Introduction

BIBLICAL SCHOLARS ROUTINELY PORTRAY ISA 1–39 as a way station toward
the "fully fledged" or "uncompromising" monotheism in Isa 40–55. Because
Deutero-Isaiah explicitly denies the existence of other gods, its rhetoric func-
tions as a yardstick for evaluating the rigor and maturity of monotheism in Isa-
iah's earlier chapters, and for many, the entire Hebrew Bible. In his *Anchor Bible
Dictionary* entry on "God," John Scullion remarks that "it is Deutero-Isaiah who
expresses most clearly that Israel's God is one and unique, in short, monotheism
in its strictest sense."[1] This work suggests that this thinking is wrongheaded. It
fails to address the diversity with which biblical writers express YHWH's sole
divinity. It ignores the distinctive form that monotheistic rhetoric took in First
Isaiah in an effort to assign each monotheistic or quasi-monotheistic text a place
in the development of Israelite religion. Tracing monotheism's development is
often like trying to trace the development of Israelite beliefs about the inclu-
sion of foreigners, or about any other subject about which the Hebrew Bible
speak at various times and in various ways. While development of monotheistic
beliefs undoubtedly occurred, I doubt our ability to plot a clear pathway where
all arrows point toward an inevitable or climactic Deutero-Isaian-like formu-
lation ("I am, and there is no other"). By contrast, this book proposes that Isa
1–39[2]—itself a complex literary whole—deploys monotheistic rhetoric with no
less rigor than Deutero-Isaiah, but that it does so in different ways. While some
studies have called attention to the imperial nature of First Isaian monotheism,
there are two underexamined aspects to that monotheizing that require further
attention. First, Isa 1–39 avoids calling other gods "gods" and instead mocks the
very presumption of divinity ascribed to idols. Second, Isa 1–39 deploys some
of the Old Testament's most striking spatial language to emphasize YHWH's
categorical exaltation and the abasement of all else. In this book, I examine ways
that First Isaiah dismisses the gods of the nations through mocking dysphe-
misms and simultaneously exalts YHWH in uncompromising terms. By refusing
to dignify the gods with the term אלהים, they "disappear" from First Isaiah's
rhetorical world while only YHWH is supremely exalted. Through a literary
and rhetorical analysis of passages using the term אלילים, I suggest that Isa 1–39
offers a powerful assertion of YHWH's sole divinity and supremacy in a world

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1. Scullion, "God," noted in Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 37.
2. I address chs. 36–39 in the book, but not as representative of the monotheizing tendencies
found in the poetry of chs. 1–35.

of political counterclaims. We may situate First Isaiah, then, as *a variety* of
monotheizing rhetoric that appears in the Hebrew Bible.

This study is not an apologetic for early monotheism. I agree with Hugh
Williamson that the texts in which First Isaiah mocks the so-called אלהים as
אלילים are quite possibly later redactions (though from when, we cannot be
certain). Instead, it is a plea for humility when telling monotheism's story in
ancient Israel. We know so little about when Israel first expressed the idea that
YHWH belongs in a category of his own, and we know so little about how wide-
spread such beliefs were when they were expressed. We also know even less
about how the Hebrew Bible's wide-ranging modes of monotheizing relate to
one another.[3] In other words, even a relative chronology of monotheizing texts
is difficult. This book looks instead at the monotheizing rhetoric of First Isaiah
as one variety of many that take shape across the Hebrew Bible and beyond.
Disentangling First Isaiah from a narrative about evolving religious belief helps
us hear this remarkable portion of Isaiah on its own terms and then gives us a
place from which to reengage with questions about the relationship between this
text and others.

Monotheism and the Eighth-Century Prophets

I begin with a look at ways that scholars have assessed monotheism (or not)
in First Isaiah. Because many assumed that the whole, or most, of First Isaiah
originated in the eighth century BCE, I will address studies that situate First
Isaiah in that historical context without committing to that temporal context for
the whole of chs. 1–39. My own position is that First Isaiah is a complex literary
unity with a long and complex redactional history, much of which we can no
longer recover. Nevertheless, much of the scholarship on First Isaiah treats it as
a product of the Assyrian period, a point to which I will later return.

Because of developmentalist conceptions of monotheism, Isa 1–39 existed
for a long time as a kind of liminal book for scholars of Israelite religion. The
prophet was a free bird, beholden neither to the "ritualistic" traditions of the past
nor to the more abstract and absolutizing formulations of monotheism that came
after him. Instead, with the other eighth-century prophets, he was considered
a dynamic soul who led Israel toward the ethical realization that YHWH stood
above and beyond Israel. His *ways* were higher, hence his ethical demands on
Israel and the nations, and his *domain* was wider, hence his rule over the nations.
To take one example from the early part of the last century, George A. Barton
argued that First Isaiah followed the prophet Amos's "abhorrence" for ritual,

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3. See Lynch, "Mapping Monotheism."

and in keeping with monotheistic ideals, envisioned a "higher religious life," even if he consistently "lapsed" back into ritualism.[4] For Barton, the evolution of Israelite religion consisted of a struggle between the higher ethical ideals of Yahwism and the ritualistic tendencies of religion. The four eighth-century prophets embodied a "practical monotheism" that avoided the speculation of later prophets. They simply avoided mention of other deities and proclaimed that YHWH ruled the nations. It was also practical in the sense that it resulted in social and ethical concerns for the poor and needy.[5]

Barton's contemporary George Gray stated with similar conviction that First Isaiah embodied a belief in "virtual monotheism" (anticipated already in Amos), in contrast to the abstract speculative monotheism that followed him. He writes this of Isa 6:

> Neither here nor elsewhere does [First] Isaiah take occasion to assert with precision, like the later Jewish prophet (45:5, 18, 22), that there is no God but Yahweh . . . yet his conception of Yahweh leaves no room for any other being in the same class. . . . The world that is full of Yahweh's glory has no room left in which to reflect the glory of any other God; and if Assyria is Yahweh's instrument (10:5ff.), made merely to serve His purpose . . ., there is no place for any gods of Assyria to control and guide that nation.[6]

Writing later, von Rad suggested that, while the seeds of monotheism's full development are present in Israel's earlier literature, "explicit monotheism" does not develop until Second Isaiah. Monotheism only emerged through confrontation with the gods of Canaan, the Assyrian threat, and eventually, in exile. Von Rad argued that, unlike traditional cultic proponents in Israel, the prophets "are much freer from traditional formulations."[7] What they say, he argues, is much closer to their own beliefs and ideas, for they stood on their own.[8] Faced with the Assyrian threat, prophets such as First Isaiah and Amos asked, who was really lord in the sphere of history? "The lordly silence with which Isaiah or Amos pass over the gods of the nations," he remarks, "is of real significance." Von Rad may be alluding to First Isaiah's silence about gods in the oracles against the nations (chs. 13–23). That silence is pregnant. Isaiah "leaves no place

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4. Barton, *Religion of Israel*, 161.

5. Ibid., 94–97.

6. Gray, *Book of Isaiah, I–XXVII*, lxxxvi. He suggests that "there may be room to question the absoluteness, and certainly the explicitness, of the monotheism of the prophets of the 8th century; [but] there can be no doubt of the intensity with which they apprehended Yahweh as a distinct and living personality" (p. lxxxvii).

7. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:212.

8. Ibid., 2:177. For a critique of the image of a lone prophet, see Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*.

whatsoever for the gods of other nations or any functions they might exercise."[9] This prepares the ground for Deutero-Isaiah, a prophet who with "conscious . . . theological reflexion" offers a clear monotheistic expression: "I am Jahweh, besides me there is no God."[10]

Von Rad argues similarly in his later published *God at Work in Israel*. There, he argues that YHWH's world-encompassing power rebalanced the prevailing assumption that Assyria stood atop the imperial heap. Assyria was a mere tool in God's hands. Noting again the absence of Assyrian gods in First Isaiah, he emphasizes how God's plans alone drive history. For von Rad, this view of history leaves no room for the nations' gods. "They are deprived of power," he writes, and so much so that when speaking about God's visitation, First Isaiah "can speak only with grim humor about the fate of idols and idols worshipers" (p. 136). For von Rad, this is monotheism, and "much more than monotheism; in Isaiah we meet an ultimate comforting message that interprets man's existence in history with reference to God's coming and therewith the removal of power from the idols."[11] His point here, as he later insists with reference to Deutero-Isaiah, is that monotheistic formulations in First Isaiah (and Second) are not abstract philosophical musings. They are borne out of the particular struggle of a politically disadvantaged people and speak into their specific historical hopes.[12]

Not all see the prophet's monotheism in such terms. Many claim that First Isaiah, with other eighth-century prophets, paved the way for monotheism by hastening Israel's break from its national "limitations."[13] Rainer Albertz proposes that the eighth-century prophets prepared Israel for universalized understandings of divinity in the exile. He builds on the early work of scholars such as Wilhelm Vatke (1835), who posited a distinction between early Israelite religion, prophetic religion, and the religion that emerged in the postexilic period. Vatke's "rather bloodless outline" of Israelite religion took further shape under Wellhausen, Keunen, and then Smend. In particular, Smend adopts Vatke's threefold schema but saw the second prophetic stage as the climax of Israel's religious development. The prophetic literature "universalized and individualized the national religion of Israel, separated it from the world, and led it to a higher morality."[14] Albertz critiques Smend's Christianized history, as well as his inattention to social and comparative dimensions of the development of

9. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:212.

10. Ibid. Even with Deutero-Isaiah, however, von Rad insists that his confession of monotheism is not a "truth based on a philosophy of religion." Instead, its truth is only made credible through confession and loyalty to YHWH.

11. Von Rad, "Origin of Mosaic Monotheism," 136–37.

12. Ibid., 137.

13. For an important critique of such anti-particularism, see Levenson, "Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism."

14. Albertz, *History of Israelite Religion*, 1:6.

Israelite religion. Nevertheless, Albertz's fascination with Vatke's and Smend's assessments of the prophetic stage is clear.[15]

For Albertz, the prophets not only extend the idea of divine power beyond previous national and religious confines. They also uncouple such ideas from any accompanying extension of *Israel's* power. "The power of God," he writes, "becomes a critical, destabilizing element which puts the existence of their own state in question." Albertz presses the point in terms of an in-principle objection to the nationalism and parochialism of the temple and cult. The prophets thus undertake "manifold distancings" of YHWH from the state. YHWH transcends the economic order, the monarchy, political and military power, and "even his own cult."[16] The prophets, along with their disciples, model a kind of personal piety that then "became the most important vehicle for official Yahweh religion in the exile, after the institutions of the state and cult collapsed in 587."[17] Albertz's formulation reflects the ideal of "ethical monotheism" that finds its origins in Keunen and Wellhausen. As a God who was "other," Israel's deity was able to stand over against the nation in judgment and to uphold an ethical order that was universal.[18]

More recently, Mark Smith has connected the emergence of monotheism to the collapse Israelite society.[19] The destruction of Judah's countryside by Sennacherib in 701 BCE alongside the aniconic reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah led to concomitant breakdowns in traditional family structures. These breakdowns, Smith argues, led Israel to theorize parallel breakdowns in the divine realm: "A culture with a diminished lineage system, one less embedded in traditional family patrimonies due to societal changes in the eighth through sixth centuries, might be more predisposed both to hold to individual human accountability for behavior and to see an individual deity accountable for the cosmos. … Accordingly, later Israelite monotheism was denuded of the divine family, perhaps reflecting Israel's weakening family lineages and patrimonies."[20] Smith then suggests that "monotheistic claims made sense in a world where political boundaries or institutions no longer offered any middle ground."[21]

These proposals, in varying ways, posit a teleology according to which monotheism evolved steadily beyond its national confines, with its traditional social and political structures.[22] The prophets allegedly aided that break with the

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15. It should be noted that Albertz insists that a history of Israelite religion must not adopt the "anti-Judaistic Christian prejudices" of his predecessors (ibid., 1:12).

16. Ibid., 1:176.

17. Ibid., 1:180.

18. MacDonald, *Deuteronomy*, 24–29.

19. Smith builds on the work of Halpern, "Jerusalem and the Lineages."

20. Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 164.

21. Ibid., 195.

22. Lynch, *Monotheism and Institutions*, 9.

past by imagining new relationships between YHWH, the nations, and their gods for late preexilic and exilic contexts. This process had its clearest and natural conclusion and home in Deutero-Isaiah.

The examples above highlight the way scholars have tended to see First Isaiah and the other eighth-century prophets standing at a crossroads in Israelite religion. They were considered the first free thinkers in Israel, able to see beyond the confines of land and nation due to their ethically enlightened beliefs and increasingly sociopolitical homelessness. Moreover, the story of monotheism's assumed a shift from *political* assertions of YHWH's power over the nations (and accompanying ethical superiority) toward a *philosophical* reflection on that extension of power and all it meant for religion. This deeply entrenched pattern feeds a scholarly narrative that First Isaiah's monotheizing was somehow incomplete and also that Second Isaiah's monotheism is abstract and philosophical. Neither does justice to the terms by which each corpus represents YHWH's sole divinity. Scholarship was, and to some extent still is, marked by a striking inattention to the ways that these prophets actually formulate their God claims. Scholars assumed that any move toward the assertion of YHWH's political hegemony over the nations involved a move toward monotheism. Conversely, anything national or parochial was considered to be at odds with YHWH's sole divinity. Furthermore, scholars assumed a link between monotheism and ethics, and thus each instance of concern for the poor became an instance of practical or ethical monotheism. Each eighth-century prophet became an instance of that religio-historical shift—birthed in politics.

Renewed interest in the shape of First Isaiah's theological world coincides with redaction-critical reflection on the nature of First Isaiah. Those who argue for monotheistic beliefs in First Isaiah tend to do so on the assumption that the book derives, *en masse*, from an eighth-century prophet or thereabouts. But if the book is instead the result of a complex redactional process that goes well beyond the eighth century, what can be said of "monotheism in First Isaiah"? The most frequent answer, it seems, is that monotheistic impulses originate in other "known" biblical sources that might have influenced the prophet. The assumption is that Isa 1–35 lacks a distinct or coherent enough monotheism to advance such claims on its own. As we will see in the course of this study, many will attribute any monotheistic language in the book to a Deuteronomistic redactor, or to Second Isaiah. Such attempts to locate monotheistic influences elsewhere miss the distinctiveness with which First Isaian monotheistic rhetoric takes shape. In the chapters that follow, I suggest that even though the book is likely the result of a long and complex redactional process (including by Deutero-Isaiah), we may still speak of First Isaian monotheistic discourse that carries its own unique constellation of features. While possessing clear links to Second Isaiah (and elsewhere), the book nevertheless has its own theological contributions to make.

Such a claim presupposes that we can speak about a body of literature called First Isaiah. For this study, I refer to First Isaiah as the body of literature stretching from Isa 1–35,[23] which was then supplemented canonically with a section of narrative literature (chs. 36–39) as a bridge to what follows in the book. Isaiah 1–35 undoubtedly underwent a complex redaction history. However, chs. 1–35 are unified in large measure by their literary orientation toward the concerns and hopes surrounding Israel's confrontation with the Assyrian Empire. This does not mean that all texts in chs. 1–35 originated in the Assyrian period. Instead, as later texts were added to texts that did originate in the Assyrian period, they conformed to those earlier concerns. The rhetoric of First Isaiah also exhibits such marked differences from the rest of the book that we can speak of a generally differentiated vocabulary (I explore this in appendixes 1 and 2).[24] The focus in my work is to analyze texts employing the term אלילים and spatial metaphors for God to emphasize the unique critique of the "gods" in First Isaiah. This critique (a) differs from critiques in DI or DtrH, or other prophetic books and (b) is literarily dependent on the Assyria-focused prophecies of First Isaiah, even though they may originate from later times. While it may be that many of the אלילים texts are redactional and later (insofar as we can tell), they are nonetheless drawn into a rhetorical world in First Isaiah that is Assyria-facing. I do not mean to imply, however, that the redactional qualities of the אלילים texts are insignificant. They certainly nudge the direction of earlier prophecies toward concerns over false deities. But before doing so, let us take a closer look at the ways that First Isaiah features in discussions about monotheism.

First Isaiah and Monotheism in Recent Scholarship

Recent scholarly conversations on monotheism in First Isaiah have tended to revolve around the impact of, and responses to, the Assyrian crisis in the eighth century. While von Rad and George Gray before him attend to the Assyrian context of First Isaiah's exalted claims about YHWH, it was not until more recently that comparative studies drew clearer attention to the impact of Neo-Assyrian ideology on First Isaiah. It is important to reemphasize that even for those who do not assign all First Isaian texts to the eighth century, the memories of Israel's confrontations with Assyria reverberate across the book. Several recent studies highlight the significant role that Neo-Assyrian rhetoric and ideology played in the formulation of First Isaian monotheism. Baruch Levine's study is an

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23. One might focus, even more specifically, on chs. 1–33, since chs. 34–35 appear to be almost wholly redactional bridges between First and Second Isaiah. Chapters 24–27 are often recognized to be much later in their entirety, though Christopher B. Hays makes a strong case for the inclusion of great portions of these chapters in the Assyrian period. See his recent book, *Origins of Isaiah 24–27*.

24. On the distinctiveness of First Isaiah's rhetoric, see Couey, *Reading the Poetry*.

example. He writes: "It was the threat to the survival of Judah and Jerusalem, emanating from Assyria, which called forth an enhanced God-idea. That idea evolved into universal monotheism, and in effect, enabled the people of Israel to survive exile and domination by successive world empires. In such terms, universal monotheism is to be seen as a religious response to empire, an enduring world-view founded on the proposition that all power exercised by humans, no matter how grandiose, is transient, and ultimately subservient to a divine plan for the whole earth, for all nations."[25] For Levine, the Assyrian threats of the eighth century led Israel's prophets toward an augmented conception of God's power and universal rule. This augmented conception was every bit as far-reaching as Deutero-Isaiah's. But Deutero-Isaiah's assertions of YHWH's power over the nation would not have been possible without the Assyrian provocation. Evolutionary assumptions are also evident in Levine's argument. Israel shifted from a "national agenda" seen in the conquest-settlement tradition toward an international agenda. While Israel's exodus traditions also exhibit international extensions of divine power, Levine insists that those traditions "belong[s] with the conquest-settlement traditions." For Levine, Israel's prophets participated in that national zeal through increasingly polemical engagements with the gods of Canaan: "The fervor of the national movement led to the progressive paring-away of gods and goddesses, and the exaltation of the national God, Yahweh."[26] But the Assyrian threat also provoked a "crisis of faith," evident in prophecies of Hosea and Amos, such that Israel's henotheistic faith became "untenable." First Isaiah marks the beginning of monotheism by declaring YHWH "sole sovereign over all nations."[27] Levine thus posits a clear movement from the *national* concerns of early Israel toward the *international* concerns of First Isaiah. The "global horizon" of passages such as Isa 10:5–19 leave no doubt in his mind that the prophet believes that YHWH "is the only true God."[28]

Other scholars focus specifically on First Isaiah's imitation of imperialist claims. Peter Machinist details specific idioms and themes that reflect direct and indirect cultural contact.[29] Among the examples Machinist examines, most reflect attempts to apply claims to hegemony and glory—traditionally ascribed to the Assyrian monarch—to YHWH. As Judean ambassadors traveled to Assyrian capitals and as Assyria exerted its influence on Judah, Isaiah found occasion to imitate such imperial rhetoric. For Machinist, First YHWH's control of the

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25. Levine, "Assyrian Ideology," 411; cf. Levine, "'Ah, Assyria! Rod of My Rage.'"

26. Levine, "Assyrian Ideology," 415.

27. Ibid., 416.

28. Ibid., 422.

29. Machinist, "Assyria and Its Image in First Isaiah"; Machinist, "Once More"; cf. Parpola, "Assyrian Tree of Life"; Schipper, "'City by the Sea'"; Halpern, "'Brisker Pipes Than Poetry.'"

nations reflects a broad process of absorbing "in a henotheistic way" the powers that typically belonged to the Assyrian deities.

Shawn Aster goes further in his study. For Aster, YHWH's claims to power imitate and ultimately subvert claims by the god Assur. Whereas Assur claimed universal sovereignty through his human counterpart, the king, YHWH exercised sovereignty *despite* any human counterpart. The depiction of YHWH was even more transcendent than the Assyrian deity:[30] "The idea of YHWH's transcendence also makes the discussion of monotheism vs. henotheism somewhat redundant. For only if YHWH exists as supreme over time and space and wholly without parallel in the earthly sphere, are any other powers not his equals. Whether such powers are called 'gods' or 'celestial beings' no longer matters, for they exist in the realm of constrained power, whereas YHWH is unconstrained and supreme."[31] The fact that First Isaiah betrays thoroughgoing knowledge of the deity Assur, but never gives him a mention, lends further credence to YHWH's total and uncontested rule. "There is no need for God to battle gods," Aster writes. Instead, the battle takes place in the realm of "imperial ideology." By "refusing to engage in any sort of polemic about Assur, [Isaiah] refused to recognize his existence."[32]

Reflection and Critique

The foregoing historical sketch provokes several observations relating to monotheism and First Isaiah. First, earlier critical biblical scholarship tended to lump First Isaiah in with other eighth-century prophets. Together, they formed a kind of golden age when monotheism was instinctual and less philosophical. It was ethical and dynamic but lacked the sharper articulations that characterized Second Isaiah's uncompromising monotheism. They embodied a kind of free-spirited individualism and ethical awakening that presaged later developments in Christianity. Their ethical monotheism was practical and applied, though not yet philosophically formed.

Second, we observed a scholarly tendency to draw a direct line between the international elements of First Isaiah and the emergence of monotheism. The more dubious versions of this theory insist that the move toward monotheism involved a rejection of "national" or "particularist" concerns. The image of prophets as social revolutionaries may play a role here. The assumption is that insofar as the prophets break with traditions of the past, they simultaneously

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30. Aster, *Reflections of Empire*, 39.
31. Ibid., 39–40.
32. Ibid., 40, 132, 277.

open new theological possibilities. However, it proves difficult to detect any move "beyond" the land, temple, cult, and kingship in First Isaiah. Even Deutero-Isaiah announces a return to the land and the rebuilding of the temple (Isa 44:24–28; 46:13), and Trito-Isaiah assumes worship at the temple (Isa 56; 60–62; 66). But in addition to the retention of national concerns, scholars typically fail to explain the uniqueness of First Isaiah's supposedly more "international" perspective when compared with other Old Testament texts Exod 15, which seem equally broad in scope. Levine's insistence that the exodus belongs to the conquest-settlement tradition—and therefore does not qualify—fails to address the issue.[33] Tone-deafness to the localized nature of all monotheistic texts seems to parallel scholarly inattention to the possible ways that monotheistic discourse could take shape. This study aims to address this with its study of First Isaiah. Monotheistic rhetoric was not moving toward a uniform end.

Third, the literature of Second Isaiah still seems to play a controlling function. It serves as a standard for measuring the relative purity of the prophet's monotheistic discourse. The Assyrian turn allegedly put Israel on a trajectory from its earlier parochialism to the internationalist perspectives of Deutero-Isaiah. Scholars consistently compare First and Second Isaiah in terms of implicit (or unreflective) monotheism versus explicit (and reflective) monotheism. In these formulations, First Isaiah rendered monotheism inevitable, but did not necessarily aim to assert YHWH's sole divinity. For some, First Isaiah does not fully tip the balance toward monotheism but nonetheless plays a key role in laying the theological foundations for its eventual emergence. With few exceptions, however, scholars agree that First Isaiah leaves very little room for other divine or human sovereigns but YHWH.[34] In this, they echo von Rad's statement that, because of YHWH's "absolute power" over the nations, "there is room for no other actor in history."[35] The regular contrast between First and Second Isaiah assumes that the latter offers a more reflective, or conscious, emphasis on YHWH's sole divinity as such.

Fourth, more-recent comparative studies have set First Isaiah on its own footing vis-à-vis an Assyrian context. They suggest that the Assyrian crisis of the eighth and seventh centuries provided the historical impetus for First Isaiah's monotheizing (or implicit monotheism). Faced with claims about Assyrian hegemony, Isaiah insisted that YHWH controlled the Assyrian Empire and would eventually bring it to judgment. This belief either prepared the way for or rendered certain the concomitant belief that the gods of the great empires were powerless. The shift toward belief in YHWH's sovereignty over the Assyrians

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33. Levine, "Assyrian Ideology," 415.

34. See Wildberger, *Isaiah 28–39*, 618, as well as his broader discussion on pp. 617–49.

35. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:183.

marks, for many, a key to understanding how monotheism emerged in Israel.[36] Nevertheless, such studies are not always careful about how they use the term *monotheism*, applying it, for instance, to explain YHWH's control over the nations. In addition, redaction-critical studies raise questions about the degree to which all the theological claims in chs. 1–39 can be positioned as an Assyrian "response." This said, the attention to the political forces at work in First Isaiah is most welcome. My study of the אלילים and accompanying monotheistic rhetoric provides a way to deepen such analysis by attending to the nuanced ways that YHWH's political supremacy featured in a world shaped by the memory of Israel's encounters with Assyria (and other nations).

Fifth, scholars rarely reflect on the usefulness of using monotheism as an analytical category in First Isaiah. Such lack of reflection seems to stem from the history of religions framework within which the concept of monotheism typically operates. This framework tends to highlight, or at least search for, the key moments when religious ideas emerged or broke through earlier forms. It is far less interested in how and whether the language of "monotheism" helps illuminate the poetics of First Isaiah itself. Moreover, because of monotheism's emphasis on the number of deities in existence, First Isaiah can be something of a nonstarter. It rarely, if ever, mentions the names of foreign or domestic deities other than YHWH.[37] Many studies of First Isaiah simply do not mention the subject. I suggest that the question of monotheism helps us understand First Isaiah's rhetoric, but the meaning of monotheism requires clarification. In addition, it proves more useful to take the discussion of First Isaian monotheism out of the realm of evolving religious ideas and to examine it instead as a rhetorical phenomenon in its own right. My point is not that rhetorical assertions are devoid of theological content or bear no relation to developing ideas. However, it is essential to understand the distinctive theological claims of First Isaiah in terms of its own rhetorical aims, including points of continuity and discontinuity with other theological claims, especially in Second Isaiah.

For monotheism to prove useful as an analytical tool, my use of the term requires clarification. I will discuss this below, but I emphasize here that scholars are generally unclear about how they use the term. Von Rad is an exception. He recognizes the limits of the term *monotheism* and resists any attempt to associate its emergence with "a philosophic reduction of the multiplicity of numinous phenomena to the view of them as one."[38] He also resists any attempt to join the prophets together as if addressing "a single idea—that of ethical

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36. Machinist, "Once More," 38.

37. I will discuss possible connections between Enlil and אליל below.

38. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:211. See discussion of von Rad and monotheism in MacDonald, *Deuteronomy*, 40–42.

monotheism."[39] Instead, their messages (and accompanying theology) were particular to the circumstances and needs of the moment. To this extent, von Rad anticipates some of the literary and rhetorical approaches to monotheism adopted by later biblical scholars.[40] In what follows, I outline an approach to monotheism that will set the stage for my study of First Isaiah. I will draw from my previous research on the analytical limits and potential of monotheism as a concept.[41]

Defining Monotheism

By way of background, there are good reasons to avoid use of the term *monotheism*. Its origins and development as a concept within the context of seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonism, and then within Enlightenment philosophical thought, raise the specter of anachronism when applied to eighth-century Israelite prophecy. In particular, the term tends to carry a set of corollaries that may be ill-suited to the biblical subject matter or to the particular texts at hand. For instance, some will insist that monotheism necessarily implies an emphasis on YHWH as creator,[42] hence his transcendent distinctiveness from all reality. For others, it implies a rejection of magic, all other divine beings, or even the cult.[43] Still others suggest that monotheism involves belief in the significance of the individual or in a transnational morality. The sheer range of monotheism's entailments bewilders. It seems to provide a handy way to project one's favored beliefs onto the ancients. As MacDonald argues, this tendency was certainly operative from the initial formulation of the concept, and through the Enlightenment as monotheism provided a clear way to distinguish the Christian religion from paganism.[44]

Yet the threat of anachronism, and the ill-conceived uses of a given concept, do not negate its potential usefulness. Such risks beset any attempt to explain the past using nonnative terms. Jonathan Z. Smith observes that a term such as *religion* is not necessarily native to the subject that scholars of religion

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39. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:188, 298.

40. But on the other hand, von Rad assumes that Deutero-Isaiah's monotheism was, by contrast to the implied monotheism of earlier times, "the conscious product of theological reflexion" (ibid., 211).

41. Lynch, *Monotheism and Institutions*; Lynch, "Mapping Monotheism"; Lynch, "Monotheism in Ancient Israel."

42. This emphasis finds its clearest expression in the work of Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, 137. Others followed Kauffmann's lead, including Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 84–85; Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 246–47.

43. See MacDonald's discussion of Keunen in *Deuteronomy*, 38–39.

44. See Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 17–21.

study. Nevertheless, the term can establish a "disciplinary horizon," and as such, "second-order categor[ies]" such as religion can prove productive by their very distance from the subject they study.[45] As a second-order category, monotheism enables interpreters of the Old Testament to ask certain questions of the text that set the terms for its discussion. It also provides a criterion for data selection as we examine the text and then for comparison with other biblical texts deemed monotheistic.[46]

However, the text needs to be given its turn to ask questions of the category itself. That is the function of the distance Smith mentions. We have seen already that First Isaiah plays a role—albeit subservient to Deutero-Isaiah—in the history of biblical scholarship on monotheism. But this has often been done unreflectively, as if the meaning and relevance of monotheism for Isa 1–39 were obvious. But we are better served by exploring the degree to which First Isaiah adapts or resists the categorization itself or perhaps calls for an inflation or modification of the term's meaning.[47] Moreover, once the category "monotheism" has done its heuristic work of organizing the data for selection, the category itself, to some extent, recedes into the background.[48] The usefulness of any heuristic category is the degree to which it enables interpreters to make meaningful claims about the text, and comparisons to other texts ostensibly within the same category.[49]

I suggest that speaking about *monotheistic rhetoric* is a more useful category than monotheism, when speaking of the kind of claims First Isaiah makes. Here is a case for the importance of this category that I made elsewhere:

> My decision to focus on rhetoric derives from a desire to avoid speculation about the theological assumptions of biblical writers, focusing instead on the theological import of their rhetorical claims. I am interested in how monotheistic rhetoric works in context (as a proximate goal), and what it accomplishes theologically (as an ultimate goal), but not in the underlying beliefs of writers. Texts employing monotheistic rhetoric do not always paint a sufficiently broad picture for one to determine with certainty that a writer's beliefs were consistently monotheistic, just as one could not derive a monotheistic belief system on the basis of expressions in certain Akkadian and Egyptian hymns that espouse the sole divinity of a given deity. Authors do not always reveal their theological presuppositions; neither do they always hold them consistently. They can, however,

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45. Smith, *Relating Religion*, 193–94 and 207–8; cited in Smith, "Monotheism," 280.
46. Satlow, "Disappearing Categories," 293.
47. On the inflation of terms, see Dwyer, "Violence and Its Histories."
48. Satlow, "Disappearing Categories," 294.
49. Ibid., 295.

deploy rhetoric that distinguishes YHWH in absolute terms, even if only for a rhetorical moment.[50]

Several studies in the past two decades have attended to the rhetorical dimensions of monotheistic claims in the Hebrew Bible. In his book *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, Smith observes that claims about YHWH's sole divinity are "rhetorical, designed as much to persuade and reinforce as it is to assert."[51] For Smith, the presence of monotheistic rhetoric does not necessarily indicate the presence of a "monotheistic culture" or underlying monotheistic belief system. Instead, it "explain[ed] Yahwistic monolatry in absolute terms. Monotheism reinforced Israel's exclusive relationship with its deity."[52] Of course, this presupposes clarity on what monotheism *is* in each context. Given that the term itself does not appear in the Hebrew Bible, one has to establish a horizon of inquiry toward which a study of monotheistic rhetoric might orient itself. As Walter Moberly notes, it is critical to find out "what is, and is not, meant by [YHWH's oneness] in its various contexts."[53] Attending to monotheism as a mode of persuasion complicates attempts to arrange the text into "neat historical phases," but simultaneously clarifies the purposes toward which biblical writers struggled to affirm YHWH's exclusive prerogatives and supremacy.[54]

   With these sensitivities in view, I propose a heuristic description of monotheistic rhetoric that allows for a wider possible range of monotheistic configurations in the Hebrew Bible, that avoids the chronological preoccupations of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, and that resists abstractions that run rough-shod over the actual contexts in which claims about divinity are embedded. Quoting from my earlier article: "Monotheistic rhetoric, I suggest, entails *the expression of* YHWH*'s categorical supremacy, or supreme uniqueness*. That is, monotheism involves locating YHWH in a class of his own that is uniquely distinguished from all other reality, or at least the realities deemed threatening to YHWH's utter distinctiveness. Phrased as a question, one might ask, *What are the ways that a given text forges divisions between* YHWH *and all else such that he is 'one/ alone'?*"[55] This definition allows us to ask, what are the terms by which the writers of First Isaiah distinguish YHWH in absolute terms? What are the ways that those constructions of YHWH's supremacy are similar to, or different from, the constructions of YHWH's status in Isa 40–55 or other bodies of literature?

50. Lynch, "Mapping Monotheism," 49.
51. Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 153.
52. Ibid., 154.
53. Moberly, "How Appropriate Is 'Monotheism?'" 233.
54. Hays, "Religio-Historical Approaches," 180.
55. Lynch, "Mapping Monotheism," 50.

Answering the former question will occupy my attention in this book, and the latter will form part of its conclusion.

Monotheizing by Omission and Exaltation

In his 2000 publication *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel*, John Kutsko critiqued the presumption that Deutero-Isaiah was the Hebrew Bible's strongest proponent of monotheism.[56] While Deutero-Isaiah affirms YHWH's sole divinity through image-maker polemics, and through "sole existence" clauses (e.g., אין עוד), Ezekiel "appears to struggle with the very use of the term *'ĕlōhîm*."[57] Thus, Ezekiel never uses אלהים in reference to idols or pagan deities, but rather, he employs a diverse vocabulary of substitute terms that deride idols' presumption to divinity (e.g., גלולים).[58] Moreover, Ezekiel modifies Deuteronomic phrases that refer to other deities (e.g., זנה/הלך אחרי אלהים) in favor of those that lack אלהים (e.g., זנה/הלך/תעה אחרי גלולים).[59] Kutsko states: "This aversion, this avoidance of any association that might legitimize a god other than Yahweh has far-reaching implications, for it suggests that Ezekiel was clearly monotheistic, accomplishing his goal in ways different from Deutero-Isaiah but consciously carrying his conviction to a radical extreme in his terminology. Unlike Deutero-Isaiah, the prophet Ezekiel is rarely invoked as a theological voice contributing to the development of monotheism in the religion of Israel. Quite the opposite is true, however; he is one of its loudest voices."[60] Sven Petry and others have made similar observations regarding Ezekiel's monotheistic rhetoric and its use of substituted derisive terms for אלהים. [61] And despite such recognition that Ezekiel, Priestly, and other Priestly-inspired literature engages in a different form of monotheistic rhetoric, it is surprising that an analogous phenomenon in First Isaiah has received such little attention, with the exception of Hugh Williamson's article on the אלילים

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56. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 38.

57. Ibid.

58. The question as to whether these critique idols has now been raised by Margaret Odell, in her forthcoming article, "Did Ezekiel Condemn Idolatry? A Re-examination of the Nature and Function of the גלולים in the Book of Ezekiel," *JBL* (forthcoming). I thank Margaret for an advanced copy of this article.

59. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 39. Interestingly, Kutsko notes how the Targumim (*Tg. Neof.*, *Tg. Onq.*, *Tg. Ps.-J.*) follow Ezekiel's lead by systematically substituting the Aramaic טעות ("idols") for אלהים. Similarly, Kutsko notes that Ezekiel transforms the Deuteronomic phrase עבד אלהים . . . עץ ואבן, "to serve gods . . . of wood and stone" (Deut 4:28; 28:36; 28:64) with שרת עץ ואבן, "to worship wood and stone" (Ezek 20:32; p. 39).

60. Ibid., 41–42.

61. Petry, *Die Entgrenzung JHWHS*, 377–78.

in Isaiah.[62] In the unique material of First Isaiah, encompassing parts of Isaiah 1–35, the prophet nearly always avoids use of the term אלהים in reference to any but YHWH, preferring instead the dysphemistic term אלילים, which seems to be a mocking distortion of the term אלהים.[63] Of its eighteen biblical occurrences, אלילים occurs ten times in First Isaiah,[64] and then nowhere else in the book.

At the same time, Isa 1–39 asserts YHWH's supremacy with remarkable force. Several scholars mentioned already suggest that Israel's political contact with Assyrian claims to hegemony explain this phenomenon. My study supports such studies without pinning down chs. 1–39 in the Neo-Assyrian period. Moreover, it supplements studies of Neo-Assyrian reflexes in Isaiah by attending specifically to the nature and function of absolutizing rhetoric in the book. This absolutizing occurs in two significant ways. First, Isa 1–39 emphasizes YHWH's supreme exaltation in spatial terms. Isaiah 6 has received the most attention in this regard. But the emphasis on YHWH's exalted status continues, most notably in the book's early chapters. Proto-Isaiah draws the reader's attention to YHWH's elevated status by frontloading assertions to this effect toward the beginning of the book. In Isa 2 the prophet deploys the verbs *נשא ("to lift," 6×), *רום ("to be lofty," 5×), *שׂגב ("to be exalted," 2×) more than anywhere else in the book. While asserting YHWH's loftiness, the prophet also claims YHWH's opposition to all that is high and lifted. Other sections of First Isaiah use language similar to Isa 2 to assert YHWH's exaltation and the abasement of all else (e.g., 5:15–16; 33:5, 10). The claim here is not that Second Isaiah lacks a similar insistence on YHWH's supremacy but instead that First Isaiah uses unique spatial metaphors that lack equivalents in the rest of Isaiah.

Second, Isa 1–39 uses unique names for YHWH, which seem to emphasize his exclusive political and military sovereignty. These include האדון ("the sovereign one"), יהוה צבאות ("YHWH of hosts"),[65] and other names. These names reflect efforts to absolutize divine power and authority vis-à-vis political claims to the contrary.

As I suggest throughout this book, the use of אלילים along with these two features contribute to Isa 1–39's broader effort to distinguish YHWH in absolute terms. To these features I would also hasten to add that First Isaiah reflects

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62. Williamson, "Idols in Isaiah."

63. I will return to the question of the relationship between Isa 1–35 and chs. 36–39 below. Most scholars believe Isa 36–39 derive from 2 Kgs 18–20, with some notable passages that seem to derive from Isaiah (e.g., Isa 37:22–29; 38:9–20). Though there remains debate concerning the precise relationship between Isa 36–39 and 2 Kgs 18–20, the monotheistic claims in Isa 37:16–20 (// 2 Kgs 19:15–19) are in clear continuity with similar language in the Deuteronomistic History (e.g., 1 Kgs 8), and lack any parallel in Isa 1–35.

64. Isa 2:8, 18, 20 (2×); 10:10 (sg.), 11; 19:1, 3; 31:7 (2×).

65. האדון appears in 5 of 6 biblical occurrences: Isa 1:24; 3:1; 10:16, 33; 19:4; cf. Mal 3:1. יהוה צבאות appears 53× vs. 7× in the rest of the book.

imitation of absolutizing claims to power evident in Assyrian rhetoric.[66] Like Ezekiel, First Isaiah is hardly more compromising and absolute than Deutero-Isaiah in its rhetoric of divine supremacy. Deutero-Isaiah marks a rhetorical shift in language about YHWH but not a heightening or deepening of YHWH's categorical supremacy.

However, to sustain this argument, it will be important (a) to explain the terms in which YHWH's categorical uniqueness takes shape in First Isaiah and (b) to demonstrate that First Isaiah has a unique theological voice—that its claims about divine supremacy are not simply Deutero-Isaian or Deuterono-mistic in origin, as several scholars claim. Regarding (a) above, I agree with others such as Baruch Levine, Shawn Aster, Peter Machinist, and others that First Isaiah expresses YHWH's categorical uniqueness in decidedly political terms. Isaiah is insistent that YHWH is sole sovereign, and that foreign alliances were a direct affront to YHWH's claims. My study supplements their studies by analyzing the pervasive rhetoric of exaltation and abasement by which First Isaiah expresses those political claims. First Isaiah begins with a tirade against all that is "raised up" (Isa 2) and concludes with the dramatic defeat of King Sennacherib for his boasts (Isa 36–39). While this study does not outline the entirety of that political theology, my discussion of divine supremacy makes best sense against the backdrop of rival imperial claims.

Regarding (b), I will show in this book how First Isaiah develops its own ways of asserting YHWH's sole divinity that are not demonstrably influenced by Second Isaiah and are not simply explainable as Deuteronomistic interpola-tions (as sometimes suggested). I suggest that one cannot simply attribute First Isaiah's monotheizing moves to other, monotheistic, redactors of chs. 1–35. Yet, the study resists an easy attribution of monotheism to the Neo-Assyrian period, at least in its final form. It is rather the Neo-Assyrian *legacy* that echoes through chs. 1–35 and that left a decisive imprint on this section of the book.

After a discussion of the meaning of אלילים and spatial rhetoric in First Isaiah in ch. 1, my study proceeds with an analysis of the texts in Isa 1–35 that mention the אלילים. These texts (in chs. 2, 10, 19, and 31) provide points of entry into the broader monotheizing rhetoric of First Isaiah. Chapter 2 examines the rhetoric and literary function of Isa 2:6–22 in which Isaiah's unique rhetoric of exalta-tion and abasement features. This text plays a defining role for YHWH's political supremacy in First Isaiah. Not only do the אלילים receive mention three times, but the passage also brings the אלילים into collocation with an intense series of spatial claims about YHWH's exaltation (2:11, 17). YHWH's sole divinity is construed in vertical terms. In other words, spatial high/low metaphors set the terms by which YHWH's exaltation is conceptualized. I suggest that Isa 2:6–22 is

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66. See Aster, *Reflections of Empire*.

deliberately anticipating themes related to divine supremacy that occur through-
out Isa 1–35.

Chapter 3 explores the judgment on Assyria in Isa 10. I consider the arro-
gant boasts of Assyria in Isa 10:9–11, which sit within a prophetic proclamation
against the Assyrian king (vv. 5–15) and use the term אלילים. These verses bear
striking similarities to Isa 36:18–20, which refer to the nations' *deities* rather than
their *images*, as in Isa 10. These verses not only demonstrate an aversion to אלהים
in Isa 1–35 but also raise questions about the way that monotheistic rhetoric in
chs. 36–39 influenced Isa 10 or vice versa, or whether there is evidence of mutual
influence. I also return to the theme of political supremacy with an analysis
of the unique divine name האדון in Isa 10:16, 33 and the abasement of yhwh's
enemies.

Chapter 4 considers the fascinating uses of אלילים in Isa 19:1–4, an oracle
against Egypt. The prophet claims that the Egyptians will consult their אלילים,
along with spiritists and mediums, in the day of trouble. However, those alleged
sources of knowledge will fail them. This chapter highlights the epistemologi-
cal import of אלילים language. Though a comparison with 8:19 (and LXX 19:3),
moreover, I suggest that Isa 19 refers to the Egyptians' deities as "non-gods," or
"fraudulent gods" (אלילים). yhwh asserts his sovereignty (cf. the use of האדון
in 19:4) in the face of Egypt's inability to elicit political knowledge from their
idols. Isaiah highlights the folly of the idol's political insights, since adherents
of אֱלִילִים become אֱוִלִים (fools).

The final chapter draws together the findings of this study and then steps back
to consider the relationship between monotheistic rhetoric in First and Second
Isaiah. While the two corpora share certain features (e.g., mockery of idols),
their lexical choices and modes of monotheizing differ. I also examine places
where Deutero-Isaiah may have influenced Proto-Isaiah's rhetoric (e.g., 2:8b,
18; 8:19–21; 21:9) and vice versa.