

The Doctrine of Belial

Preface: Throughout Scripture, we have references to *sons of Belial* and even a *daughter of Belial*; therefore, it might be a good idea to have some idea as to what we are speaking of.

Topics: Hebrew
 Greek
 Latin
 Belial as Found in Scripture
 Paul's Use of the Term Belial
 Conclusion

Charts: Examples of Various Translations of B^elīyya`al

- First, we need some vocabulary: b^elīyya`al (בֶּלְיָאֵל) [pronounced *b^eleey-YAH-ǵahl*], is transliterated *Belial*, and it gives the sense of being a proper noun, partly because of the fact that it was originally transliterated in the KJV and partly because *sons of Belial* simply makes it sound like a proper noun. However, it is a compound word, being made up of two words: (1) b^elīy (בְּלִי) [pronounced *b^eLEE*], which means *not, without*. Strong's #1097 BDB #115. And (2) yā`al (יָאֵל) [pronounced *yaw-ǴAHL*], which means *to profit, to avail, to benefit*. Strong's #3276 BDB #418. Together, the word mean *without value, worthless, ruin, good-for-nothing, ungodly, wicked*. In modern English, rather than render a phrase as *sons of Belial*, we might give it the more updated rendering of *sons of bitches*. More about this word in point #2.

Examples of Various Translations of B ^e līyya`al						
Scripture	Deut. 15:9	I Sam. 1:16	I Sam. 2:12	Job 34:18	Psalms 41:8(9)	Prov. 16:27
Context	your __ heart	daughter of __	sons of __	"[You are] __"	a __ disease	a __ man
CEV	guilty	no good	dishonest	unfair	fatal	Worthless
God's Word™	worthless	good-for-nothing	good-for-nothing	good-for-nothing scoundrel	devilish	worthless
NAB	mean	a ne'er-do-well	wicked	wicked	deadly	scoundrel
NASB*	base	a worthless woman	worthless men	'Worthless one'	wicked	worthless
NIV	wicked	a wicked woman	wicked men	worthless	vile	scoundrel
NJB	mean	a worthless woman	scoundrels	scoundrel	fatal	worthless
NKJV*	wicked	a wicked woman	corrupt	worthless	evil	ungodly
NRSV	mean	a worthless woman	scoundrels	scoundrel	deadly	scoundrels
REB	villainous	so devoid of shame	scoundrels	'You scoundrel.'	evil	scoundrel

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Young's Literal Translation	worthless	a daughter of worthlessness	worthlessness	'Worthless'	Belial	worthless
This is not a comprehensive listing of the passages in which b ^e l ⁱ y ^y a`al is found, but a representative grouping of them. As you can obviously see, except for Young, each translation gives the word a slightly different spin, depending upon its context.						
*Transliteration <i>sons of Belial</i> , when appropriate, footnoted.						

2. This is translated by the KJV as *Belial, naughty, ungodly, wicked*; BDB gives its meanings as *worthlessness, ruin, destruction, good-for-nothing*. I prefer *without any value*. as it has a more degrading connotation, even though it means the same as *worthless* and *good-for-nothing*. The NIV renders this word with *wicked, troublemaker(s), scoundrel(s)*. Rotherham renders this *the Abandoned One*. The key is that this noun is transliterated into the Greek and used as a name for Satan (II Cor. 6:15), who is the embodiment of lawlessness and evil. The original rendering is actually good, as it identifies the parent of the person found here—Satan is the father of those who lead others away from God. **Now the sons of Eli were men of Belial; they did not know Y^howah** (I Sam. 2:12). These men are more than lost—they are leading others astray as well. In the majority, this word is found in conjunction with *sons, man (men)* as in *sons of Belial*. (Judges 19:22¹ 20:13 I Sam. 1:16 2:12 10:27 II Sam. 16:7 20:1 Psalm 18:4 Prov. 16:27) and it is occasionally found apart from this phrase (Deut. 15:9 Job 34:18 Psalm 41:8 101:3 Prov. 6:12 19:28 Nahum 1:15*). C.L. Burney suggests that we dismiss the Massoretic vowels and interpret this as coming from the root word b^elⁱa^l, which means *to swallow*, and therefore understand b^elⁱy^ya`al to mean *engulfing ruin*.² Strong's #1100 BDB #116.
3. Greek translations of *belial*:
 - a. Anomia (ἀνομία) [pronounced *an-om-EE-a*], which means *lawless, without law, lawlessness*. Strong's #458. Psalm 18:4 (17:4 in Septuagint).
 - b. Loimos (λοιμός) [pronounced *loy-MOSS*], which means *pestilence, disease*. As an additional note, Brenton became rather free in his translation of this word the further along that he got in Samuel. In II Sam. 20:1, you cannot even find *sons of pestilence* or anything approximating that in his rendering of ἰὺδς παράνομος. Strong's #3061. I Sam. 1:16 2:13 10:27 II Sam. 16:7 20:1.
 - c. Paranomos (παράνομος) [pronounced *pa-RAH-noh-moss*], which means *contrary to the law, lawless*; in the plural, it could be rendered *transgressors, evil doers*. This is the word found most often as the Greek equivalent of b^elⁱy^ya`al. Strong's #none. Deut. 13:13 Judges 19:22 20:13 Psalm 41:8 (40:8 in Septuagint) 101:3 (100:3) Prov. 6:12
 - d. One conclusion that we can draw is that those who translated the Septuagint either did not really grasp the meaning of the word. Furthermore, it is a testimony in itself as to the unevenness of the translation of the Septuagint itself (although, do not be too haughty about English translations, as none of them were as consistent as the Septuagint in this regard).
4. The Latin Vulgate generally transliterated b^elⁱy^ya`al, possibly influenced by the Pseudopigrapha. It rendered it *diabolus* in I Kings 21:13.
5. The Talmud believes b^elⁱy^ya`al to mean *without a yoke*,³ but there is no reasonable support for this understanding.
6. Various uses of b^elⁱy^ya`al in scripture:

¹ You just about cannot find men of *less value* than what is found in this passage.

² *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p.137.

³ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 513.

- a. The most common use is in *sons of Belial* (occasionally transliterated in a footnote; mostly translated). Passages: Deut. 13:13 Judges 19:22 20:13 I Sam. 2:12 10:27 25:17 II Sam. 23:6 I Kings 21:10, 13a II Chron. 13:7
 - b. *A man of the Belial*: I Sam. 25:25 II Sam. 16:7 20:1 I Kings 21:13 Prov. 16:27. In I Sam. 30:22, it reads, literally, **a b^olⁱyya`al from the men.** *Men of Belial*: I Kings 21:13b
 - c. *A daughter of Belial*: I Sam. 1:16
 - d. *A torrent of Belial*: (II Sam. 22:5 Psalm 18:5).
 - e. *A heart of Belial*: Deut. 15:9
 - f. *A word of Belial*: Psalm 41:10 (this refers, apparently, to a disease) 101:3.
 - g. Also, *Adam of Belial* (Prov. 6:12), *a witness of Belial* (Prov. 19:28), *a counselor of Belial* (Nahum 1:11), and **“Who says to a king, ‘B^olⁱyya`al?’”** (Job 34:18)
 - h. *B^olⁱyya`al* is only found by itself in Nahum 1:15.
 - i. Nowhere in the Old Testament is this used as a proper name, or could it be construed as reasonably needing to be a proper name.
 - j. The Greek Septuagint does not transliterate b^olⁱyya`al, which is what would have been done with a proper noun. However, in the literature of Paul’s time (and earlier), *Belial* (or, actually *Beliar*) was used as a proper noun.
7. ZPEB: *Sinners of the worst type are in view in [use of] the term.*⁴
 8. ZPEB also points out that in four of the instances named above in point 6, four appear to be associated with destruction (Psalm 18:4 41:8 Nahum 1:11 1:15).
 9. Paul uses the Greek transliteration of this word, no doubt influenced by writings of his day (he was obviously very well-read). In II Cor. 6:15, he writes: **What harmony has Christ with Belial,⁵ or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?** The term *Belial* had taken upon itself the idea of a Satanic figure (if not Satan himself) in Paul’s day. Paul’s use of that term does not mean we should adjust the meaning of b^olⁱyya`al in the Old Testament; his writing to the Corinthians was using a commonly understood name for Satan in order to make a point.
 10. **Conclusion:** I think that we could reasonably conclude that this b^olⁱyya`al is not a proper noun in the original Hebrew but simply a compound word which means *without value, without worth, worthless*. You may wonder, *why all the mystique? Why wasn’t it simply properly translated all along?* There appear to be three reasons:
 - a. The translators of the Septuagint realized that there was a negative connotation to this word, but were not exactly certain as to its meaning (or, at least, did not appear to be).
 - b. The Talmud was confused about its meaning as well, thinking it to mean *without a yoke*.
 - c. Finally, in later Jewish writings, *Belial* was used as a proper noun, referring either to *Satan* or to the *Pseudo-Messiah*. We find this in the apocalyptic books of Jubilees, the Ascension of Isaiah, and the Sibylline Oracles.⁶ When Paul uses their term in a similar fashion, this appears to give credence to the idea that b^olⁱyya`al should stand for a proper name, but it is his concession to the use of that word during his time, and not its use a millennium earlier.

⁴ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 513.

⁵ Actually, in the Greek, it is *Beliar*; it is not unusual to substitute one liquid letter for another in transliteration, according to *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 513. Thayer attributes it to the harsh Syriac pronunciation of *Belial* (*Thayer’s Greek English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, American Book Company, ©1889, p. 100). In our modern world, some Orientals with a strong accent occasionally replace an *l* with an *r* when they speak. I recall one of the key phrases of the movie *Chinatown* was “*Bad for glass,*” which Jack Nicholson originally shrugged off as Oriental babbling, was actually “*Bad for grass.*”

⁶ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 513.