



## Chapter Twelve

### ISAIAH'S "WORTHLESS IDOLS"

Isaiah's love of wordplay is well known. Among his many artistic uses of language, it appears the prophet adapted the name of "the" god into a Hebrew word, *'ēlil*, that became a common term for false gods and idols.<sup>225</sup>

As it happens, however, a better suggestion [for the etymology of *'ēlil*] 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."<sup>226</sup>

As noted above, the best explanation for the origin of Enlil's name is the Semitic *il-ilû*, "god of gods." This would have been written in syllabic cuneiform as Illil,<sup>227</sup> so its use by the prophet is not as much of a stretch as it looks at first. This is especially plausible since Assur, the chief

---

225. Hays (2020), op. cit., p. 224.

226. Ibid., p. 226.

227. Ibid.

god of the Assyrians, was “the Assyrian Enlil.”<sup>228</sup> When Assyria came to power, the temple of the god in the capital city, also called Assur, was renamed from *bit aššur* (“House of Assur”) to E-kur,<sup>229</sup> the name of Enlil’s temple in Nippur.

The turbulent political events of the day are reflected in Isaiah’s writing. Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel during his lifetime and would have done the same to Judah without God’s divine intervention.<sup>230</sup> One of the most interesting uses of *’ēlīlīm* by Isaiah describes the shift of power from southern Mesopotamia to the land of Assur, whose homeland was what is now the Kurdish region of northern Iraq:

(The king of Assyria is speaking): As my hand has reached to  
the kingdoms of the idols [*’ēlīl*],  
whose carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and  
Samaria,  
shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols [*’āšābbē*]  
as I have done to Samaria and her images [*’ēlīle*]?”  
(Isaiah 10:10–11)

The clue is the singular form of the word *’ēlīl* in verse 10, which makes the verse “my hand has reached to the kingdoms of *’ēlīl*.” In other words, the Assyrian king was referring to Sumer and Akkad, the lands that recognized Enlil as their chief deity. Chapter 10 of Isaiah depicts God speaking for the Assyrian king to *mock* the mighty Sennacherib for

228. Alasdair Livingstone, “Assur.” In K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, & P. W. van der Horst (Eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2nd extensively rev. ed.) (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), p. 108.

229. *Ibid.*

230. The story is told in 2 Kings 18:13–19:37, 2 Chronicles 32, and Isaiah chapters 36 and 37.

daring to boast that he would do to the people of Yahweh what he'd just done to the people of Enlil:

In light of Assyrian propaganda, the singular use of לִילֵא 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 מִלִּילֵא), 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; and he goes on to characterize all the peoples ruled by Assyria as “subjects of the god Illil” (*ba'ulāt Illil*). (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.”<sup>231</sup>

God does not take such hubris lightly. Isaiah 10:12–19 records His decree of Sennacherib's fate:

When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes. (Isaiah 10:12)

That was fulfilled when the angel of the LORD struck down 185,000 Assyrians outside the walls of Jerusalem,<sup>232</sup> preserving Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah for another century.

Most uses of *'ēlīlim* in the Bible refer to carved images representing

231. Hays (2020), op. cit., p. 229.

232. Isaiah 37:36.

the gods of the pagans. The word eventually became an adjective used as an insult (“worthless”).<sup>233</sup> However, there are Scriptures where it appears to refer specifically to Enlil, and more broadly to the entities who followed his example and rebelled against their Creator:

For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;  
 he is to be feared above all gods [*elohim*].  
 For all the gods [*elohê*] of the peoples are worthless idols [*’ēlîlim*],  
 but the LORD made the heavens. (Psalm 96:4–5)

The heavens proclaim [God’s] righteousness,  
 and all the peoples see his glory.  
 All worshipers of images are put to shame,  
 who make their boast in worthless idols [*’ēlîlim*];  
 worship Him, all you gods [*elohim*]! (Psalm 97:6–7)

Both of the psalms above equate *elohim* (“gods”) with the *’ēlîlim* (“worthless idols”). In these contexts, they are not the graven images forbidden by God, but rebellious spirits called *’ēlîlim*. (“Enlilites”?) The term may be similar to “revolutionary,” which describes those who take up arms against a legitimate government.

The Jewish scholars who translated the Septuagint three centuries before the birth of Jesus apparently understood, at least in some passages, that the *’ēlîlim* were not simply graven images:

For all the gods of the nations are **demons** [*’ēlîlim*],  
 but the Lord made the heavens. (Psalm 96:5 LXX, emphasis added)

Isaiah, as you’d expect from a prophet of God, foretells a day when these mutinous spirits are destroyed:

233. Hays (2020), op. cit., p. 234.

For the LORD of hosts has a day  
 against all that is proud and lofty,  
 against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low;  
 against all the cedars of Lebanon,  
 lofty and lifted up;  
 and against all the oaks of Bashan; [...]  
 And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled,  
 and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low,  
 and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.  
 And the idols [*'ēlīlim*] shall utterly pass away.  
 (Isaiah 2:12–13, 17–18)

The phrase “in that day” refers to the Day of the Lord, the ultimate fulfillment of prophecy. It describes the end of history when God finally pours out His wrath on the unrepentant—which will include “the host of heaven,”<sup>234</sup> a group that apparently includes the *'ēlīlim*. You're familiar enough by now with the supernatural significance of Mount Hermon to know that the reference to “the cedars of Lebanon” and “the oaks of Bashan” is not a polemic against imported lumber; it's a condemnation of a supernatural enemy—in this case, the one who was believed to rule over Bashan and Lebanon from his abode atop Hermon.

But Isaiah was not the only prophet to deal with Enlil. And there is evidence that the false god's presence in the Bible is recorded much earlier than Isaiah.

---

234. Isaiah 24:21.