

Beelzebul

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Beelzebul

Among the minor unsolved problems of New Testament exegesis is that of the meaning of the name *Beelzebul*. To be sure, it makes no decisive difference in our understanding of the gospels, for the evangelists use it simply as a name of *Satan*, the prince of the demons, Matt. 12, 24 = Lk. 11, 15 (ἄρχοντι τῶν δαιμονίων)¹. Only the saying in Matt. 10, 25 contains a possible reference to the meaning of the name:

If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more shall they call his servants so.

Such a name is, however, completely unknown in the Jewish literature outside the synoptic gospels. It is further difficult to find an etymology which would be suitable for a name of Satan. It is with this last question that we will be concerned here.

We are fortunate that the spelling of this word, whose meaning was not understood by the Greek church, has come down to us relatively uniformly: almost all of the Greek MSS read Βεελζεβούλ. Only B and in all but one case ⚭ read Βεεζεβούλ, which Foerster thinks represents a Palestinian popular pronunciation and therefore to be original². It is however much more likely that the assimilation occurred in Greek, where the combination of λζ is unusual³. The Vulgate and most of the Syrian translations read Beelzebub, a form to which we shall later return, but which is definitely not original. The Greek spelling must be the transliteration of a Semitic word, and the most natural is the Aramaic-Hebrew combination בְּעֵזְבֹּל-יָבוּל⁴.

1.

Whatever the root meaning of Zebûl, it seems that in the *Old Testament* it is used in the sense of “dwelling”. As this is disputed

¹ We cannot with W. Foerster, *Theol. Wörtb.* 1 (1933), p. 605f., think of Beelzebul as a minor evil spirit. For the version in Mk. 3:22 (“they said: ‘He ‘has’ Beelzebul’ and ‘By the prince of the demons he casts out demons’”) is secondary to that of Q (E. Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus* (1937, n. ed. 1951), p. 79; V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (1952), p. 237) and Mk. 3:22–23a, 30 are editorial compositions of the evangelist.

² Foerster, *ib.*

³ J. H. Moulton and W. F. Howard, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 2 (1929), p. 105.

⁴ The word Zebûl seems not to have existed in Aramaic.

by Koehler, we shall have to substantiate it⁵. The verb *zbl* in Gen. 30:20 probably means “exalt”, “honor”, from the Akk. *zabalu*, to “carry”, “lift”. Koehler postulates in addition a second root *zbl*, from the Ugaritic, meaning “to rule”, and accordingly he gives to the word *Zebûl* in the Old Testament the meaning “dominion”. Aside from the fact that etymology is only of secondary importance in determining the meaning of a word in a given language, Albright for example would translate the Ugaritic *Zbl* as “the Exalted One”⁶. It is therefore very probable that we have to do with only one root, the Akk. *zabalu*, which acquired the meaning “exalt”. The transition to “dwell” can perhaps be seen in the Babylonian distinction between epiphany-temples and dwelling-temples⁷. Because in the latter the god dwelt high in the *Zikkurat*⁸, the transition is plausible enough.

In any case, the meaning of *Zebûl* must be shown from its actual occurrences. In 1 Kings 8:13 (= 2 Chron. 6:2), Solomon says of the temple: “Yahweh has said he would dwell (שכן) in deep darkness; truly I have built Thee a בַּיִת צֶבֶל, a place for Thy dwelling (מְכוֹן לְשִׁבְתֶּךָ) forever.” Clearly בית is used parallel to מְכוֹן and יָשַׁב; בַּיִת צֶבֶל must therefore mean dwelling-temple. As מְכוֹן is used in the same chapter (Vs. 39, 43, 49) to mean God’s dwelling place in heaven, it is not necessary that *Zebûl* have itself the connotation of exalted dwelling; it may simply share in the general development in which words which mean dwelling are applied to God’s heavenly dwelling.

In Is. 63:15, “Look from heaven and see, from Thy holy and glorious dwelling (מִצְדָּל)”, *Zebûl* is simply a synonym for heaven, and the same is true of Hab. 3:11, where it is used of the dwelling of the moon, or, in the present text, of both sun and moon. Ps. 49:15 is impossible to translate. In its original Canaanite form it may be

⁵ L. Koehler, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros* (1953), p. 250.

⁶ W. F. Albright, *Journ. Pal. Or. Soc.* 16 (1936), p. 17. He earlier thought that Ugaritic *Zbl* “stands by ellipsis for Ba‘al-zebûl, Lord of the Abode (i.e. shrine)”, *ib.* 12 (1932), p. 192.

⁷ For this fundamental distinction between the *Zikkurat* as a *Wohntempel* and the temple on ground level as an *Erscheinungstempel*, cf. W. Andrae, *Das Gotteshaus und die Urform des Bauens im alten Orient* (1930), pp. 1–30.

⁸ The *Zikkurat* is called in at least one inscription a *Bit-zabal*, according to S. Guyard, *Remarques sur le mot assyrien zabal et sur l’expression biblique bet zeboul: Journ. as.* 7, 12 (1878), pp. 220–225.

that Zebûl retained its root meaning of exalted, and a contrast with She'ol was intended. As the text stands, it looks as if people in She'ol have lost the dwelling they had on earth⁹, but this is most uncertain.

We see that Zebûl is not a common word in the Old Testament, that it can be used as synonymous with heaven, and that it probably means dwelling. In the light of its use in 1 Kings 8:13, it is doubtful whether it can be maintained that the word retained its root connotation of "exalted", so that it would mean primarily "heavenly dwelling"¹⁰. It must be emphasized that Zebûl does not etymologically mean dwelling, but that this is the only way we can express the common element of its two uses: of heaven and of the temple.

When we examine the use of the word in late Hebrew, we find even more clearly that Zebûl is used for heaven as the dwelling place of God and, in connection with 1 Kings 8:13, for the temple. First of all, this is the way the Old Testament passages were understood. The LXX translate οἶκος in Is. 63:15 and οἶκος κατοικητηρίου in 1 Kings 8:13¹¹. The Targums translate Is. 63:15 and Hab. 3:11 with a form of מדור, "dwelling"¹², and are quite specific on the meaning temple in 1 Kings 8:13, translating בֵּית מְקוֹדֶשָׁא.

Zebûl appears four times in the Dead Sea scrolls, three times qualified by "holy", and always in the sense of God's heavenly dwelling. In IQM XII:1 בזבול קודשכה "in thy holy dwelling" is parallel to בשמים "in heaven". In IQM XII:2 בזבול כבודכה "in thy glorious dwelling" is parallel to במעון קודשכה "in thy holy habitation"¹³. In IQS X:3 it is as in Hab. 3:11 a question of the sun and the moon (מאורות) shining "from the holy dwelling" (מזבול קודש). Finally, in IQH III:34 "God thunders in the abundance (or roar-

⁹ «Ohne Wohnstatt»: H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen*, 1 (1960), p. 363.

¹⁰ Especially after the time of Deut., the same development occurred with other words having no such root meaning, cf. מכון mentioned above, מעון in Deut. 26:15, Jer. 25:30, 2 Chron. 30:27, etc.

¹¹ They attempted to translate Ps. 49:15 as ἐκ τῆς δόξης αὐτῶν and have misunderstood Hab. 3:11: ἐν τῇ τάξει αὐτῶν.

¹² It is significant that the Targum also translates the verb zbl in Gen. 30:20 with this word. On the Targum to Ps. 49:15, cf. below.

¹³ H. Bardtke, *Die Handschriftenfunde am Toten Meer*, 2 (1958), p. 226, is misled by Koehler to translate: «in deiner heiligen Herrschaft» in these two passages, in spite of the parallelism.

ing?) of his might, and his holy dwelling (זבול קודש) roars in the truth (?) of his glory.”

Zebûl is not a common word in Rabbinic Hebrew¹⁴. It is used of the temple in a passage we will discuss, where however the meaning of the word has to be explained. It is found in Ḥag. 12 b as the name of the fourth of the seven heavens. In this passage the seven heavens are given names which are with some ingenuity synonymous with heaven: Wilôn (= lat. velum), Raqîaʿ, Sheḥaqîm (from Ps. 78:23), Zebûl, Maʿôn, Makôn, and ʿarabôth (from Ps. 68:5). It is significant that it is in the fourth heaven, the Zebûl, that the heavenly Jerusalem is to be found, where Michael is offering sacrifice in the heavenly temple. In Rabbinic Hebrew then Zebûl means “dwelling”, either in the sense of temple or of heaven with connotations of the temple.

2.

To return now to the *New Testament*, neither “Lord of Heaven” nor “Lord of the Temple” seem very appropriate for a name of Satan. In fact, although we know a number of names for Satan and names of demons in Jewish literature, this name never occurs. The references Foerster cites are of course all dependant on our gospels: the Christian portions (!) of the Testament of Solomon, the Valentinians (Hipp. Ref. VI, 34, 1, a “strongly syncretistic” Jewish magical prayer), and Origen (Adv. Cels. VIII, 25). Origen, refuting Celsus’s statement that the demons belong to God and must be worshipped, quite specifically says that he is quoting scripture (ὡς φασιν οἱ θεῖοι λόγοι) in showing that they are subject to Beelzebul.

For anyone not knowing Hebrew, Beelzebul is simply a name, and thus it was transmitted by the entire Greek MSS tradition. This name would be however a stumbling block for anyone understanding the etymology, and the reading Beelzebub is found in just those

¹⁴ That Zebûl is a relatively rare word in late Hebrew is shown 1) perhaps by the corruption of the texts of Hab. 3:11 and Ps. 49:15, 2) by the fact that the LXX did not understand it in 2 Chron. 6:2, Hab. 3:11, and perhaps Ps. 49:15, and 3) by the fact that it seems to appear in only two contexts in the Rabbinic literature and in at least one passage has to be explained.

witnesses who were in a position to understand it: the Syrian translators and Jerome, independently of one another¹⁵. Both made the obvious alteration, probably but not necessarily in connection with 2 Kings 1, to “Lord of Flies”¹⁶.

1. When we come to modern attempts to avoid the difficulty of the name, we shall speak first of those (e.g. W. Bauer, *Wörterb.*, s.v.) who follow Jerome and the Syrians in maintaining the originality of Beelzebub. They simply cannot explain away the fact that all the Greek MSS evidence is against them nor further show why a Hebrew pun referring to a Philistine god of the tenth century B.C. should be revived as a name of Satan in the first century A.D.

2. Even more remote is Schlatter’s suggestion that the original was *בְּעַל דְּבָבָא* = the *ἔχθρος* of Matt. 13:39¹⁷. The gospels treat the name not as an epithet but as a proper name, and Schlatter’s spelling is even further from Beelzebul than Beelzebub.

3. The alternative to the derivation we have suggested which must be taken most seriously is that first proposed by Lightfoot and supported in detail by Billerbeck¹⁸. I am hardly in a position to dispute with such Rabbinists but can only say that they have been oversimplified and thus misinterpreted when Taylor says Beelzebul means “Lord of dung”¹⁹. In fact there is no such word as *זִיבּוּל* meaning dung, and if there were, the more accurate transliteration would be *βελζιββουλ*. The word for dung, or more accurately “compost heap”, is *זִבּוּל*, something quite different. *זִיבּוּל* is not an independent word at all but rather a cacophemistic way of writing *זִיבּוּחַ*, sacrifice. That is, it does not in itself *mean* “compost heap”, but it *suggests* the word *זִבּוּל* by changing one letter of the word for “sacrifice”. In every case in which it is used, the passage reads straightforward if we read the word “sacrifice” and would

¹⁵ Neither the vet. lat. nor the Diatessaron, which otherwise provide the link for many readings common to the Syrian versions and the west, reads Beelzebub.

¹⁶ In all probability 2 Kings 1 is contemptuously referring to the Phoenician Bʿl Zbl (or Zbl Bʿl?), cf. Albright (n. 6), 12, p. 191, but all later readers up to the 20 century thought that the god of Ekron was really named Beelzebub.

¹⁷ A. Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus* (1929), p. 243.

¹⁸ J. Lightfoot, *Horae hebraicae*, 2 (1652), on Matt. 12:24; P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, 1 (1922), p. 631ff.

¹⁹ Taylor (n. 1), p. 239; also Lohmeyer (n. 1), p. 78 n. 1.

make no sense if the reader were not aware of this. We can only conclude that the name Beelzibbul could be a disrespectful way of referring to the "Lord of Sacrifice", but it could have no independent meaning of its own. Thus, quite aside from the difficulties involved in the Greek spelling, this explanation is found to have no advantages, for we are still left with the problem of explaining how "the lord of sacrifice" could become, even cacophemistically, a name of Satan.

4. We are left with the most natural derivation and have now to explain it. Some would like to interpret it of the demon "dwelling" in the one possessed (cf. Lk. 11:24-26). We have seen that this would be impossible, for Zebûl does not mean "dwelling" as such but is used for either heaven or the temple as God's dwelling.

While Zebûl cannot mean dwelling in general, it can nevertheless suggest this idea. It is then perhaps significant that in the Beelzebul controversy in Mk and Q it is connected with the images of Satan's kingdom and the strong man's house. The other context contains in any case a play on words: "If they call the master of the house (οἰκοδεσπότην, syr. מרה דביתא) Beelzebul..." (Matt. 10:25).

3.

The chief rival of the Yahweh faith in the Hellenistic age was the cult of the heavenly *Baal*, called in Greek Ζεὺς Ὀλύμπιος and in Aramaic בעלשמין²⁰. Especially at the time of Antiochos IV Epiphanes, the struggle with this cult became for Israel a matter of life or death²¹. It is to this name that Daniel refers with his "abomination of desolation", for שקויץ (מ)שמם = בעל שמים²². The disguise is due not only to the apocalyptic style or the prevalent tendency of substituting a cacophemistic name for that of a heathen god. In the late writings of the Old Testament, after Israel had come into closer contact with this cult, the name "Lord of heaven" (מְרִי שְׁמִיָּא, Dan.

²⁰ The Syrian translation of Ζεὺς Ὀλύμπιος in 2 Mac. 6:2 is בעלשמין אלוּמפיוס.

²¹ Cf. E. Bickermann, *Der Gott der Makkabäer* (1937), esp. pp. 50ff. For the previous history of this rivalry, cf. O. Eissfeldt, Ba'alšamēm und Jahwe: *Zeitschr. attl. Wiss.* 57 (1939), p. 1-31.

²² First recognized by E. Nestle, *Der Greuel der Verwüstung*, Dan. 9:27, 11:31, 12:11: *Zeitschr. altt. Wiss.* 4 (1884), p. 248.

5:23) was appropriated by Yahweh himself.²³ The title simply was not available to designate any other god.

According to Judaism and also to the New Testament, the heathen gods were thought to be demons. "All the gods of the peoples are demons" (δαίμόνια, LXX Ps. 95:5). The heathen worshippers "sacrifice to demons and not to God" (1 Cor. 10:20, cf. LXX Deut. 32:17, Ps. 105:37, Bar. 4:7, Rev. 9:20). What better name then for Satan, the chief of the demons, than that of the chief of the heathen gods? He could not of course be called by his proper name—we have seen that this title is restricted to Yahweh—but this name "Lord of heaven" could be hinted at in a slight disguise.

The Pharisees accuse Jesus of being inspired by Satan. The name they use, Beelzebul = Baalshamaim = Satan, is transparent enough to be readily understood by Jesus and their hearers. It is not a name otherwise known, because it was coined specifically for this situation.²⁴

We now have to ask *why*, of all the possible synonyms for heaven, they should have chosen the word *Zebûl*.²⁵

There is a very peculiar passage in the Tosephta Sanhedrin in which it is said of certain Minim, including "those who stretched out their hands against the *temple*" (*Zebûl*), that they, in contrast to lesser sinners, will remain in She'ol forever and endure the fate described in Is. 66:24, Tos. San. 13:5:

She'ol perishes but they do not perish, as is said (Ps. 49:15), "their form causes She'ol to perish". What is the cause of this? Because they stretched out their hands against the *Zebûl*, as is said, "מִזְבֹּחַ לֹ", because of his

²³ Ezr. 1:2, 5:11, 12, 6:9, 10, 7:12, 21, 23, Neh. 1:4, 5, 2:4, 20, Dan. 2:18, 19, 37, 44, 4:34, 5:23, Ps. 136:26, Tob. 13:11, 2 Mac. 15:23, cf. Jon. 1:9, Gen. 14:19. Cf. G. Westphal, *Jahwes Wohnstätten nach den Anschauungen der alten Hebräer* (1908), pp. 257ff.

²⁴ It is of course possible that the heavenly Baal was still called Ba'al-zebûl in some of the former Phoenician cities. We must then ask why this specific epithet was taken up, and not for example Ba'al-Ma'on, still preserved in the trans-Jordan place name as late as Judith 8:3 (cf. Syr.).

²⁵ This is the conclusion reached by W. E. M. Aitken, *Beelzebul: Journ. Bibl. Lit.* 31 (1912), pp. 34–53. His thesis was not however convincing because he could not explain why it was that just *Zebûl* should be substituted. Also C. C. Torrey, *The Four Gospels* (1933), p. 21, n. 6, says Beelzebul means "Lord of the Heavens, by the Jews identified with Zeus Ouranios, the chief of the Gentile gods".

temple”, and Zebûl does not mean anything else but temple, as is said (1 Kings 8:13), “truly I have built Thee a **בית זבול**”.

This understanding of Ps. 49:15b is reflected in the later Targum: “Their bodies will be destroyed in Gehinnom because they stretched out their hands and destroyed the house of dwelling (**בית מְדוּרָה**) of His Shekinah.”²⁶

Among “those who stretched out their hands against the temple” are certainly included the Christians. It was the accusation made against Stephen: “this man never ceases to speak against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place” (Acts 6:13f.). Similarly, Paul is accused that he “is teaching men everywhere against the people and the law and this place; moreover he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place” (Acts 21:28). The Gospel of Peter (VII, 26) says of all the apostles: “We were sought by them as criminals and such that wanted to burn the temple.” According to Mark, this accusation played a role in the trial of Jesus, when “false witnesses” accused him of saying: “I will destroy this temple made with hands and within three days build another not made with hands” (Mk. 14:58), and it was repeated by taunters under the cross: “You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself” (Mk. 15:29f.). The taunt under the cross shows that the accusation was popularly known and also how it was meant: of a magical power which could be used to come down from a cross, to destroy and miraculously to build a building within three days, or to drive out demons from those possessed.

It is therefore very probable that the accusation has its origin in the ministry of Jesus and that the Pharisees in the Beelzebul controversy knew of a certain claim Jesus made over the temple. Just a few verses before Matthew’s account, Jesus claims to be lord of the sabbath, and this conclusion is reached by a *Kal wahomer* from his lordship over the temple (“greater than the temple is here”, Matt. 12:6). We can conclude from the saying Matt. 10:25b that Jesus called himself “master of the house”, perhaps even publicly, and we can conjecture how such a claim would be mis-

²⁶ Cf. Rosh Hashanah 17a; Seder ‘Olam Rabbah 3.

understood. As the accusation²⁷ “Beelzebul” is mentioned in this context, it is likely that the taunt “Lord of the temple” refers to this misunderstood claim of Jesus. The Pharisees, in accusing him of being possessed by Satan = Baalshamaim = Beelzebul, are at the same time throwing in his face his claim to have authority over the temple, his stretching out his hands against the Zebûl. It is possible that the understanding of Ps. 49:15 which underlies Tos. San. 13:5 goes back to the Pharisaic side of the Beelzebul controversy²⁸.

It often happens in a controversy that a disrespectfully meant name is accepted by the other side. Thus in the Beelzebul controversy Jesus accepts the Pharisees’ taunt and says in effect that he *is* Lord of the temple (the dwelling place of the Shekinah) who casts out demons “by the spirit of God” (Matt. 12:28), and the eschatological high-priest who has entered the strong man’s house and bound Beliar (Test. Levi 18:12). The saying Matt. 10:25 b was originally an independent isolated saying²⁹, and the play on words with “master of the house” makes it likely that Jesus is interpreting the accusation positively. If the master of the house is Lord of the temple (Beelzebul), what are those of his household? What else but the new temple “not made with hands” (Mk. 14:58) which Jesus will “build” (Matt. 16:18)?

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²⁷ If we are to read the dative with B*, then ἐπικαλεῖν would even mean “to accuse”, “to throw in one’s face”.

²⁸ As the text of Tos. San. 13:5 stands, other Minim besides the Christians are envisaged, and the later Targum surely refers primarily to the Romans as the destroyers of the temple. Nevertheless, R. T. Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (1903), pp. 118–125, and H. L. Strack, *Jesus, die Häretiker und die Christen* (1910), p. 58*, n. 8, rightly see the original anti-Christian reference.

²⁹ R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (1958), p. 94.