

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MEANINGS OF
"BELIAL."

How much depends on the right choice of a starting point in philological inquiries! It seems to me that many losses have arisen to Biblical exegesis by the premature assumption of etymologies. Take the cases of the word so familiar to us in the Authorized and Revised Versions of the Old Testament as "Belial." A theory has grown up according to which the Hebrew word thus represented is a common noun, meaning primarily worthlessness, *beliya'al* (בְּלִיעַל) being derived from *beli* "not" and *ya'al* (probably) "use," as Mühlau and Volck, in their edition of Gesenius's *Handwörterbuch*, give it. So prevalent is this theory that it has been adopted in the Anglo-American Hebrew-English Lexicon, now being printed at the Oxford University Press, and even in the margin of the Revised Version, where "sons (or, men) of Belial" becomes "base fellows," with an additional marginal note on "Belial," "that is, worthlessness." We are at once struck, however, by the fact that for the literal meaning "unprofitableness" no example is given (contrast the case of Lat. *nequam*). Again and again there were opportunities for the use of *beliya'al* in this sense in connexion with idolatry or with the foreign alliances of Judah, as, e.g., Isa. xxx. 5, 6; Jer. ii. 8, 11; Isa. xliv. 9, lvii. 12, but the opportunities were not taken by the Hebrew writers. Why not? Another singular fact is that the writers of the Book of Proverbs, who, one would have thought, would have welcomed a term susceptible of such fruitful didactic applications, only use *beliya'al* three times (Prov. vi. 12, xvi. 27, xix. 28). Upon these occasions the Revised Version renders the phrases in which the word occurs thus: "a worthless person," "a worthless man," and "a worthless witness." It is plain,

however, that in each case the conception is a positive, not a negative one; it is malignity or dangerous wickedness which is meant. Turning to the narrative books, it is plain that the rendering "base fellows" (Rev. Vers. margin) by no means suits the context. It was not merely "base fellows" who bore false witness against Naboth (1 Kings xxi. 10, 13), but utterly depraved persons who despised the best traditions of Israelitish morality. It was not merely "worthless men" who opposed David's fair-minded distribution of the spoil after he had delivered Ziklag (1 Sam. xxx. 22), but "evil men," as the phrase is explained, who were deaf to the claims of that brotherly feeling without which David's "troop" would have melted away. They were not merely contemptible but actively dangerous, though by his personal influence David neutralized the danger. So too in 1 Sam. x. 27 it was not merely "baseness" which showed itself in the withholding of an offering to the new king, but a dangerous inclination to rebellion.¹

In the legal portions of the Old Testament the word *beliya'al* occurs but twice—Deut. xiii. 14, xv. 9. This is only natural, for the phrase "sons of *beliya'al*" implies a moral judgment more suited to a teacher or a narrator than to a lawgiver. In the first passage the Revised Version renders "base fellows," in the second "a base thought" (בְּלִיעַל and דְּבַר in apposition). In the latter case, the rendering is conspicuously unsuitable; the

¹ There is one occurrence of בְּלִיעַל which is only known to us from the Septuagint. It is in 1 Sam. xxix. 10, where, as Wellhausen and Driver have pointed out, the words *καὶ πορεύεσθε εἰς τὸν τόπον οὗ κατέστησα ὑμᾶς ἐκεῖ καὶ λόγον λοιμὸν μὴ θῆς ἐν καρδίᾳ σου, ὅτι ἀγαθὸς σὺ ἐνώπιόν μου*, retranslated, supply what is painfully missed in the Massoretic text. *Λοιμὸς* is one of the renderings of בְּלִיעַל in LXX. (which nowhere favours "baseness"). But I do not see how the version in Kautzsch's Old Testament—"think not evil of me"—can be right. Surely Achish is begging David not to allow thoughts of revenge and rebellion to arise in his mind. Mere hard thoughts could scarcely be expressed by בְּלִיעַל.

"thought" spoken of is seduction to idolatry, which was no mere "baseness," but the highest act of rebellion against Jehovah. In the prophets, too, the word occurs but twice, viz., in Nah. i. 11 and ii. 1. But, as the combined researches of Bickell and Gunkel have shown, Nah. i. 2-ii. 3 is not a prophetic but a poetic composition. It is really an alphabetic psalm, describing Jehovah's speedy appearance for judgment on Israel's enemies, and is one of the numerous insertions of the post-Exilic editors of the prophetic records.¹ *Beliya'al* there means no mere "baseness," but the highest degree of wickedness, or rather hopeless ruin; indeed, in Nah. ii. 1, where the word stands alone with a personal reference (as elsewhere only in 2 Sam. xxiii. 6; Job xxxiv. 18), we are on the way to the use of Belial for Antichrist. Among the acknowledged psalms the word occurs thrice, viz., in Ps. xviii. 5 (4), xli. 9 (8), ci. 3. Here the Revised Version has only once found it possible to render "base." But every reader will feel that "base thing" cannot be the right parallel to "the work of them that turn aside." Since the Psalm betrays the influence of the Book of Proverbs, we may assume that *beliya'al* has the same meaning here as in that book, i.e. malignity or dangerous wickedness. In Ps. xli. 9 the Anglo-American Lexicon admits the possibility of the meaning "a base, or wicked thing," but it is difficult to find any recent commentator who does not prefer the sense well conveyed by Delitzsch in the words "*ein heillos Uebel*," "an incurable disease." The parallel line seems, indeed, to permit no other sense; it runs, "and now that he lieth, he will arise no more." In his own commentary the present writer put the meaning

¹ In my *Origin of the Psalter*, p. 228, I followed Bickell. In 1893 (Stade's *Zeitschrift*, pp. 223, 224) Gunkel completed the argument for the psalm-theory, and drew the natural inferences. Both Bickell and Gunkel have since returned to the subject elsewhere.

thus, "‘Lit., a matter of perdition,’ *i.e.*, something which must sink him in perdition or the world of the dead (see on xviii. 3)." There only remains Ps. xviii. 5 (4). Here the Revised Version has made no change in the Authorized, which gave "the floods of ungodliness." At any rate, it is seen that mere "baseness" will no longer pass muster. *Beliya'al* may indeed mean that degree of evil which is without any "soul of goodness," but even this sense will not do here, on account of the parallelism of Death (*i.e.*, the realm of Death personified) and Sheól. Might we not render "Perdition"? Compare Milton's—

"Hurl'd headlong down
To bottomless Perdition, there to dwell."¹

Passing over the remaining Old Testament passages, let us now ask what is the fundamental meaning, and what may be the etymology of the word? One thing seems clear—the primary meaning and the etymology given by Gesenius and his followers are erroneous. The word is found in two senses—(1) hopeless ruin, (2) great or even extreme wickedness.² Though the second is by far the more common of the two, the first, which occurs only in Ps. xviii. 5 (=2 Sam. xxii. 5), xli. 9; Nah. i. 11, ii. 1, must, according to analogy, be the more original. If so, can we suggest a probable derivation? It is not likely that one of the ordinary words for "ruin" would be a compound. But it is perfectly possible that a word belonging to cosmogonic speculation should be, or should be thought to be (cf. *בְּלִימָה*, Job xxvi. 7, and, according to Nöldeke, *צִלְמוֹת*). I think, then, that in the age in which *בְּלִיעֵל* could be used of the subterranean watery

¹ *Paradise Lost*, i. 45–47.

² In *Sanhedrin*, 111*b*, a playful connexion is suggested with 'ֵל "yoke," as if Belial meant "throwing off the yoke." This shows insight. Cf. the assurance of *בְּלִיעֵל* and *בְּלֵעַ* in Prov. xix. 28

abyss¹ (cf. Jon. ii. 3, 4), it was probably understood to mean "the depth which lets no man return" (בְּלִי יְעִלָּה), as Baethgen explains in his note on Ps. xviii. 5.² Cf. the Babylonian title of the under-world, *irçit lâ târat*, "the land whence there is no return." How early the idea of the great abyss existed, is a question which it would take too long to discuss here.

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'OUR LORD'S IDEAL OF PRAYER.

IN His discourse on the Mount, after warning against the prayer that is wrong in motive, Jesus goes on to inhibit the prayer that is mistaken in method. Prayer may sometimes bring down but a stunted blessing, or, indeed, be entirely barren, because it is defective in aim, temper, knowledge. The prayer of the secret chamber must be informed by right views of God and of the freeness of His grace, unless it is to be as disappointing as the ostentatious prayer of the synagogue or of the street corner. The spirit of pietistic pride did not flaunt itself before men only, but courted God's favour by a redundant religiousness. Men's prayers, no less than their characters, need the pruning knife, and morbid excesses must be thinned away if there is to be a due degree of fragrant and satisfying fruitfulness. "Use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do."

Our Lord's familiarity with the genius of heathen worship suggests questions which admit only of conjectural answers. Did He draw His information from the Old Testament Scriptures, and have we here a reminiscence of the frantic cry on Carmel, "O Baal, hear us, O Baal, hear us"?

¹ Since the abyss is the proper abode of Satan, he may well be designated Belial (2 Cor. vi. 15, Βελιαρ).

² Similarly Halévy. The true derivation may be irrecoverable.