

The Rich Man, Lazarus, and Abraham – A polemical parable

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Text of Luke 16:19-31

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores, and longing to eat what fell from the Rich Man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The Rich Man also died and was buried. In Hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire'. But Abraham replied, 'Son remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here

and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone else cross over from there to us.' He answered, *'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment. Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'* *'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'* He said to him, *'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'* (NIV)

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Introduction

Sometimes in the Bible it is obvious when a parable is a parable, and when real events are real events. And sometimes the reader can easily distinguish between things to be taken literally and things to be taken figuratively. But this is not always so simple. Many times when Jesus spoke in parables people misunderstood and took him literally.

For example, Jesus once said, when visiting the temple in Jerusalem, *"Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days"*. Those listening all thought he was speaking literally about the real temple and objected; "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?". Yet the Gospel writer notes; *"But the temple he had spoken of was his body"* (John 2:20). In other words he was talking figuratively, in a kind of parable.

Even Jesus' own disciples were often confused by his figurative speech and parables. For example on another occasion he told his disciples to *"be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees,"* and they misunderstood, thinking that he was reproaching them for having forgotten to buy bread. Then he explained to them that he was talking figuratively; the yeast was the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:6-7, 11-12).

It is easy to smile at these mistakes by the people of Jesus' day, and forget that we are reading the account including the explanation. Without the explanation we would probably be just as confused as those to whom Jesus first spoke the words.

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A unique story

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is one of the best known in the Bible because it is unique in several ways.

Firstly, it is unique because, although its style resembles a parable, and also although it comes immediately after a series of four other parables (parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, prodigal son, dishonest manager), it certainly is not a ordinary parable. The parables of Jesus normally concern nature, everyday life, customs and society, not startling visions of the underworld, complete with fire and chasms.

Secondly, this parable, if we can properly call it a parable, is the only one in which real people - Abraham, Lazarus - are named.

Thirdly, it is unique because the teachings in this story contradict the rest of the Bible's teaching about what happens after death. For example no other direct support can be found anywhere in the Bible for the idea that 'souls' live on after death, nor for the idea that the 'souls' of the good and the wicked go to different places. Nor for the idea that Abraham is waiting to welcome the dead. These comments may surprise some readers, but popular ideas about souls going to heaven or hell, and so on, are not taught in the Bible. In fact they are repeatedly denied in both Old and New Testaments. Elsewhere in the Bible "the dead know nothing". (More on this subject in a moment).

Fourthly and finally, Jesus uses various phrases (such as "the Bosom of Abraham") and images (such as the chasm separating the underworld in two) which are only found outside the Bible. In fact these terms are only found in 1st Century Jewish mythology. (More on this subject shortly also).

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Bible teaching on death

Before looking at Luke 16:19-31 in detail it is probably necessary to support the assertion made above that the Bible teaches that "the dead know nothing".

That phrase is actually a quote from the Bible (Ecclesiastes 9:5). Similar comments can be found in Ecclesiastes 3:19-20 and 9:10. These verses are so clear, and so clearly contradict popular church teaching about the 'immortal soul' (a phrase never found in the Bible), that that content has led some Christians to reject the book of Ecclesiastes as being 'the work of a man without faith'. This is a short sighted solution to their problem, as it is not only Ecclesiastes but almost every book in the Bible which contains the teaching that death is what all the

evidence confirms; death. So if someone rejects Ecclesiastes, because they find its teaching unpalatable, they would, if they were consistent have to reject the entire Old Testament on this subject, and then ultimately what the New Testament teaches as well.

It is not going to be possible to cover the entire subject of life, death, and the nature of man in a few lines.

What follows next is a short detour into the subject of death. It can be skipped if it is too familiar. (If you are not sure what the Bible teaches on this subject it would be better to write to the address on the back cover for a copy of the leaflet 'Life After Death').

A short detour into Bible teaching on death.

The main points of Bible teaching are as follows:

1. Man's 'soul' is made up of two parts - dust and breath: See Genesis 2:7(where "living soul" is the same Hebrew phrase as "living creatures" in Genesis 1:21, 24, 9:10,12,15,16 etc.) Job 27:3, 33:4-6, Psalm 104:30, 1Corinthians 15:45 (where the "soul" of Adam is the same Greek word psyche as "life" or "lives" in Matthew 2:20, 6:25, 10:39, 20:28, Acts 15:26, 20:10,24, 27:10, John 10:11, 15,17, 13:37,38, Romans 11:3, Philippians 2:30, 1John 3:16, Revelation 8:9 etc.).

2. When man dies the breath returns to God who gave it, and man returns to dust: See Genesis 3:19, 6:3, 18:27, Job 7:21, 21:26, 34:14-15, Psalm 37:20, 49:10-14, 55:23, 76:12, 88:5, 90:3-6, 103:14, 104:29, 112:10, 140:10, 146:4*, Ecclesiastes 3:19-20*, 12:7*, Isaiah 26:14, 43:17, 51:39, Ezekiel 18:4, Nahum 3:18, John 6:49, Romans 5:12-14, James 2:26. (* in the asterisked verses English Bibles have "spirit" but the Hebrew has the same word ruakh as the "breath" in the animals of Genesis 6:17, 7:15 etc. The word ruakh does not mean a conscious spirit).

3. Those who have known God 'sleep in the dust' - meaning that they rest unconscious until Christ returns: See 2 Samuel 7:12, (and likewise 1 Kings 2:10, 11:43, 14:20, 31, 15:8, 24, 16:6, 28, 22:40, 50 etc. etc.), Job 10:21, 13:12-15, 14:21, Psalm 6:5, 13:3, 30:9, 31:17, 49:17-20, 88:10-11, 115:17, Ecclesiastes 9:4-6, 10, Isaiah 38:18, John 3:13, 11:11-13, Acts 2:29,34, 13:36, 1 Corinthians 15:51.

4. Only then will man rise from the dust to be judged, and, if accepted, live forever in Christ's Kingdom on earth: See Job 33:25, Psalm 22:29, 37:11,22,29,34, 49:15, 116:15, Isaiah 26:19, 57:1, Jeremiah 23:5, Ezekiel 21:27, Daniel 12:2-3, Matthew 5:5, 6:10, 8:11, 22:23-32, 23:39, 25:34, Mark 13:32, 14:25, Luke 1:33, 17:24, 20:35-38, John 5:21-22, 28-30, 6:39-40,44,54, 11:24-25, 14:6, Acts 1:6-7,11, 4:2, 17:18,32, 23:6, 24:15,21, 26:6-8,23, Romans 2:16, 4:17, 6:5, 14:10, 1 Corinthians 6:14, 15:12-14,20-23, 49-55, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Philippians 3:11, Colossians 3:4, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-16, 5:23, 2 Timothy 4:1, Hebrews 11:13,19,39-40, Revelation 5:10.

Obscurity about 'soul' in some Bible translations

There are some complications to the simple explanation above because of the way that Bible translations inevitably sometimes reflect church traditions rather than the literal text. So a phrase which conflicts with traditional beliefs such as "do not go near a dead soul" (Numbers 6:6) is translated as "do not go near a dead body". When Joshua "struck all the souls with the edge of the sword" (Joshua 10:28, 30, 32, 37, 39) it is translated "people". And so on.

Part of this is an expected competence on the part of the translators, who aim to render the sense of a sentence not merely transpose words literally from one language to another. But in this case, where the Hebrew and inherited western concepts of what constitutes a living being are at odds, the benefits of paraphrasing the Hebrew text conflict with the benefits of transparency in showing the original terminology.

One solution to this problem is a concordance (such as Young's, Wigram's, or Strong's), but in some countries these cost more than a month's wage. Additionally such concordances only have significant benefit where a translation has truly obscured the original text – soul/spirit/life, Sheol/Hades/Gehenna, and a few other well-known examples.

Alternatively some readers use two Bibles, a modern one for general reading, and an older version for checking difficult passages. Either way it is worth noting in the margin of one's Bible the literal meaning of the text, so that it can be remembered the next time it is read.

Anyway, that is the end of our short detour to recap on general Bible teaching about death. (Again, if you are not sure what the Bible teaches on this subject

then seek out a copy of the leaflet 'Life After Death' or similar, such as 'After Death What?').

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Back to Luke 16....

So, as we said, the picture of the afterlife given in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus contradicts all the Bible verses given above.

Something equally strange, given the popularity of Luke 16 in the churches as a proof text on heaven and hell, is that it also contradicts church traditions. If Abraham is really in a place where one can communicate across a chasm with the wicked, burning in another part of the underworld, then he is not in heaven. Luke 16:22-26 clearly has nothing to do with the popular picture of heaven. Some churches have attempted to get round this by saying that the Bosom of Abraham was under the earth when Jesus spoke but is in heaven now. Apart from the lack of any Bible support for such an idea, what exactly does it achieve?

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Understanding Parables

If we are going to understand Luke 16:19-31 we have to do so in the context of the rest of the Bible. But first, it is worth noting that the Parables of the New Testament are not simple stories like the fairy tales that we tell children.

They can be, and were intended to be, difficult to understand:

- "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing they do not see, though hearing they do not understand'" (Matthew 13:13)
- "Although I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly". (John 16:25)

The explanation of Luke 16:19-31 which will follow requires a little thought, but then God gave us brains in order that we use them:

- "Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16)
- "Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults." (1 Corinthians 14:20)

Here is an example of a parable that is more than just a simple 'story':

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A decoded example : the Parable of the Weeds

In Matthew 13:24-30 there is a parable about a farmer who finds weeds growing in his field. The interesting thing about this parable is that it is one of very few where Jesus later (13:36-39) explained the meaning to the disciples:

- The sower= Christ
- The field = the world
- Good seeds = good people
- Bad seeds = bad people
- The enemy = the Devil
- The reapers = the angels
- The harvest = the end of the age

There is no confusion here because Jesus himself gave the identification of the characters in the parable. We now turn to some of the parables in Luke which lead up to that of the Rich Man and Lazarus:

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First scene set: The Parable of the Great Banquet

In Luke 14:16-24 Jesus tells a parable about a man sending out invitations to a feast. But the invited guests are too busy with business to accept the invitation. The host then becomes angry and invites the poor and outsiders instead. It is easy to see that the characters in the parable are all real people, or groups of people:

- Host of the banquet = God
- Servant sent to call guests = Christ
- Guests who make excuses = the rich Jews
- The poor and sick of the town= the poor Jews
- Those from outside the town = the Gentiles

Also it was based on real life circumstances. When he told this parable Jesus was actually present at a banquet (see 14:1), and his audience included exactly the kind of people who were excluded in the parable (14:7).

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A second scene set: The Parable of the Lost Son

In Luke 15:11-16 we have another parable. The mention of the far country and pigs in v.15 suggests the same subject:

- The father = God
- Older son = Jews
- Younger son = Gentiles

Again, real people, real local circumstances. The parable means more than that. But that is one set of meanings there.

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The key scene set: The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

In Luke 16:1-13 we have a much more complex subject.

This parable is often badly misread as teaching that churches should imitate the world when handling money. But Jesus makes it clear that he is talking about "the Pharisees who were lovers of money" (v.14). And when the Pharisees laughed at the parable he turned to them and said "You are the ones!" (v.15). It was about them.

The master = God

The dishonest manager = the Pharisees

The debtors = the people

The bills = ?

Instead of the bills being literally money owed to God, the Pharisees were reducing what the people owed to God in terms of worship and righteousness (v.17). It appears that Jesus particularly had in mind the Pharisee practice of selling letters of divorce (v.18).

This information allows us to reconsider why the master had "commended" his servant for conspiring with his creditors to cheat him (v.8). What master in real life would do this? This cheated master can only be speaking with bitter irony. Certainly, in the next verses, Jesus had nothing good to say about the dishonest manager (vs.10-13).

The key to understanding this strange 'commendation' (v.8) is in the Old Testament. The "eternal dwellings" (v.9), refer to the "eternal home" of the grave (Ecclesiastes 12:5). And the so-called "friends" waiting there, are those already dead (Psalm 49:11-14). Therefore:

- The master's bills = God's laws
- Eternal dwellings = the grave

Again, the parable concerns real people, real local problems and contemporary issues. And, most importantly, the key to the answer was in the Old Testament.

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The Rich Man and Lazarus

We now come to the last of the parables in this section of Luke, the one with which we are concerned. One important point: there is no break between the "You are the ones!" (Luke 16:15) spoken to the Pharisees and the Lazarus parable. This suggests that the Pharisees were the audience of this parable as well.

Who are the characters?

- The Rich Man = ?
- His father = ?
- His five brothers = ?
- Lazarus = ?
- Abraham = ?

It seems easiest to start where there is likely to be most agreement, that Abraham is the Abraham of Genesis.

The next easiest is Lazarus. There is only one person of this name found in the Bible, namely Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha who was raised from the dead by Jesus in John 11:1-44. Comparing the parallel accounts of the anointing in Bethany in John 12:3 and Matthew 26:6 we find that Lazarus' other name was Simon, and that he had been a leper. The leprosy must have been healed when Christ raised Lazarus from the dead, but he was still known as "Simon the Leper".

This explains why the Lazarus in the parable was "full of sores" (Luke 16:20). The begging had nothing to do with poverty, it was because he was unclean. According to the Law of Moses, Simon would have been ceremonially unclean and could not enter his own house in Bethany; "he must live outside the camp" (Leviticus 13:46).

So we have two men, both Jews, both called Lazarus, both beggars, both lepers, both of whom died, and both of whom would not convince people by their

resurrection (compare Luke 16:30-31 and John 12:10). This is too many coincidences for them not to have been the same person. So:

- Abraham= Abraham
- Lazarus = Lazarus

This would lead us to expect the Rich Man is also someone known to the audience of the parable.

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Who was the Rich Man?

Reading through the story we can find the following clues to the identity of the Rich Man: he was rich (vs.19) dressed in purple and fine linen (vs.19) lived in luxury every day (vs.19) in his lifetime he received good things (vs.25) he had five brothers (vs.28) they lived in his father's house (vs.27) they had Moses and the Prophets (vs.25) but they did not listen to them (vs.29) they would not be convinced even if someone were to rise from the dead (vs.31) It is not obvious to the modern reader who this Rich Man is. But it should be clear that the picture is much too detailed to simply be 'a representative of all rich men'. But the Pharisees listening would have known immediately whom Christ was referring to. There was not any chance of their mistaking it, because only one man in Israel dressed in purple and fine linen. A man who fitted exactly all the clues which Jesus gave as to the identity of the Rich Man.

As in Luke's previous parable of the Dishonest Steward, the key to the meaning lies in the Old Testament. In Exodus 28 we find the instructions given to Aaron for making the high priest's garments; "blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and fine linen" (note Exodus 28:5-8, 15, 31, 39). The Pharisees could not fail to understand that the man dressed in purple and fine linen was the Jewish high priest. The Name of the Rich Man The high priest when Jesus spoke this parable was Caiaphas. We know from the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote a detailed account of the period in Antiquities of the Jews, that Caiaphas met all 4 of the first qualifications of the Rich Man of Luke 16:

1. he was rich (v.19)
2. dressed in purple and fine linen (v.19)
3. lived in luxury every day (v.19)
4. in his lifetime he received good things (v.25)

(see Antiquities, XIII: 10:vi:p.281, XVIII:1:iv:p.377, also Wars of the Jews 11:8:xiv: p. 478)

His Father's House

In Luke 3:2 and Acts 4:6 we meet the other high priest who served with Caiaphas, Annas, who was "father-in-law to Caiaphas" (John 18:13). Josephus also records that Caiaphas served as high priest 18-35AD at the time of Jesus' ministry. Annas had been removed from his office by the Romans for openly resisting them, but behind the scenes he retained his authority and position. This is why in John 18:13-24 Jesus is first tried by Annas, and only afterwards sent to Caiaphas (v.28), but then Caiaphas, not Annas, sends Jesus to Pilate (v.29).

Five Brothers

In case anyone listening did not understand who He meant, Christ was even more specific: The "five brothers" Christ mentions are the five other high priests, who were in fact his five brothers-in-law, the five sons of Annas.

The historian Josephus records: "Now the report goes, that this elder Annas proved a most fortunate man; for he had five sons, who had all performed the office of a high priest to God, and he had himself enjoyed that dignity a long time formerly, which had never happened to any other of our high priests. . ." (Antiquities, Book XX, chapter 9, section i, p.423)

The years they served are as follows:

- Eleazar 16-17AD
- Jonathan 36-37AD
- Theophilus 37-41AD
- Matthias 41-43AD
- Annas the Younger 62AD

As mentioned above, the years 18-35AD between Eleazar and Jonathan were occupied by Caiaphas. Between 43-62AD the high priests were taken from other families than of Annas. Finally in 70AD the temple was destroyed and the high priesthood along with it. This confirms the list of coincidences between the Rich Man and Caiaphas:

5. he had five brothers (v.28)
6. they lived in his father's house (v.27)
7. they had Moses and the Prophets (v.25)
8. but they did not listen to them (v.29)

The final coincidence is confirmed when after the resurrection of Simon of Bethany, we read that "the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him" (John 12:10)

9. they would not be convinced even if someone were to rise from the dead (v.31) John 12:10 also confirms another coincidence between the Lazarus of the parable and Simon Lazarus of Bethany. The resurrection of both was rejected by Annas and his five sons.

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Summary so far

We have now established the identity of all 9 characters:

- Abraham = Abraham
- Lazarus = Simon the Leper of Bethany
- The Rich Man = Caiaphas
- His father = Annas
- His 5 brothers = Eleazar, Jonathan, Theophilus, Matthias, Annas the Younger

But what does the parable mean?

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At the Rich Man's Gate

"At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores, and longing to eat from the Rich Man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores." (vs. 20-21)

As we noted in considering the real Lazarus, when a Jew contracted a disease they became 'unclean'. They were at most allowed only into the outer court of the temple. This meant the unclean were no longer allowed to eat from the

sacrifices offered in the inner court. In this way Simon of Bethany was barred from eating at the table of Caiaphas in Jerusalem. There is similar language in Matthew 15 when the Canaanite woman (who was a 'Gentile dog' as far as the Pharisees were concerned) said to Jesus "Even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table" (Matthew 15:27). It may be that before he died Simon the Leper literally did beg outside the temple. But the meaning here is deeper than begging for food. Jesus is saying that the weak, the unclean, and the poor, were all denied spiritual food by the ruling caste of high priests.

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The Bosom of Abraham

"The time came when the beggar died, and the angels carried him to Abraham's side" (v.22 NIV).

Now this is where the story starts to become difficult. Nowhere else in the Bible does it say that when men die they go to Abraham's side. In older Bibles it reads "bosom of Abraham", meaning the lap of Abraham.

Today there are a hundred and one different theories about death. Many people seriously believe when they die they will go up to the gates of Heaven, to be met by the Apostle Peter. Others believe other things. But the idea that the dead go to sit 'in the lap' of Abraham is something that nobody today believes.

However many Jewish people did believe it in Jesus' day. Mentions of "the bosom of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" have been found in burial papyri (cf. papyrus Preisigke Sb 2034:11). In early Rabbinical legends "the Bosom of Abraham" was where the righteous went. (cf. Kiddushin 72b, Ekah 1:85). It is not in the Hebrew Bible of course, but nevertheless it was popularly believed.

While modern translations often have "to Abraham's side", the literal rendering "to the bosom of Abraham" is better as the 'Bosom of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', was a specific concept in contemporary Jewish belief.

Another source showing what many Jews of Jesus' day believed is a book called 4 Maccabees. A work which was probably written by Jews in Egypt about a generation after Christ. In this work of fiction Abraham, Isaac and Jacob receive and welcome Jewish martyrs into the world of the dead:

"After our death in this fashion Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will receive us and all our forefathers will praise us" (4 Maccabees 13:17).

Again, this is not Bible teaching, only popular superstition.

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The Rich Man's view from Hell

The story becomes even more strange and difficult when we read the next verse:

"The Rich Man also died and was buried. In Hell where he was in torment he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus in his bosom. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire'." (vs. 23-24)

Even with the most fertile imagination it is difficult to believe that from Hell one can see people in Heaven and talk to them. Here the story gets stranger still:

"But Abraham replied. 'Son remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone else cross over from there to us'." (vs. 25-26)

Nothing else in the Bible prepares us for this description of Hell. Again the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus turns out to be unique. Which is why so many go to this story.

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Which Hell are we talking about?

We need to clarify what the word 'Hell' means here, as in English and other European-language Bibles (unlike many Bibles in Asia) two words have been confused into one.

'Hell' in the English New Testament can render one of two words in the original Greek text:

1. Hades, the grave, the pit, the place where the dead sleep. In the Old Testament known as Sheol (Genesis 37:35, 42:38, 44:29, Job 14:13, Psalm 6:5, 16:10, 139:8, Ecclesiastes 9:10, Matthew 16:18).

In the Bible all people go to Hades to await the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:55, Revelation 1:8, 20:13). Even Jesus was in Hades for 3 days and 3 nights (Psalm 16:10, Acts 2:27,31). 2. Gehenna, originally the name of the valley Gehenna on

the south side of Jerusalem. In the Old Testament the valley was known as Ben Hinnom (Jeremiah 7:31). In the New Testament the name is associated with the fire in which the rejected will be destroyed at the last judgement (Matthew 5:22,29,30, 18:9, 23:15,33, Mark 9:43,45,47, Luke 12:5, James 3:6) The problem is that in Luke 16:23 the 'Hell' described does not fit either of these Bible definitions. In fact the word is Hades, but it clearly does not fit with the Hades of "silence" (Psalm 31:17), where Jesus was laid (Acts 2:25-28 quoting Psalm 16:8-11).

There are 9 other mentions of Hades in the New Testament, 50 in the Old. All these other references present Hades as the grave. Luke 16:23 is the odd one out.

The source for the unusual Hades in Luke 16:23, as with the source for the 'Bosom of Abraham' itself, lies outside the Bible in the myths of the 1st Century. Many Jewish myths survive today (eg. in the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, Talmud, etc.). In these works a variety of fantastic pictures of Hades are given that have no connection with the Old Testament.

One of the closest to the picture given in Luke 16:23-24 is in a work called The Apocalypse of Zephaniah. False Beliefs about Hades It needs to be said that The Apocalypse of Zephaniah has nothing to do with the Zephaniah who wrote the book of that name in the Bible. The real Zephaniah lived in the days of King Josiah about 620BC. The so-called Apocalypse of Zephaniah on the other hand, was written by an unknown Jewish author, and probably a Pharisee, some time around 150AD. In other words, the book is a fake. It is interesting however because the myth shows us what many Jews in Jesus' day believed.

The details are not exactly the same as in Luke 16:23-24; for example in the Apocalypse of Zephaniah the chasm between the fiery part of Hades and the part given to Abraham has a giant river running through it. In fact the author recounts the fictional Zephaniah's journey across the river in a boat steered by an angel:

"You have escaped from the abyss and Hades, you will now cross over the crossing place... then he ran to all the righteous ones, namely Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Enoch, Elijah and David" (Apoc. Zeph. 9:2).

Another difference is that in Luke 16 only Abraham is mentioned. In the Apocalypse of Zephaniah all three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, are in the side of the underworld reserved for the righteous, along with Enoch, Elijah

and David. But these differences are minor, and there are enough common points, and more in many other Jewish myths, to suggest that the content of the Rich Man and Lazarus parable has some relation to contemporary Jewish ideas, and in particular to popular Pharisee teachings.

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The Pharisees and the 'Sinners'

We have established above that the picture of Hades, the Bosom of Abraham, and the chasm between them, represents the Pharisees' teaching, or at least popular Jewish belief, rather than Jesus' own teaching.

All this is, however, only half of the Pharisees' teaching. The other half concerns the Pharisees' ideas about exactly who would go to be with "Father Abraham" (Luke 3:8), and who would go to the fiery side of Hades. According to the Pharisees all the 'sinners', meaning publicans, tax-collectors, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, lepers, people with other skin diseases, the insane, and, of course, Gentiles and Samaritans, would burn in the fire. Only those who followed all the rules of the Law, as did the "righteous" - meaning the rich and respectable, the scribes, the experts in the Law, the rulers of the synagogues, the priests and high priests, and of course the Pharisees themselves - would depart to be with "Father Abraham". "Our father Abraham" is a common phrase in the Jewish Mishnah (e.g. Aboth 3:12; 5:2,3,6,19; 6:10; Taanith 2:4,5)

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What the Pharisees did not teach – Heaven going

But note that the Pharisees did not teach that the righteous went to Heaven. Even they knew that "no man has ascended into Heaven" (John 3.13). Heaven was for God alone (Psalm 115:16) and to teach otherwise would have been blasphemy. The Pharisees also did not teach that Abraham's Bosom was the final destination of the righteous. The Pharisees taught a resurrection and judgement on earth. Abraham's Bosom was only a waiting station.

With the above in mind it is surprising that so many Christians quote the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus as proof of the Christian traditional belief in heaven going. Not only does the story not mention the word heaven once, this description of Abraham's Bosom bears no resemblance to any ideas about heaven taught anywhere.

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Why Did Jesus Use the Pharisee's Doctrine?

We have shown that the teaching about Hades and Abraham's Bosom is not from the Bible, but from contemporary Jewish superstition. This helps us on the fundamental principle that the Bible does not contradict itself.

But for many this creates an even bigger problem: Surely Jesus would not approve false teaching?! – To many the idea itself is abhorrent.

The answer: "Well, it was only a parable" solves nothing. Even in a parable we would expect consistent teaching. It surely would have been equally possible for Christ to have told the parable in a way that fits with Old Testament teaching. Christ certainly did not need to refer to Hades, the great chasm, Abraham's Bosom, and "Father Abraham". Therefore we have to conclude that Christ had a good reason to do so.

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An Unacceptable Solution

Some might suggest that: "Christ was accommodating himself to his listeners to get the message across". But this is unconvincing. Admittedly there are examples of Christ speaking to the poor and the simple in terms that they would understand. That does happen. But never to the disciples, and certainly not to the Pharisees, did Christ simply 'accommodate' his words to false teachings in order to make other points understood. Neither would his disciples. Paul even specifically warns about the various Jewish books, such as Apocalypse of Zephaniah, which circulated in the first Century: "Pay no attention to Jewish myths" (Titus 1:14)

That being so, we need to coherently present an alternative that justifies why Jesus would include Jewish superstitions in telling this parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which are so badly at odds with the rest of the Bible.

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If I drive out demons by Beelzebub...

The answer to why Jesus would do this may be in observing how Jesus dealt with the Pharisees on an earlier occasion. In Matthew 12:22 Jesus heals a demon possessed man who was blind and mute. But when the Pharisees heard this they said: "It is only by Beelzebub, the Prince of demons that this fellow drives out demons" (v.24).

Now Jesus could have responded to this slander in several ways. He could have quoted Exodus 4:11 to show that it is God who makes man blind or mute, not demons. He could equally have quoted 1 Kings 18:27 and 2 Kings 1:3 to show that Baal-Zebub, the God of Ekron, had failed to prove his existence in the days of Elijah. But he didn't. Instead Jesus counters with irony:

"If I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then they will be your judges". (Matthew 12:27)

The comment "so then they will be your judges" is a powerful rebuke. In saying this Jesus threw the falseness of the Pharisees' teaching right back at them.

This is not without Old Testament precedent. Back in the days of the prophet Elijah, his way of dealing with the prophets of Baal was not much different (see 1 Kings 18:27). Elijah mocked them to show Israel how false they were.

So this opens up the question: if it is confirmed that Jesus makes use of Pharisee beliefs in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (and we have the evidence that he does), then next we need to ask; 'Does Jesus confirm their beliefs, or ridicule their beliefs?'

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Jesus contradicts the Jewish myth, and thereby the Pharisees' beliefs

The first contradiction has already been mentioned. In the Jewish myth Zephaniah was able to cross by angelic boat from one side of Hades to another. Jesus contradicts this:

"a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone else cross over from there to us" (v.26)

Another contradiction is that in the myth Abraham, Isaac and Jacob intercede for those in torment in Hades:

"As they looked at all the torments they called out, praying before the Lord Almighty saying, 'We pray you on behalf of those who are in all these torments so you might have mercy on all of them.' And when I saw them, I said to the angel who spoke with me, 'Who are they?' He said 'Those who beseech the Lord are Abraham and Isaac and Jacob". (Apoc. Zeph. 11:1-2).

But Jesus contradicts this. Instead he has Abraham refusing to help relieve the Rich Man's suffering: "now he is comforted and you are in agony" (v.25)

Another contradiction is that in other Jewish myths Abraham is credited with the ability to do what the Rich Man asks (v.27) and resurrect the dead. For example in the 1st Century Jewish fiction The Testament of Abraham the patriarch Abraham pleads for the dead and returns 7,000 to the living:

"Then Abraham arose and fell upon the earth, and [the Angel of] Death with him, and God sent a spirit of life into the dead and they were made alive again." (Testament of Abraham 'A' 18:11).

But Jesus again contradicts the myths, and has Abraham refusing to raise Lazarus: "They have Moses and the Prophets, let them listen to them" (v.29)

This reflects Jesus' own condemnation of the Pharisees in John 5:39. "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me."

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Jesus Ridicules False Teaching

We have ruled out Jesus supporting the ideas in the Jewish myths. We have also ruled Jesus simply 'accommodating' to those myths for convenience.

That leaves us with only one solution left that will explain why Jesus should deliberately choose to tell a parable drawn from the Pharisees' superstitions. And this is that Jesus was showing the teaching to be false by exposing it.

And how?

By making the main characters in this parable real people: Caiaphas and Simon of Bethany. According to the Pharisees' view of the universe, Simon, as a leper (and therefore a "sinner") should after his death at Bethany have descended to be tormented in the fiery part of Hades. Caiaphas on the other hand, would, as high priest, at the very top of the Jewish religious hierarchy, be guaranteed a pleasant welcome by Abraham on the other side of the underworld. And yet Jesus told them a version of their teaching which had the beggar Lazarus received by Abraham, while the wealthy high priest, clothed in purple and fine linen, descended into the flames.

To add 'burning coals', Jesus told how the high priest called on "Father Abraham" to show mercy, and Abraham refused. (The mythical ferryboat across the chasm in Hades was not in service). Nor was Abraham inclined to help the Rich Man who had enjoyed such a good life on earth (v.25).

Then, as a final rebuke, Jesus has Caiaphas ask Abraham to send Simon the Leper back to the house of Annas in Jerusalem to warn his brothers-in-law. But again Abraham refuses, twice.

"They will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead". (Luke 16:31)

In this refusal Christ has Abraham promising Caiaphas the same torment in the fire for his entire household: Eleazar, Jonathan, Theophilus, Matthias, and Annas the Younger, and no doubt his father-in-law Annas the Elder also.

No wonder, then, that this is the last of the series of parables in Luke Ch.14-16 either addressed to the Pharisees, or with the Pharisees present. In the next verse (Luke 17:1) the Pharisees are gone, and Jesus is left alone with the disciples.

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Conclusions

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is not as simple as it appears. Some of the keys (purple and fine linen, the beggar covered in sores, the crumbs from the rich man's table) can only be understood by comparison with other Old Testament and New Testament passages.

The parable contains some details where a knowledge of history (the five brothers mentioned by Josephus), or of contemporary beliefs (the Bosom of Abraham), can be helpful.

But even without this knowledge the parable certainly does not support modern ideas about heaven-going.

The parable cannot be literal. Caiaphas did not literally die and descend to Hades. He was still very much alive in Acts 4:6. Likewise although Abraham refused to raise Lazarus in the parable, in reality Jesus did raise Lazarus. But Jesus says in John 11:11 that Lazarus "slept"; he was not literally in Abraham's Bosom. And finally of course we know from Hebrews 11:13, 39-40 that Abraham is not literally presiding over the underworld; he is dead, awaiting the resurrection.

The only thing that is literal about the parable is the prophecy of Luke 16:31 that was fulfilled in John 12:10 when Caiaphas and his family tried to kill Lazarus rather than accept the fact that Jesus had raised him from the dead.

That bit of the parable very literally came true.

Steven Cox, Hyderabad, India 2000

Questions

1. Why did Jesus speak in parables?
2. What does the Bible teach about death?
3. Who was Simon of Bethany?
4. Who was the Rich Man?
5. Who was his father?

Cover illustration: Caiaphas rending his clothes in anger (detail from Giotto 'Christ before Caiaphas')

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Quotations from Apocalypse of Zephaniah, 4 Maccabees, and Testament of Abraham taken from J.H. Charlesworth, THE OLD TESTAMENT PSEUDEPIGRAPHA, 2 vols., Copyright © Doubleday, New York 1983. References to 'Bosom of Abraham' in Kiddushin 72b and Ekah 1:85 are cited from L. Ginzberg, LEGENDS OF THE JEWS, republished John Hopkins, 1998, Vol.5, p. 269.

Quotations from Josephus taken from JOSEPHUS COMPLETE WORKS, translated by William Whiston, republished Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, 1966. But note that 'The Discourse to the Greeks on Hades' found in this edition of Josephus is not genuine. It is by Hippolytus of Rome c.400AD, and is based on Luke 16.

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Note: the original printing of this booklet did not mention Sepp and Drioux, 1865, two scholars whose works made widely known in Germany and France the identification of the five brothers in Luke 16 with the five sons of Annas mentioned by Josephus.

