedly emphasized his favorable treatment of its cities, including Nippur. See Fuchs, *Inschriften*, 289; 307; 335, etc.; as well as Sarah C. Melville, *The Campaigns of Sargon II, King of Assyria, 721–705 B.C.*, Campaigns and Commanders 55 (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016) 154–172. Nor does Enlil figure in comparable ways in the rhetoric of Tiglath-Pileser III or Shalmaneser V.

27 On the use of the definite article in אֱלִיל, one may compare the fairly regular form אֱלִילִים.

28 Theodore J. Lewis, »You Have Heard What the Kings of Assyria Have Done«: Disarmament Passages vis-à-vis Assyrian Rhetoric of Intimidation« in *Isaiah's Vision of Peace in Biblical and Modern International Relations: Swords Into Plowshares*, eds. R. Cohen and R. Westbrook (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 75–100; A. Leo Oppenheim, »Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires«, in *Propaganda and Communication in World History*, vol. 1, *The Symbolic Instrument in Early Times*, ed. Harold D. Lasswell et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1979) 111–144.

The conclusion that »the kingdoms of Illil« in Isa 10:10 refers specifically to the cities of southern Mesopotamia would also make better sense of the ensuing comparative statement that »their images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria.« Simply put, the prestige of the cult sites of Babylonia was well known, and overshadowed even those of Assyria in the wider ancient Near Eastern world; even the Neo-Assyrian emperors acknowledged as much.²⁹ They rebuilt Babylonian temples, dedicated statues in them, and gave favorable tax status to citizens of their cities.³⁰

The knowledge of Illil in proto-Isaiah has also been perceived in connection with the otherwise mysterious »Hêlêl ben Shaḥar« in Isa 14:12. That name appears in a taunt-song over a fallen Assyrian king.³¹ W. R. Gallagher has cogently argued that the author drew on anti-Assyrian rhetoric in which Aššur and Illil were equated and the deity's fall symbolized the destruction of the nation and its dynasty.³²

Since the entire point of these proto-Isaianic passages is that Yhwh was in charge of history rather than the Assyrians and their gods, אֱלִיל implicitly carried the connotation »false god« from its beginnings. Even at the outset it was a term employed to distinguish false gods from the real God. Nevertheless, after the term entered the Isaianic lexicon and tradition, it began to undergo changes in use. It occurs twice in the oracle against Egypt in Isa 19:1,3, an eighth-century passage³³ that (perhaps surprisingly) shows a number of apparent influences from Akkadian. The use of סכר in 19:4 echoes Assyrian literary motifs,³⁴ and in 19:3 אֱלִיל occurs next to what is widely recognized as the only biblical instance of a loanword from Akk. *eṭimmu*, »spirit of the dead«:

²⁹ Steven W. Holloway, *Aššur is King! Aššur is King! Religion in the Exercise of Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, CHANE 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 380–425.

³⁰ Holloway, *Aššur is King!*, 88; 146.

³¹ For an overview, see Christopher B. Hays, *Death in the Iron Age II and in First Isaiah*, FAT 79 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 219–221.

³² William R. Gallagher, »On the Identity of Hêlêl Ben Šaḥar«, *UF* 26 (1994) 145 f.; If the Isaianic texts have been preserved correctly—which is by no means certain in the case of a loanword that has been poorly understood by the later tradition—one can only speculate about why the name is spelled differently in different instances (אֱלִיל vs. הֵלֵל). Even in the Case of *êfil*, I do not take the MT's pointing to fully reflect it's derivation.

³³ Hilary Marlow, »The Lament Over the River Nile—Isaiah XIX 5–10 in its Wider Context«, *VT* 57 (2007) 229–242; Alviero Niccacci, »Isaiah XVIII–XX from an Egyptological Perspective«, *VT* 48 (1998) 214–238; Donald B. Redford, »The Relations between Egypt and Israel from El-Amarna to the Babylonian Conquest«, in *Biblical Archaeology Today: Proceedings of the International Congress on Biblical Archaeology, Jerusalem, April 1984* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1985) 195.

³⁴ Christopher B. Hays, »Damming Egypt / Damning Egypt: The Paronomasia of *skr* and the Unity of Isa 19:1–15«, *ZAW* 120 (2008) 612–616.

the spirit of the Egyptians shall be crushed within it,
and I will confound its plan.
They will consult their *'ēlîlîm* and their shades, (וּדְרְשׁוּ אֱלֹהֵי־אֱלִילִים וְאֱלֹהֵי־אֲטִים)
their ghosts and their familiar spirits ...

The specific association with Mesopotamian mythology is lost here, but if אֱלִילִים were considered an Akkadian loanword here, like אֲטִים, then it is still used essentially correctly to refer to Egyptian divinities in general, even if pejoratively. It had not, up to that point, been associated with terminology referring to idols.

* * *

The next stage of אֱלִיל's use moved it farther afield. By way of background—as J. J. M. Roberts has observed, v. 10 »is only a fragment, and perhaps a reworked fragment at that.«³⁵ That verse begins with a comparison (»Just as my hand has reached ...«)—a protasis that never finds its apodosis. When the redactor inserted v. 11, it seems to have come at the cost of some loss of text. Thus, one of the earliest instances אֱלִילִים meaning »idols« may have been the expansion in Isa 10:11:

Just as I have done to Samaria and her *'ēlîlîm* (אֱלִילִים),
shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols (עֲצָבִים)?
הֲלֹא כַאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְשֹׁמְרוֹן וְלֵאֱלִילֶיהָ כֵּן אַעֲשֶׂה לְיְרוּשָׁלַם וְלַעֲצָבֶיהָ:

Since v. 10 is a threat against both Samaria and Jerusalem, it has been understood to presuppose that Samaria has not yet fallen. By contrast, in v. 11 the verb tenses indicate a narrative setting in which Samaria has been conquered (עָשִׂיתִי לְשֹׁמְרוֹן), whereas Jerusalem has not (אַעֲשֶׂה לְיְרוּשָׁלַם). Thus scholars commonly posit two stages of composition: One dated to the reign of Sargon II and the second dated to Sennacherib's reign.³⁶ However, later dates seem more likely, because (1) the original layer is more consistent with Sennacherib's rhetoric and this one is more consistent with the later reshaping of the book of Isaiah;³⁷ and (2) the period of Josiah

³⁵ Jimmy J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 166.

³⁶ Machinist, »Ah, Assyria«: 202–207. So, similarly, Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 164–168; Matthijs J. de Jong, *Isaiah Among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets: A Comparative Study of the Earliest Stages of the Isaiah Tradition and the Neo-Assyrian Prophecies*, VTSup 117 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 129 f. The theory that the passage originally referred to both Samaria and Jerusalem, and that only אֱלִילִים and אֲטִים were additions (Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, SBT II/3 [London: SCM, 1967], 42f.) does not account well for the other data discussed here.

³⁷ Since the Assyrian rhetoric of cultural unification tended to predate Sennacherib, some would posit that each of vv. 9, 10, 11 comes from a different, but the conclusion that vv. 9–10

would seem a natural one for such a polemic against idols, given its emphasis on the removal of forbidden cultic paraphernalia (2 Kgs 23:24).³⁸ It would not be surprising if the redactor narrating the boasts of the Assyrian king here were the same one who added the Deuteronomistic historical material about very similar rhetoric relayed by the Rabshakeh in Isa 36–37.³⁹

Depending how early v. 11 is, the redactor who added it (and his audience) may still have been aware of the original meaning of אֱלִיל, and he may have been playing with it, delaying the revelation that it means not »chief gods«, but »idols«, which is emphasized by the parallel noun. Such »delayed completion« is characteristic of the poetry of First Isaiah.⁴⁰ Or it may be that the redactor was no longer aware of the reference to Illil and the *illilû*, in which case he slightly misunderstood the earlier texts (and might thus be considered the inventor of אֱלִילִים as a Hebrew word rather than an Akkadian loanword!).

In any case, the term אֱלִיל is relevant to understanding the book's formation, in that it is used repeatedly in the condemnation of idols in Isa 2:8, 18, 20; and 31:7. Some of these are in the context of fairly stereotypical »idol-polemic« language, e. g.:

Their land is filled with idols;
they bow down to the work of their hands,
to what their own fingers have made. (2:8; cf. 2:20; 31:7)

Since the Bible's most extensive idol polemics are found in Second Isaiah (e. g., 40:18–20; 42:17; 44:9–20; 45:20; 48:5), it is tempting to assume that the occurrences in Isa 1–39 also came from the same period and redactional layer (i. e. late sixth century). However, אֱלִיל never occurs in Isa 40–66; the far more common

were written by one author, with some broader knowledge of Assyrian rhetoric, is more economical.

38 The DtrH usually uses the term גְּלוּלִים instead of either of the terms in Isa 10:10, but the passages where גְּלוּלִים appears (2 Kgs 17:12; 21:11; 21:21; 23:24) are all post-Josianic (note the occurrences relating to the unpardonable »sin of Manasseh« theme).

39 Williamson, here as elsewhere, resists countenancing Josianic layers in the book; but his theory that the idol language in Isa 1–39 must all be later than Second Isaiah hangs on the slender thread of his understanding of the redaction of Isa 2:18–20. See his »Idols in Isaiah in the Light of Isaiah 10:10–11« in *New Perspectives on Old Testament Prophecy and History: Essays in Honour of Hans M. Barstad*, eds. Rannfrid I. Thelle, Terje Stordalen and Mervin E. J. Richardson, VTSup 168 (Leiden: Brill, 2015) 17–28; but also the relevant sections of his ICC commentary. His judgment that v. 20 is a late gloss seems likely, but the date of vv. 8 and 18 is far less secure, as even he entertains 8th-century dates for the verses all around them (Williamson, *Isaiah 1–5*, 205–213).

40 J. Blake Couey, *Reading the Poetry of First Isaiah: The Most Perfect Model of the Prophetic Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 95.

term in Second Isaiah is פסל (9x in the aforementioned passages, but never in Isa 1–39; עצב is also used in 46:1; 48:5).

Thus, a more complex process may underlie the data: I suggest tentatively that the anti-idol passages in chaps. 2 and 31 were already present when the more extensive polemics of Second Isaiah were written, and that the later tradent avoided the Isaianic coinage אֱלִיל so as to distance idols further from any hint of theological reality or significance. Jill Middlemas has emphasized how the use of specific god-language serves Second Isaiah's rhetoric of incomparability:

[S]tatements about 'God/god' ('ēlohîm) in Second Isaiah support Yahwistic divinity contrasted to the lack of divinity in empty idols. The term 'ēlohîm of Yahweh veritably saturates Second Isaiah (40:1, 3, 8, 9; 27, 28; 41:10, 13, 17; 43:3; 44:6; 45:3, 5, 14, 15, 18, 21; 46:9) with important declarations that emphasize that Yahweh alone is God and the deity of ancient Israel.⁴¹

In light of this emphatic contrast, it is understandable that the author(s) avoided the similar-sounding title *'ēlîlîm*, which indeed derived from Semitic 'l, when speaking of idols.

That sensibility was not universally shared, since the majority of the non-Isaianic uses of אֱלִיל are in anti-idol polemics elsewhere, following the usage in Isa 2 and 31: Lev 19:4; 26:1; Hab 2:18; Ps 96:5 (=1 Chr 16:26); 97:7. Some of these are later than the Isaianic texts discussed above—and they may all be, but some are of uncertain date.⁴²

It seems clear, however, that the adjectival use of אֱלִיל emerged only quite late, since it appears clearly only in Zech 11:17 (רעי האליל, »worthless shepherd«) and Sir 11:3 (אליל בעוף דברה, »the bee is insignificant among flying creatures«).⁴³ The redefinition of the term to be a mere indeterminate pejorative had been accomplished gradually, and such a process is not so unusual in the history of language.⁴⁴ The older etymological theory—that the nominal use evolved from the adjectival one—is thus probably backwards.

⁴¹ Jill Middlemas, *The Divine Image: Prophetic Aniconic Rhetoric and Its Contribution to the Aniconism Debate*, FAT/II 74 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 100.

⁴² A reanalysis of the date of these occurrences is beyond the scope of this article.

⁴³ The other instances considered adjectival uses of אֱלִיל are actually not spelled in the same way: they are Jer 14:14 (אלול) and Job 13:4 (אלל). It is not clear how these were originally vocalized; they may have resulted from later Masoretic reinterpretation. For example, Marcus Jastrow (*Sefer Melim*, 71) connected Job 13:4 to a different term (אָלל, »soft, lax object«).

⁴⁴ The phraseology of Ps 96:5, בלי־אלהי העמים אלילים, might have supplied a jumping-off point for an adjectival interpretation of the term, but this is speculative.

Naturally, it is impossible to prove that אֱלִיל did not exist until Isaiah coined it—it is impossible to prove a negative—but if it did, there is no attestation of it in West Semitic languages prior to the time of Isaiah ben Amoz. Since the proto-Isaianic texts are among the most literarily creative in the Hebrew—rich in *hapax legomena* and other interesting linguistic features—it would be no surprise if the prophet were responsible for coining the term אֱלִיל in Hebrew as well. At the very least, it should be recognized that the nominal form appears earlier than the adjectival one.

In conclusion, then, it appears that אֱלִיל was adopted from Akkadian Illil/Enlil into Hebrew because it reflected the rhetoric of Neo-Assyrian rulers such as Sennacherib; it allowed the prophet to play on the name as he turned the tables on the Assyrian king. As in Akkadian, it was used in an extended sense to refer to major divinities; and it was retained in the Isaianic tradition presumably because it was a useful term for »false gods«—readily comprehensible even as a new coinage, yet distinct from the terms used for Yhwh. As anti-idol polemics became increasingly prominent and vicious, the latest Isaianic tradents avoided אֱלִיל, preferring more overt terms for idols. Eventually, it came to be reanalyzed as an adjective and used as a mere insult: »worthless.«

Abstract: The characteristically Isaianic term אֱלִיל for other gods does not have its roots in an earlier Semitic adjective, as has often been thought. Rather, it was adopted from Akkadian Illil/Enlil into Hebrew because it reflected the rhetoric of Neo-Assyrian rulers. As in Akkadian, it was used in an extended sense to refer to major divinities; and it was retained in the Isaianic tradition presumably because it was a useful term for »false gods«—readily comprehensible even as a new coinage, yet distinct from the terms used for Yhwh. As anti-idol polemics became increasingly prominent and vicious, the latest Isaianic tradents avoided אֱלִיל, preferring more overt terms for idols. Eventually, it came to be reanalyzed as an adjective and used as a mere insult: »worthless.«

Keywords: Israelite religion; Mesopotamian religion; Book of Isaiah; Idol worship; Hebrew Bible/OT polemics

Zusammenfassung: Der für das Jesajabuch typische Begriff אֱלִיל zur Bezeichnung anderer Götter hat entgegen einer häufig vertretene These keine Wurzeln in einem semitischen Adjektiv. Vielmehr wurde er vom akkadischen Illil/Enlil ins Hebräische übernommen, da er die Rhetorik der neuassyrischen Herrscher widerspiegelte. Wie auch im Akkadischen wurde der Begriff verwendet, um auf die großen Gottheiten zu verweisen. Vermutlich wurde er als Bezeichnung für »falsche Gottheiten« benutzt – leicht verständlich selbst als neue Prägung, aber

doch anders als die für Yhwh verwendeten Begriffe. Als die Anti-Idol-Polemik immer mehr in den Vordergrund rückte und immer bösartiger wurde, vermieden die jüngeren Tradenten des Jesaja אֱלִילִים und zogen eindeutiger Begriffe für »fremde Götter« vor. Schließlich wurde der Begriff als Adjektiv neu interpretiert und als reine Beleidigung verwendet, nämlich als »wertlos«.

Schlagwörter: Israelitische Religion; mesopotamische Religion; Jesajabuch; Götzenanbetung; hebräische Bibel/alttestamentliche Polemik

Résumé: Le terme typiquement ésaïen אֱלִילִים pour désigner les autres dieux ne trouve pas ses racines dans un adjectif sémitique antérieur, comme on l'a souvent pensé. Ce terme hébreu est une adaptation de l'akkadien Illil/Enlil parce qu'il reflète la rhétorique des dirigeants néo-assyriens. Comme en akkadien, il a été utilisé dans un sens élargi pour désigner les principales divinités ; et il a été conservé dans la tradition ésaïenne, sans doute parce qu'il s'agissait d'un terme pratique pour désigner les « faux dieux » – facilement compréhensible même en tant que nouvel idiotisme, mais distinct des termes utilisés pour Yhwh. Alors que les polémiques anti-idoles devenaient de plus en plus importantes et méchantes, les derniers traducteurs du livre d'Ésaïe ont évité le terme אֱלִילִים, préférant des termes plus explicites pour les idoles. Finalement, il a été réinterprété comme un adjectif et utilisé comme une expression insultante « sans valeur ».

Mots-clés: religion israélite; religion mésopotamienne; livre d'Isaïe; culte des idoles; polémiques dans la Bible hébraïque/Ancien Testament