What are ‘Elilim?’

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The word ’elîlim appears in the Hebrew Bible fourteen or fifteen times, always as a designation of deities other than Yhwh (Lev 19:4; 26:1; Isa 2:8, 18, 20; 10:10 (⁄), 11: 19:1, 3; 31:7; Ezek 30:13; Hab 2:18; Pss 96:5; 97:7; 1 Chr 16:26). Standard lexica derive the word from the root Ɑ-l-l, understanding it as a cognate of the Akkadian alâlu and Arabic *alâl or *alîl, and the plural of ’illî, with the singular form appearing four times (Jer 14:14; Zech 11:17; Job 13:4; Sir 11:3). The plural form thus has been thought a sort of frozen dysphemism: “worthless things” equal images of deities other than Yhwh.

The unqualified certainty of recent lexica has not always prevailed, however. First, the LXX renders the term inconsistently. In some cases, the Greek translators understood the Hebrew to denote a physical object, a rendering befitting the frequent parallelism between ’elîlim and pesel (as in Lev 26:1; Hab 2:18; Pss 97:7; cf. Isa 10:10) or masekâ (Lev 19:4; Hab 2:18). Such translations include ta cheiropoiēta (“the things made by hand”; Lev 26:1; Isa 2:18: 10:11; 19:1; 31:7), favored in texts emphasizing the object’s manufacture or material. When the visible nature of the ’elîlim is in view, but its manufacture is less salient, the preferred translation may be eidōlon (Lev 19:14; Hab 2:18; Ps 96:7[MT 97:7]; 1 Chr 16:26). Meanwhile, other texts understand ’elîlim as theoi (Isa 19:3, unless the Greek reflects a variant reading ’elîlim) or daimonia (Ps 95:5 [MT 96:5]). The translation “worthless” or its equivalent appears only for the singular form ’îlî (ta matata in Zech 11:17; [iatai] kakōn in Job 13:4; mikra in Sir 11:3).4

1 I am grateful to John Huehnergard and Jo Ann Hackett, as well as two anonymous reviewers, all of whom made comments on earlier drafts of this document. Errors of fact or judgment remain my responsibility, of course.

2 HALOT 1:56; BDB 47 (tentatively); DCH 1:291.

3 For example, Theodor Nöldeke attempted to explain the word as a “Metaplasmus” of a root -lattested in the Himyaric (now called Ancient South Arabian or Sabaic) word *îlî; Theodor Nöldeke, “Elohim, El (אֵל, אלהים),” Sitzungsberichte der königlichen preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin 54 (1882): 1191. Nöldeke’s argument is cited with reservations in BDB 47 but has apparently not commended itself, in part because it depends on decisions about the original text of Isa 10:10 as its primary biblical confirmation. See below.

4 Jer 14:14Qere has qesem w’êlîl, possibly a hendiadys “divination and
There are two exceptions to this rule, for ta bdeleygmatā ("abominable things") appears in Isa 2:8, 20. That lexeme normally translates the Hebrew words tēḇā or seqēs in the LXX, both of which are also dysphemisms, though occasionally it glosses tēḇēḥ-X (3 Kgdm 11:5 MSS, 33). The rendering of Isaiah 2:8, 20 LXX might be an argument for associating the plural ᵐᵓēlîm with the root ᵐᵓ-l-l, but the association is weak, since the singular ᵐᵓēl never clearly refers to idols.

Second, the Vulgate always renders ᵐᵓēlîm with a word denoting an image, whether idolum (Lev 19:4; 26:1; Isa 2:8, 18; 10:11; 31:7; Ezek 30:13; 1 Chr 16:26), simulacrum (Isa 19:1, 3; Hab 2:18), or the nominalized adjective sculptilis (Pss 95:5 [MT 96:5]; 96:7 [MT 97:7]). In no case does the translation understand the Hebrew word as "worthless thing."

Third, even in contemporary scholarship, a certain amount of confusion prevails. Thus Preuss explains the plural form as a diminutive form of ᵐᵓēl intentionally analogous to ᵐᵓēl as an expression of scorn, though this thesis can hardly be correct since the reduplication, in a noun, of the second radical of a biliteral root lacks obvious parallels. 5 At the same time, qṭīl diminutive forms typically resolve to qṭēl rather than qṭîl, 6 while more to the point qṭîl forms tend to be loanwords. 7 So there is little if any basis for such a construal as Preuss’s.

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

None of the aforementioned versional evidence disproves the modern lexicography, of course. Nor does it render invalid the translation “idols,” since the biblical texts clearly use the term negatively. Yet the ancient understanding at least opens space for other explanations. A possibility that has received only passing consideration but deserves reexamination is that ᵐᵓēlîm is a loanword from the Akkadian term illilu (“deity”), itself a Sumerian loanword EN.LÍL.LÁ. 8 The oldest appearances of the Hebrew name Enlil itself may be a loanword from a Semitic language that entered Sumerian no later than the early
word occur in Isaiah, a text replete with Akkadian loanwords owing to the awareness of Assyrian propaganda on the part of Isaiah of Jerusalem,⁹ and more generally the intense interaction between Israelite and Mesopotamian cultures during the eighth century BCE and later.¹⁰ In later texts, the meaning of ᵒĕlîlîm as a term for explicitly foreign deities remained stable.

A significant possible objection to the thesis might appeal to the word’s morphology. The Hebrew ᵒĕlîlîm lacks the geminated ℓ, which originated from the assimilation of ℓ and ℓ in Akkadian.¹¹ However, of the eighty more or less certain Akkadian loanwords in the Hebrew Bible, eight contain non-guttural geminated medial consonants, i.e., forms that could be represented in Masoretic Hebrew as such (Addaru, ikkāru, ummiānu, aššatu, libbātu, maṣṣaru, nikkassu, and šabbiṭu).¹² Two forms, influenced by Aramaic, dissimilate the geminated consonants (maṣṣaru → mešār; šabbiṭu → šarbīṭ); and two others simply de-geminate the consonants (Addaru → ŭādār; nikkassu → nēkāsîm). That is, the differences in spelling are not fatal for understanding the Hebrew lexeme ᵒĕlîlîm as a loanword, possibly via Aramaic.¹³ In short, then, no convincing argument exists refuting the understanding of ᵒĕlîlîm as an Akkadian loanword and thus as deriving from a separate root than the singular form ᵒĕlîl.

third millennium BCE, as argued by Piotr Steinkeller, “On Rulers, Priests and Sacred Marriage: Tracing the Evolution of Early Sumerian Kingship,” in Kazuko Watanabe (ed.), Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near East: Papers of the Second Colloquium on the Ancient Near East–The City and its Life held at the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan (Mitaka, Tokyo) (Heidelberg: Winter, 1999), 103–37 (114 n. 36). However, this view has been questioned by several Assyriologists. For the history of that discussion, see Xianhua Wang, The Metamorphosis of Enlil in Early Mesopotamia (AOAT 385; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011), 6–22; Dietz Edzard, “Enlil, Vater der Götter,” in Paolo Marrassini (ed.), Semitic and Assyriological Studies Presented to Pelio Fronzaroli by Pupils and Colleagues (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 173–84. The solution to this problem is not crucial to the argument at hand, in any case.


¹⁰ On important aspects of that contact, see Peter Dubovský, Hezekiah and the Assyrian Spies: Reconstruction of the Neo-Assyrian Intelligence Services and its Significance for 2 Kings 18–19 (BibOr 49; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006).

¹¹ On the assimilation of –n, see G·AG §33d-g.

¹² Derived from Paul V. Mankowski, Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew (HSS 47; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 168–73 and infra. On gemination and de-gemination of consonants, see G·AG §20a-d.

¹³ The reduction of i- to ē- in initial syllables is documented for Akkadian loanwords in Aramaic, as shown by Stephen A. Kaufman, “On Vowel Reduction in Aramaic,” JAS 104 (1984): 87–95. The vowel reduction would also render the degemination of –l- unavoidable, at least for a Hebrew text borrowing the word (cf. again, Addaru → ŭādār; nikkassu → nēkāsîm).
A second possible objection arises because *illīlu* is fairly rare in Akkadian. However, this point is also not decisive, not only because a number of the Akkadian loanwords in Hebrew are religious words (as well as technological and military/political terms), but because some other fairly rare words did cross the linguistic boundary. These include *šarrēru* → *šāšar* (“red clay, pigment” [Jer 22:14; Ezek 23:14]), *șumbu* → *šāb* (“wagon, wagon wheel” [Num 7:3; Isa 66:20], and *kamānu* → *kawwān* (“sweet cake” [Jer 7:18; 44:19]). Admittedly the first two may accompany technology transfer, but the third is unlikely to have done so.

Moreover, the resurgence of Enlil in Assyrian texts, seen prominently in the inscriptions of Assurbanipal, is prefigured in those of Tiglath-pileser III, which refer at least sometimes to Aššur as “Enlil of the gods” (*illīl ilāni*). If we could identify a trigger for moving the word *illīlu* to Northwest Semitic languages (Aramaic and Hebrew) in the eight century BCE, the oral proclamation of Tiglath-pileser III’s propaganda would be a reasonable guess.

**Positive Arguments**

What arguments could move this understanding of the etymology of *ʾēlîlîm* from a possibility to a probability? To make that case, one might consider (1) the process of borrowing from one language to another, and (2) the understanding of the word held by those using it.

First, lexical borrowing meets least resistance when the two languages share similar phonologies, as would have been the case with Akkadian and Hebrew. And while any aspects of language may be borrowed, nouns move most easily from more to less prestigious languages (in this case, Akkadian to Hebrew), particularly when the nouns come from technical or elite zones of the vocabulary.

When do speakers recognize a given word as a loanword, and how do they “nativize” it? Frequently, lexical borrowings

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14 Enlil (*EN.I.I.L.*) appears in the inscriptions of Assurbanipal (RINAP 5/1 3.i.38, v.17; 4.i.30; 5.iii.23; 6.i.8”; 7.i.89”, v.84; 9.iii. 34; 10.iv.11; 11.iv.111, viii.92, 97, ix.74, 77, 84; 23.5, 29, 110), including the phrase *ba’ulat* *EN.I.I.L.* (“subjects of Enlil”; RINAP 6.i.8”; 7.i.89”; 10.iv.11).

15 RINAP 1 35.i.1, 34; 37.1 (cf. 35.i.21; 37.12; 39.2; 40.3; 46.2). In these inscriptions, Enlil is normally written *.BAD*, but in the phrase *illīl ilāni* is written *EN.I.I.L.A.*, indicating a subtle theological reflection on the relationship between the entity Enlil and the status of Enlil-ness (so to speak).


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must be fitted to the phonology of the receptor language. However, morphological refitting also sometimes occurs as in the change of case endings or repluralization. In the present instance the -īm ending of *Ĕlîlm conforms the word to Hebrew pluralization of masculine nouns.

If *Ĕlîlm is a lexical borrowing from Akkadian, and therefore a homophone of a possibly native Hebrew word *Ĕlîl that appears in biblical texts only as a singular noun, then it would be striking that the loanword is plural at all times. The phonology of the plural (notably the use of the long medial vowel /i/ > /î/) would reflect an attempt to conform the loanword to the native word *Ĕlîl while still keeping them distinct. In other words, *Ĕlîlm refers to multiple deities conceived of as a group in distinction from the Israelite deity Yhwh. While the common Hebrew word ʿĔlîlîm can bear a similar meaning, some reason existed for preferring a foreign-sounding word in certain circumstances (though note the concatenation of the words in Ps 97:7).

Second, to clarify this point, the semantic range and denotation of *Ĕlîlm and thus the earliest known understandings of the word by Hebrew speakers show a clear pattern:

1. The word never refers to Israel’s deity;
2. It never designates a class of beings of which Israel’s deity is a member (unlike ʾĔl or ʿĔlîhîm);
3. It may refer to artifacts, especially but not exclusively metal objects, and presumably statues (Lev 19:4; 26:1; Isa 2:8, 20; 31:7; Hab 2:18);
4. It may refer to foreign deities (Isa 10:10; 19:1, 3; Ezek 30:13; Ps 96:5; 1 Chr 16:26), but not always is their origin clear, and occasionally the deity seems to be Israelite, though not Yhwh (Isa 10:11; 31:7).

The most revealing uses of *Ĕlîlm appear in what are probably the oldest texts, Isa 2:8, 18, 20; 10:10 (?), 11; 19:1, 3; 31:7. For a word entering Hebrew from Akkadian, a plausible entry point would have been during a period of maximal contact of speakers and maximal differentiation of prestige, a condition that fits the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, precisely coeval with the earlier layers of the book of Isaiah. By the time of the creation of later texts, the word had simply become part of the Hebrew lexicon. A brief investigation of the examples in Isaiah reveals a profile of word usage indicating users’ awareness of its foreignness.

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19 But see Huehnergard, “Hebrew Nominal Patterns,” 47.
20 An analogy might be the history of the English word *camel*, from Latin *camēlus* < Greek *kāmelos* < Semitic *gāmil*—the movement of the accent from word final position in Semitic to word initial position in Greek follows the latter language’s phonological rules, as would be true in the current English form. Older English forms included *camyile*, *camell*, *camell*, and others, showing interference from French dialects and possibly reflecting a different accenture.
Case 1: Isa 2:8, 18, 20. The poem in Isa 2:5–22, which expands upon the hope oracle in 2:2–4 by contrasting the present disaster with a future resolution, depicts the change of situation in part by referring to both the present omnipresence (2:8) and soon-to-be absence (2:18) of the ṓĕlîlîm, here deities of the Northern Kingdom but manifestly not Yhwh. V. 20 speaks of the destruction of gold or silver deities on the part of their erstwhile users.

While the deities here are not foreign, strictly speaking, the portrayal of Jacob’s desperate state in 2:6–8 highlights an unnatural state of affairs marked by the presence of “diviners like the Philistines” (ʾimēnîm kaphēlîlîm) and of chariots, apparently of the Assyrian invaders.21 In other words, the presence of the ʾĕlîlîm indicates the foreignness of the moment. One need not accept the view, then, that the deities in question were northern avatars of Yhwh.22 The oracle would be engaging in code-switching, that is, “the use of material from two (or more) languages by a single speaker in the same conversation.”23 The switching would emphasize the alien nature of the situation the prophet describes.

Case 2: Isa 10:10–11. Arguably, a clearer example of such code-switching occurs in Isa 10:10–11, part of the Assyrian emperor’s invidious speech noting the weakness of conquered powers, moving ever closer to Judah. V. 11’s reference to the ʾĕlîlîm of Samaria and their defeat probably refers to the common Assyrian practice of deporting divine images to the imperial center. But more interesting, if also more problematic, is v. 10, which many scholars have argued has suffered textual corruption:

Just as my hand has found for the kingdoms of the “idol(s),”

[so will it be] for their images from Jerusalem and from Samaria.

... kaʾār maqāʾā yād lēmālikot ʾēlîlim

ūpālîhēm mītālāyim imīlīmūn

The reading in MT would suggest a translation of the last words in 11a as “kingdoms of futility,”24 punning cleverly on the plural form that appears in v. 10. In MT, again, both the first word in 11b (ʾōpēlîm) and the resulting chiastic structure (political word/divine word/divine word/political word pair) lead the poem’s audience to expect the form ʾēlîlîm in both verses, allowing the poet to “trick” the audience by using the homophonous

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21 See J. J. M. Roberts, First Isaiah (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 45.
23 Thomason, Language Contact, 132.
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native word. However, both 1QIsa² and LXX cast doubt on MT’s reading.²⁵

If we accept the reading of 1QIsa, it is curious that the oracle places in the mouth of the Assyrian king the phrase *mamlĕkôt *ĕlîlîm*, forming a collocation remarkably close to a recurring line in *Enûma elîš* malûkût ilâni gimratsunu qaîtka nîsmitî (“I filled your hands with the kingship of the gods, all of them”), a statement that Tiamat addresses four times to her consort Qingu.²⁶ As is well-known, Isaiah 10 shows extensive knowledge of Assyrian propaganda, making an allusion to a standard, even “canonical,” Mesopotamian text both possible and important. The echo of such a line would not just fit Isa 10’s already well-attested proclivities toward word play across language barriers, but would mark an extraordinarily subtle bit of counter-propaganda, answering the Assyrian deployment of *Enûma elîš* as a rationale for the allegedly creative dimensions of its expansion by turning it back on its users.²⁷ By recasting the Assyrian king as the embodiment of chaos, not creation, and the acquisition of the kingdoms of gods (now labeled with the foreign-sounding *ĕlîlîm in order to emphasize their sharp distinction from Israel’s deity)²⁸ as an

²⁵ The plural form appears in 1QIsa, while LXX’s *elolocate* represents a Hebrew *ṭebâlûti* (C imperfect) or *ṭélîti* (C imperative) of *yâlal* (“to mourn, cry out, ululate”), assuming that the idols in the Israelite capitals should mourn because of their inability to save their worshipers.


²⁸ “Foreign-sounding" because, while the normal Hebrew word *ṭelîhim can refer in the book of Isaiah to foreign deities (Isa 21:9; 36:18, 19; 37:12, 19, 38; 41:23; 42:17; 65:17), only one such usage can possibly
act threatening cosmic order rather than bolstering it, the echo plays upon the expectations of implied listeners, if not necessarily the real addressees. Whether every member of an Israelite audience would have heard the echo mattered less than its overall impressiveness.29

Case 3: Isa 19:1, 3. The reference to the ḫēlē Mīṣrayim in v. 1 is echoed by ḫēlîlîm in v. 3, where the word introduces a string of divinatory or funerary words (cf. Isa 2:6), as well as the Akkadian loanword ḫiṭṭîm (from ṣēmēnu [“ghost, revenant”]), itself a hapax legomenon in the Hebrew Bible. Again, the lines emphasize the foreignness of the word by concatenating it with other foreign words, as well as through its placement in a larger poem about Egypt.

Case 4: Isa 31:7. The date of Isa 31 is debatable, in part depending on one’s understanding of a Josianic redaction of the book.30 But the foreignness of the deities is not evident.

In summary, then, the evidence from the book of Isaiah is consistent with the belief that the word ḫēlîlîm is somehow “foreign.” As such, the vocabulary item satisfies one possible use of loanwords: even when not strictly necessary because a suitable synonym exists in the receptor language, the loanword may “enrich the language by conveying the new meaning without any ambiguity.”31 While the more normal names for deity (other than the Tetragrammaton) can name Israel’s patron deity or others, the word ḫēlîlîm admits of no ambiguity, a valuable gain for a text created in part to interpret the tragic history of the late eighth century BCE.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, then, the confidence with which modern lexica assume ḫēlîlim to be the plural of ḫēlî without further qualification seems misplaced, as does the assumption that the word is a native Hebrew word meaning “useless things” or some such.

come from the eighth-century prophet (21:9). The word refers to Israel’s deity more than 90 times in the book.

29 It is useful to keep in mind Richard Hays’s distinction between “allusion” (“usually imbeds several words from the precursor text, or it at least in some way explicitly mentions notable characters or events that signal the reader to make the intertextual connection”) and “echo” (“may involve the inclusion of only a word or phrase that evokes, for the alert reader, a reminiscence of an earlier text”). See Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 10. The Isaiah line may be an instance of allusion, with all the deliberateness of choice and expectation of understanding that the term implies. But demonstrating that claim is difficult, and so I opt for the safer label “echo.”


31 Hock and Joseph, *Language History*, 289, as part of a larger discussion of the uses of loanwords.
Strong circumstantial evidence exists for understanding the plural form to be a loanword understood as such by its earliest known user, the eighth-century (or slightly later) texts in the book of Isaiah. The uses of the word in those poetically subtle and rhetorically powerful texts show an awareness of the origins of the label in a foreign language and therefore its suitability for naming beings not suitable for Israelite worship. The borrowing of the word seems to have allowed the eighth-century prophet or his immediate successors an opportunity to signal simultaneously their awareness of the linguistic and political dominance of Assyria and their contempt for, and resistance to, that dominance.