

The deities of other nations were most explicitly cast as peripheral members of the category of deity, and particularly in later periods. For example, the story of the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal rhetorically marginalizes Baal by asserting Baal is not *hā'ēlōhīm*, “the deity.” Deuteronomy 32:16–17 is more explicit: “They made them jealous with strange ones, with abominations they provoked them. They sacrificed to *šēdīm* [*shaddays* or perhaps “demons”], not Deity [*lō' 'ēlōhā*]*—*to deities they did not know [*'ēlōhīm lō' yādā'ūm*], to new ones that showed up recently, that your ancestors did not fear.” Here the divinity of the *šēdīm* is acknowledged, but their prototypicality is rejected in their identification as “strange ones” that were not familiar to them and that their ancestors had not worshipped. This same rhetoric takes a slightly more hyperbolic tone in Deut 32:21, where the divinity of those deities is ostensibly denied: “They made me jealous with what is not a deity [*lō' -'ēl*], they provoked me with their vanities. So I will make them jealous with what is not a people [*lō' -'ām*], with a worthless nation I will provoke them.”

The parallel descriptions of the other deities and the other nation as “not a deity” and “not a people” point to the rhetorical exaggeration here.⁶⁶ The author was not denying their existence as a deity or a people, they were denigrating them as comparatively meaningless, or “vanities,” the way a Denver Broncos fan might insist the Las Vegas Raiders are “not a real football team.” This kind of rhetoric was frequently deployed to marginalize and demean the deities of other nations and their misguided citizenry (Isa 44:9; Ps 96:5 // 1 Chr 16:26),⁶⁷ but it has frequently been construed by scholars as an explicit assertion of philosophical monotheism (Middlemas 2014, 93–102). The rhetoric of incomparability that described YHWH as deity of deities (Deut 10:17; Josh 22:22; Ps 136:2) and asserted them to be greater than all other deities (Exod 18:11; 1 Chr 16:25; Ps 95:3; 96:4; 97:9) permits a less rhetorically obscured picture of the relationship of YHWH to the other deities. The cultic objects associated with the deities of the nations were more “literally” decried as non-divine in later periods, and those who treated them as deities were also mocked (Deut 28:64; Isa 42:17; 43:10; 44:9–20;

⁶⁶ Similarly, other authors put the rhetoric of exclusivity into the mouth of the personified Babylon and Nineveh (Isa 47:8, 10; Zeph 2:15), who obviously do not consider themselves to be the only cities in existence, but just the only ones that matters to their constituencies (cf. MacDonald 2003, 81–85).

⁶⁷ Christopher Hays (2020) has argued that the Hebrew *'ēlīlīm* seems to have originated in a borrowing from the Neo-Assyrian references to Enlil/Ellil (likely on the part of the author of Isa 10:10), and to have originally functioned sarcastically as a reference to “false deities.” Later it would have developed the pejorative adjectival sense of “worthless.” The rhetorical point is that the deities of the nations are insignificant or powerless deities.