SHORT NOTES

SHEOL AND THE SONS OF BELIAL

It is not the aim of the present note to list the various attempts that have been made to explain בֵלייָּהָל. That task has been well and concisely performed by D. Winton Thomas in his article "בֵּלייָּהָל in the Old Testament" in J. N. Birdsall and R. W. Thomson (ed.), Biblical and Patristic Studies in Memory of Robert Pierce Casey (Freiburg, etc., 1963), pp. 11-19. Nor is it to consider the developed sense in which it was used in the intertestamental period. It is, rather, to question one particular type of theory that has been widely accepted; namely, that the word denotes Sheol, the underworld.

The passage in the Old Testament that has been regarded as particularly strong evidence for the identification of בֵלייָּהָל with Sheol is 2 Sam. xxii 5-6 = Ps. xviii 5-6. There מִשְׁבַּרְךְ-מָאוֹת (חֶלְבֶּ-מָאוֹת in Ps. xviii) is parallel to ונַהֲקָל בֵּלייָּהָל in v. 5, and חֶלְבֶּ הָּ֨ל to מוֹאָֽסֶף-מָאוֹת in v. 6. The psalmist is threatened by such dangers until God pulls him to safety from מִיָּמִים מוֹאָֽסְיָם in v. 17. Thomas (pp. 15-16) notes the theory that בֵלייָּהָל is a compound noun consisting of the negative particle בֵלי and יָּאָל, an apocopated imperfect of קָלָא "to come up". Sheol is thus thought to be the place from which one does not come up again, and scholars have compared Job vii 9: יָֽרֶדּ הָּל לֹא יָֽאָלַה "he that goes down to Sheol does not come up". Similarly Ps. xli 9 refers to דֶּבֶר בֵּלייָּהָל, which is translated "fatal disease", and then says לֹא יָֽשִׁפָּו לֵֽאָמ "he will not rise up again". Thomas also notes other theories, such as the view that the verb is in the הֹפֶךְ-י and that בֵּלייָּהָל means "he who does not allow coming up from the dead", or the opinion that the word is an adaptation of "the Babylonian Bililu, goddess of the underworld".

While Thomas maintains that בֵּלייָּהָל is a word denoting Sheol, he is not satisfied with any of the etymologies noted above. He points out that "the use of בֵלי as a negative of a verb is rare", and that the abbreviation of יָּאָלַה is "strange" (p. 16, following Driver [see below], p. 53). He offers a different explanation, which is borrowed, in part, from what G. R. Driver says in ZAW 52 (1934), pp.
Driver doubts whether it is a compound noun—though the existence of *blmt* “immortality” in Ugaritic suggests that the existence of a compound noun in Hebrew should not be dismissed as improbable. Rather, he suggests, the word is a noun from a root *bl* with an affirmative -l as in *gīḇōl, karmel*, and *ʿārāpel*, and the original vocalization may have been *bēlaʿal* (cp. *ʿārāpel*) or *bēliʿal* (cp. *špiṣān*). The verb *bālaʿ* often means “to swallow”, but Driver appears to derive it from a different root, which is cognate with Arabic *balāqa* “to reach” (cp. *JTS* 33 [1932], pp. 40-1); he thinks that Hebrew *bālaʿ* sometimes means “to confuse”, and that *bliʿal* means “confusion”. Thomas, however, derives the noun from *bālaʿ* “to swallow”, and suggests that Sheol was thought of “as ‘the swallower’, the abyss that engulfs” (p. 18).

For the idea of Sheol swallowing people Thomas compares Prov. i 12: *nīblaʿem kīḇōl hayyîm* “let us swallow them alive like Sheol”. In addition, he notes, the Syriac verb “*blaʿ* ‘swallowed’ is used with Sheol as subject” (p. 18). He could also have compared Num. xvi 32 (cp. v. 34) where the earth swallows (*bl* people, and they go down alive into Sheol. Similarly, Ps. lxix 16 probably has in mind the watery depths that lead to Sheol when it says *wēlāti biblāʿéni mēṣūlā*, and Isa. v 14 speaks of Sheol swallowing people, although it expresses the idea without using the verb *bālaʿ* (cp. Hab. ii 5).

How, then, does Thomas explain the phrase *ben-* (or *bat* or *ḇiyyāʿal*? He thinks that it “indicates one whose actions or words engulf a man, bring him to the abyss, to the underworld. Such a wicked man is, in colloquial English, ‘an infernal fellow’” (p. 19). Similarly, an *ḇiyyāʿal* or a *ḇiyyaʿal* is “a witness or counsellor whose testimony or advice brings a man finally to ruin...”

A comparable theory has recently been advanced by P. K. McCarter in *II Samuel* (Garden City, New York, 1984), although he (p. 373) follows F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman in thinking that *ḇliyyaʿal* means “(place of) not-coming-up”. However, he also mentions Thomas’s theory (and, incidentally, fails to realize on pp. 51, 552 that Winton is Thomas’s second Christian name, rather than part of his surname). McCarter translates *tiš bliyyaʿal* in 2 Sam. xvi 7 as “You ... fiend of hell” (pp. 362, 373; cp. pp. 414, 423 on xx 1), and *ḇliyyaʿal* in xxii 5 as “hell” (pp. 452, 465). Similarly, he renders *ben-māwet* in xii 5 as “a fiend of hell” (pp. 292, 299).