

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus: A Narrative-Exegetical Study of Its Relationship to the Afterlife, Wealth, and Poverty—Part 1: The Afterlife

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The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31 has garnered attention and commentary by Christians for millennia. The primary interest in the parable arises from the fact that it is the only such story that Jesus told in which some sort of conscious life immediately after death is described, actually in quite vivid detail. That Jesus predicted the Final Judgment and the end of the world, the resurrection of the dead and His glorious Second Coming is seen over and over throughout the Gospels and in the rest of the New Testament. But what happens to a person immediately on death? Do they sleep in the grave as many texts throughout Scripture indicate? Or is there some post-mortem shadowy or other existence in between death and the resurrection of the dead? Hence, the great interest in the parable.

Scholarship has focused major attention on the issue of the afterlife and there are serious issues to be resolved concerning the parable's teaching on that subject. But redressing the neglect of the parable's teaching on wealth and poverty, justice and mercy is also needed. Consequently, this two-part study will address both topics. Part one will review and critique the scholarly debate over the meaning of the parable's teaching on the afterlife. Part two will review the scholarly debate on wealth and poverty in the parable and present a narrative

analysis of the story and illustrate how the narrative details point toward the major focus and emphasis.

An Imaginative Parable or a Report of Reality?

Is this story an imaginative parable?¹ It is not referred to in Luke as a parable and unlike any other parable, it has two characters with names (Lazarus and Abraham).² Furthermore, it is the only such story that speaks of the afterlife. Some commentators argue that it is not a parable, but rather a depiction of what actually happens after death.³

But the signs of the story being a parable are to be found throughout the text. Bock notes that the story begins with *Ἀνθρώπος δέ τις* (“Now a certain man”) as a marker of a parable, similar to the story of the dishonest steward in 16:1 (*ἄνθρωπος τις* “a certain man”).⁴ But this is only the first indicator. The overwhelming indicator that this is a parable is the way that the story is filled with hyperbole, similar to other parables of Jesus.⁵ The rich man is rich to the extreme—purple clothes (very expensive at that time), fine linen, great feasts, great gate.⁶ The poor man is poor to the extreme—laid at the gate, no food, covered with sores,

¹ This is a quite pertinent question in regard to what the story says about the afterlife. If the story is an actual report, then it presents what happens when we die. If it is an imaginative parable it much more likely uses a caricature of life after death in an illustrative manner to teach a truth.

² One can actually add “Moses and the Prophets” to the list of named characters. Abraham in his response to the rich man in Luke 16:29, 31 does not mention the books Moses and the Prophets wrote but to them as individuals. Certainly their words are in their books, but referencing them as individuals heightens the sense of drama of hearing the words they spoke and wrote long ago. Like Abel before them, though they are dead they are “still speaking” (Heb 11:4).

³ So Tertullian in *De Anima* chapter 7 who argues, “Do you suppose that this end of the blessed poor man and the miserable rich man is only imaginary? Then why the name of Lazarus in this narrative, if the circumstance is not in (the category of) a real occurrence?”

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 1365. Translations in these two articles are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁵ For instance, in the parables of lost things in Luke 15, a man has 100 sheep, but loses only one. A woman has 10 coins, but loses only one. A man has two sons of diametrically opposite character, with the younger going to the depths of depravity and on return asking only the smallest of favors (because he knows to ask more would be arrogant), while the older brother is so hardworking and faithful that he is not even in the house when the younger brother returns. And the older brother argues with the father using hyperbole (not even a goat versus the fatted calf).

⁶ Bock points out that the term for “gate” (*πυλὼν*) is typically used to refer to entrances to palaces, temples and cities. See Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1366.

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dogs lick his wounds, he would be satisfied with the merest of leftovers. This emphasis on hyperbole continues in the reversal at death—Lazarus exalted next to Abraham, the rich man burning in Hades, asking for the smallest of favors. This extensive use of hyperbole is the consistent marker of a parable. The continuation of the hyperbole in the afterlife scene fits into the category of what could be called “eschatological comedy” not unlike a reference in today’s popular culture to a joke that begins “A man arrives at the pearly gates and meets St. Peter.”⁷ We immediately know that this is not a depiction of reality but rather of some unreality to make a joke or a point. The same is clearly going on in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.⁸ Thus, we can confidently say that this story is a parable.

A Review and Critique of Interpretations of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus has been the subject of study and discussion by Christian leaders and scholars for millennia. Our procedure in this section will be to briefly review the lengthy history of discussion of the parable, beginning with early commentators, followed by the modern discussion and concluding with a critique of these deliberations.

Discussion of the Parable from the Second to Sixteenth Centuries

Tertullian (c. AD 155–220) is the first Christian theologian to comment on the parable.⁹ His discussion is in response to the Gospel of Marcion which argues that the torments of hell are for people who revere the Law and the Prophets and Abraham’s bosom is reserved for the worshipers of Christ and God. Included in Marcion’s argument is belief in the Demiurge, a lower god responsible for creating the universe. Tertullian counters Marcion’s teaching, rejecting the idea of the dualistic concept of the Demiurge. In the process, Tertullian presents his position that Abraham’s bosom is not the final abode of the righteous but rather a holding location for the righteous awaiting the resurrection.¹⁰

⁷ Cf. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1369n20

⁸ We will see this in more detail in part two of this study.

⁹ See Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 4.34.14, discussed in François Bovon, *Luke 2, Hermeneia* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 485–6.

¹⁰ Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 4.34.14.

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Origen (c. AD 184–253) also makes reference to the parable. He argues that after death the soul puts on another body rather than continuing in the same earthly body.¹¹ Origen, like Tertullian, argues for the bosom of Abraham as a temporary residing place for the soul before the final resurrection.

Gregory of Nyssa (c. AD 335–395) uses the parable to help believers keep in mind the afterlife and to teach them to purify their lives.¹² He feels that Christians can have riches now or they can have them in the hereafter. In his teaching the parable points to an intermediate state in between death and the resurrection.

John Chrysostom (AD c. 347–407) sees the parable teaching on the subject of salvation and eschatology, but with practical application on the subjects of wealth and poverty with insights into the narrative details of the story. Nevertheless, John clearly believes in an eternal soul separate from the body as he describes the death of the rich man and his soul led away to torment, even as Lazarus is taken by angels to heavenly bliss.¹³

Gregory the Great (AD 540–604) looks at the parable on an allegorical and historical level.¹⁴ On the allegorical level, Gregory sees the rich man as representing the Jews and Lazarus as representing the Gentiles. The dogs he presents as Christian preachers who bring healing to Gentile sinners (arguing that dogs licking wounds heal them). On the historical level, which he argues teaches morals, Gregory exalts poverty and the eschewing of ostentation. He argues for showing mercy to the poor.¹⁵

Albert the Great (c. AD 1200–1280) was a theologian of practical bent who commented on the parable in his commentary on the Gospel of

¹¹ See Bovon, *Luke 2*, 486. Origen's view is preserved in Methodius of Olympus's *De resur.*, III. 17–18.

¹² See Bovon, *Luke 2*, 486 and Gregory of Nyssa, *De pauperibus amandis*, I (PG 46:268CD) and II (PG 46:484D–485B).

¹³ See Wendy Mayer, "John Chrysostom's Use of Luke 16:19–31," *Scrinium* (4/2008): 45–59 and John Chrysostom, *Homilies 1–4 and 6–7 De Lazaro*. On Chrysostom's view on the soul see "Second Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man," *St John Chrysostom: On Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catharine P. Ross (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 41–46.

¹⁴ See Warren S. Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography*, ATLA Bibliography Series, no. 4 (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1979), 37–9.

¹⁵ Gregory the Great, *Homilia XL*.

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Luke.¹⁶ He criticizes the rich man's ostentatious clothing and relates it to what prelates in his own day were wearing. Along with earlier theologians, he does not consider the bosom of Abraham to refer to paradise, but rather to a location where the righteous wait for the Lord.

Reformation theologians, Martin Luther (1483–1546), Melancthon (1497–1560) and John Calvin (1509–1564) all commented on the parable.¹⁷ Luther argues for a literal, historical approach and consequently applies the parable to helping the neighbor. “This parable adequately teaches us that it is not sufficient merely not to do evil and not to do harm, but rather that one must be helpful and do good. It is not enough to ‘depart from evil;’ one must also ‘do good.’” (Ps 37:27).¹⁸ Luther also sees in the parable a rejection of consulting spirits and necromancy.¹⁹

Melancthon also draws a practical lesson from the parable.²⁰ He posits that going through extreme suffering does not mean that God has rejected someone. For Melancthon, Lazarus represents the church throughout history when it experiences poverty and humiliation. God stays with believers even through their death.²¹ Strikingly, for Melancthon, the bosom of Abraham does not represent limbo for the fathers, but rather refers to the eternal beatitude for those who, like faithful Abraham, are justified by faith.²²

Calvin in his commentary on the parable excoriates the rich man for refusing to raise a finger to help the poor man.²³ He says of the death of the rich man, “the rich man is like a bright mirror in which we can see

¹⁶ Albert the Great, *Evang. Luc.* 16.19–31 (435–54). See Bovon, *Luke 2*, 486–7 for discussion.

¹⁷ On Luther and Calvin see Kissinger, *Parables of Jesus*, 44–6, 50; *Works of Martin Luther*, eds. Jeroslav Pelikan, et. al. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955–76), 51:8; 52:179–80; and *Calvin's Commentaries: A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, and Luke*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 2:116–22. On Melancthon see Bovon, *Luke 2*, 487 and Melancthon, *Annotationes*, cols. 300–2, 523–28; *Postillae*, cols. 28–42.

¹⁸ *Works of Martin Luther*, 51:8.

¹⁹ *Works of Martin Luther*, 52:179–80. Luther is criticizing a perspective that the sending of Lazarus to the five brothers in the parable refers to the appearance of a ghost, similar to the necromancy of the witch of Endor (1 Sam 28).

²⁰ See Bovon, *Luke 2*, 487 and Melancthon, *Annotationes*, cols. 300–2, 523–28; *Postillae*, cols. 28–42.

²¹ Melancthon, *Annotationes*, cols. 301-2; 523–25; *Postillae*, col. 28.

²² Melancthon, *Annotationes*, col. 525.

²³ See *Calvin's Commentaries: A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, and Luke*, 2:116.

that temporal felicity is not to be sought for if it ends in eternal destruction.”²⁴ Illustrating his belief in an eternal soul, Calvin says of Lazarus’ death, “When he says Lazarus was carried, it is a synecdoche. For in that man’s soul is his more excellent part, the name of the whole man is deservedly given to it.”²⁵ Further, Calvin suggests that at death believers rest in the bosom of Abraham, a metaphor for the place of rest where they await final immortality.²⁶

Calvin goes on to describe the torment of the rich man in Hades. Calvin affirms that souls do not have eyes or fingers and they do not experience thirst. Jesus is talking in figures so that we can understand. “The sum of it is that believing souls when they leave the body lead a joyful and blessed life outside the world, but that for the reprobate are prepared terrifying torments which can no more be conceived by our minds than can the infinite glory of heaven.”²⁷

Discussion of the Parable in Modern Times

Parable interpretation took a major turn with the work of Adolf Jülicher in his *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu (The Parables of Jesus)* first published in 1886.²⁸ Jülicher eschewed allegorical interpretation of the parables, arguing that Jesus taught parables that were easily understandable with one major point. It was the Evangelists that redacted Jesus’ parables into allegorical stories.²⁹ For Jülicher, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is an example story that tells us how we should live, giving a direct model for action.

After Jülicher, interpreters of the parables shied away from allegorical or metaphoric interpretation for some time. Eventually interpreters saw that Jülicher had been too sweeping in his critique and came to see some or even extensive allegorical or representational aspects of Jesus’ parables.³⁰ Most modern interpreters of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus deal with the details of the story on an

²⁴ Ibid., 117.

²⁵ Ibid., 117–18.

²⁶ Calvin is a little ambiguous in his description of the meaning of the bosom of Abraham, perhaps arising from previous commentators’ interpretations. See Ibid., 118.

²⁷ Ibid., 119.

²⁸ Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969).

²⁹ See Kissinger, *Parables of Jesus*, 71–77.

³⁰ See the lengthy discussion of this debate in Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 33–67.

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exegetical or literary level. Their discussion revolves around three aspects concerning interpretation of the parable which can be posed as questions. What is the relationship between the parable and parallel stories in the ancient Greco-Roman world? What does the parable tell us about the afterlife? What does the parable teach about the use of resources?³¹ We will look at each of these questions in turn, the first two in the present article and the third question in more detail in the second article.

The Parable and Its Parallels in the Greco-Roman World

An Egyptian story in a Demotic text from the later first century AD has parallels to the parable.³² In the Egyptian story a father and son see a funeral of a rich man and poor man. The father says he would like to be like the rich man in the afterlife. The son, however, wishes for his father to be like the poor man and takes his father on a tour of the Egyptian equivalent of Hades where the poor man is honored and the rich man is punished.³³ This story has a number of affinities with the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The same is true of a number of other stories from the ancient world both Jewish and pagan.³⁴

Richard Bauckham criticizes the emphasis among scholars on just the parallel Egyptian story.³⁵ Instead, he notes the parallels and contrasts of a number of stories both pagan and Jewish in relation to the parable.

³¹ See Bovon, *Luke 2*, 473 for a set of questions he raises, some similar to those listed here. Outi Lehtipuu, *The Afterlife in Luke's Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus*, NovTSup 123 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 11 states questions in this way, "Earlier scholarship on the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus has largely concentrated on three questions. The first concerns its unity, the second its extra-biblical parallels, and the third its authenticity. These questions, posed for the first time at the end of the nineteenth century, have dominated the field ever since." In the present two articles we do not deal with the questions of unity and authenticity.

³² See F. L. Griffith, ed. *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis: The Sethon of Herodotus and the Demotic Tales of Khamuas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1900), 42–81, 142–207. Seeing this Egyptian folktale as the source of the parable was argued by H. Gressmann, *Vom reichen Mann und armen Lazarus: Eine literargeschichtliche Studie* (Abhandlungen der königlichen preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften phil.-hist. Kl. 7; Berlin: Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1918) and has been very influential. See Ronald F. Hock, "Lazarus and Micylus: Greco-Roman Backgrounds to Luke 16:19–31," *JBL* 106/3 (1987): 447–63.

³³ See Bovon, *Luke 2*, 476.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 476–7 and Richard Bauckham, "The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels," *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991): 225–46.

³⁵ See Bauckham, "The Rich Man and Lazarus," 225–46.

He starts with the well-known Egyptian story and similar Jewish counterparts. The parallels and contrasts are interesting, particularly the contrasts. These stories present a reversal of fortunes, with the wicked, rich or tyrannical person suffering and the righteous, typically poor or holy person (sometimes both), finding solace and comfort. Bauckham notes three points on which the stories differ from the parable.³⁶ First, they begin with burials, the parable begins with the lives of the rich man and Lazarus. Second, these other stories have a character who attends the funeral receive a revelation of what happened to the dead person. The parable, in contrast, shows to the reader through the narrator what happened to both men after death. Third, the postmortem fate in the Egyptian and Jewish stories are based on a person's good or bad deeds. The parable does not state explicitly what was the basis of the reversal. Bauckham posits that it was simply the fact of the disparity between the resources of the rich man and the poor man.³⁷ He also notes two parallels between the Egyptian story, the Jewish stories and the parable—reversal of fortunes in the next world and reference to a revelation. He argues that these are two motifs common to many stories that go beyond just the Egyptian and Jewish stories.³⁸ He contends that Jesus could have known these motifs, but the way he used them created a new story different from the others.

Bauckham complains that the focus on just the Egyptian story has produced two untoward effects. The first is that if the parable is seen through the eyes of the Egyptian story it divides the parable into two parts—the story of fortunes reversed (Luke 16:19–26), and then the discussion of Lazarus returning to warn the brothers (Luke 16:27–31) with this second part less important.³⁹ The second negative effect, according to Bauckham, is seeing some criterion of judgment against the rich man inherent or implied within the story.⁴⁰

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 227–8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 228, 232–3. Bauckham explains this more on pp. 232–3. See more concerning this in the critique section. Bauckham is thus contra most other interpreters who see some sort of action or neglect by the rich man as the cause for his torment in Hades. Indeed, Bauckham says on pp. 232–3, “In effect, therefore, it is true that the rich man suffers in the next life just because he was rich in this life, while the poor man is blessed in the next life just because he was poor in this life.”

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 229.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 230–1.

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Bauckham reviews Ronald Hock's thesis that the dialogues of *Gallus* and *Cataplus* in the writings of Lucian are more pertinent as parallels to the parable than the Egyptian story.⁴¹ Bauckham feels that the stories in Lucian are relevant to the interpretation of the parable but not necessarily *more* relevant than the Egyptian story. Lucian's characters argue that riches corrupt people and poverty makes people virtuous. Bauckham sees the use of reversal in Lucian as approaching closer to the point of the parable than the Egyptian story, but on the other hand he sees the parable as maintaining the motif of reversal in a more simple and pure form than is seen in Lucian's writings.⁴²

Bauckham notes the common themes of visits to the world of the dead and returns, individuals returning from the dead soon after dying, and people brought back by necromancy, coming back in a dream or as a ghost or, in Christian stories, being raised from the dead by an apostle.⁴³ He sees the few stories that reveal the fate of the dead person or that of others as the most relevant stories in relation to the parable.⁴⁴ He singles out the Jewish or Christian *Book (or Penitence) of Jannes and Jambres*, in which Jannes dies and Jambres uses magical books to call up his shade from the grave. In the fragments of this work that remain Jannes warns Jambres to live a good life so as not to end up in the same place of suffering as Jannes in Hades. Bauckham sees a lot of parallels to the parable in this story, although, interestingly, with the absence of the necromancy. He argues that Jesus' hearers could well have known of the idea of a return from the dead.⁴⁵ Bauckham thinks that the type of "return from the dead" described in the parable probably is Lazarus' shade returning from the dead, not actually a resurrection.⁴⁶ The purpose of the visit by Lazarus would be, according to Bauckham, to reveal the rich man's fate to his brothers as a warning.

Other scholars also take into account the cultural milieu in which Jesus presented the story. John Nolland argues that Jesus created the parable but that he took into account the cultural and religious

⁴¹ Ibid., 234–6.

⁴² I am not as convinced of Bauckham's critique. In the second article in this study in the narrative section I will illustrate how the parable makes it point about the importance of care for the poor.

⁴³ Ibid., 236–9.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 239–42.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 242.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 243. In the second article that deals with the narrative analysis of the parable I will discuss the parallelism between verses 30 and 31 regarding this question.

background of his hearers.⁴⁷ Craig Blomberg argues that the parable presents the two diametrically opposite characters as types from their cultural setting.⁴⁸ Their fates in Abraham's bosom and in Hades are taken by Blomberg as "two traditional Jewish names for the places of the righteous and wicked dead, respectively."⁴⁹

What, then, is the relationship between the parable and parallel stories in the Greco-Roman world? From the above we would note that many scholars see a relationship between the parable and other stories of visiting the realm of the dead, sometimes with those other stories fairly determinative of the meaning of the parable, but more recently scholars see these stories as informing the interpreter of the cultural milieu in which the parable was told. As Bauckham points out, the other stories are helpful as background but making the linkage too strongly can actually hamper understanding the parable's point. It seems more advisable to follow the approach of recognizing the parallels to Jesus' parable but especially taking note of the differences.

The Parable and the Afterlife

We have seen above that from ancient times the parable has been seen as representing details of the afterlife. Tertullian is the first, but certainly not the last interpreter to read the parable in this way.⁵⁰ Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Albert the Great and Calvin do as well.⁵¹ The usual position is to suggest that the "bosom of Abraham" where Lazarus is and Hades where the rich man is are intermediate locations before the final judgment, with the soul in a holding pattern.

A number of modern interpreters take similar positions. Bock thinks that the parable may point to immediate consciousness after death and that confirmation in judgment and glorified resurrection comes later.⁵² Bovon thinks that the state of Lazarus and the rich man are not final, as

⁴⁷ Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 827. Four famous folktales are often cited as background, one from Egypt, one from Judaism and two from the writings of Lucian of Samosata. Bovon summarizes them nicely, Bovon, *Luke 2*, 476–7.

⁴⁸ See Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 254–5, particularly 254n217.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵⁰ Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 4.34.14.

⁵¹ For Origen's view see Methodius of Olympus's *De resur.*, III. 17–18. Gregory of Nyssa, *De pauperibus amandis*, I (PG 46:268CD) and II (PG 46:484D–485B). Albert the Great, *Evang. Luc.* 16.19–31 (435–54). *Calvin's Commentaries*, 2:116–22.

⁵² Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1369n19.

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he says, “This situation, although inescapable, is not necessarily to be eternally so. Although undeniably implacable, its validity holds for the time during which one awaits the events of the end-time, the last judgment, and the resurrection of the dead.”⁵³ Bovon, thus approaches or accepts the early interpretation of the parable as suggesting an intermediate state between death and the final judgment. He accepts the literal nature of the life after death experiences of the two men, stating in reference to Lazarus, “his being carried off does correspond to the fate of the righteous after their death; what remains of their personality is led off toward the place reserved for the righteous.”⁵⁴

But other scholars are more cautious. Nolland suggests concerning verse 22 (Lazarus taken by the angels to Abraham’s bosom) that Lazarus (and Abraham) are actually translated to heaven.⁵⁵ Thus, Nolland is not arguing for an eternal soul or limbo. However, he also notes, concerning verse 23 (the rich man seeing Abraham and Lazarus from Hades) that the torment in Hades represents a preliminary experience before the final judgment.

Blomberg argues that the fates of the two men in Abraham’s bosom and in Hades are “two traditional Jewish names for the places of the righteous and wicked dead, respectively.”⁵⁶ He notes with Jutta Leonhardt-Balzer that Abraham’s bosom and Hades may better represent a relationship with God and the rupture of such a relationship, rather than actual locations.⁵⁷

Bauckham also has this cautious perspective on what the parable tells about the postmortem state when he describes the fact that Abraham refuses to send Lazarus to the rich man’s brothers,

The story in effect deprives itself of any claim to offer an apocalyptic glimpse of the secrets of the world beyond the grave. It cannot claim eyewitness authority as a literal description of the fate of

⁵³ Bovon, *Luke 2*, 484.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 481.

⁵⁵ Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 829.

⁵⁶ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 255.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* One senses possibly a desire on Blomberg’s part to distance himself from actual burning fire in Hades. Blomberg does warn against deriving too much from the post-mortem descriptions in the parable. He holds that the parable represents the final reward of the two characters (read two groups). See *Ibid.*, 260. See also Jutta Leonhardt-Balzer, “Wie kommt ein Reicher in Abrahams Schoss (vom reichen Mann und armen Lazarus) Lk 16,19–31,” in *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 657.

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the dead. It has only the status of parable. It is part of a story told to make a point. The point is no more than the law and the prophets say—and that no more than the law and the prophets say is required.⁵⁸

One more note can be added here concerning the scholarly view of the parable's teaching about the afterlife and that is the position of scholars such as Outi Lehtipuu and Alexey Somov who argue that the double work Luke-Acts contains inconsistent traditions about the afterlife and eschatology.⁵⁹ Lehtipuu states this clearly, if bluntly,

Luke uses many different kinds of images when describing the fate of the dead. These do not form one, harmonious whole. Different expressions, such as Hades and Gehenna, paradise and eternal habitations, are used. All this points to the conclusion that Luke did not have a clear picture in mind concerning the fate of the individual after death. Moreover, the several different eschatological emphases in his double work indicate that—in contrast to a common scholarly view—Luke did not work out a systematic eschatological doctrine. Moreover, eschatological expectations do not form a central theme in Luke-Acts and do not explain the purpose for writing the work.⁶⁰

She argues that, instead, Luke uses this story for the practical purpose of calling people to repentance.⁶¹

Somov places Luke-Acts within its cultural milieu, stating,

Luke inherits in good measure the common beliefs and traditions of his cultural-religious milieu with all their diversity and inconsistency. Apparently, he does not consider the variety and even discrepancy of his views as a contradiction. That is how this diversity should be accounted for. However, this is not the entire picture. Luke does not simply borrow or adopt the ideas he has at hand, but rather makes new combinations of them for his own purposes in his own context.⁶²

⁵⁸ Bauckham, "The Rich Man and Lazarus," 245.

⁵⁹ Outi Lehtipuu, *The Afterlife Imagery in Luke's Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus*, NovTSup 123 (Leiden: Brill, 2007) and Alexey Somov, *Representations of the Afterlife in Luke-Acts*, LNTS (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017).

⁶⁰ Lehtipuu, *Afterlife Imagery*, 303.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Somov, *Representations of the Afterlife*, 227.

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Somov, like Lehtipuu, sees those purposes as related to the practical issues of repentance and salvation.⁶³ Those who fail to repent will be punished in Hades while those who repent and believe are already experiencing eternal life.⁶⁴

Critique of Interpretations of the Afterlife

Running like a thread throughout the interpretation of this parable from ancient times is the question of what happens to a person when they die. From early on the idea of an eternal soul became part of the explanation for what the parable presents. Wedded to this idea was the idea of the afterlife involving an intermediate state before achieving final resolution at the Last Judgment.

However, counter to this conceptual framework stands biblical anthropology which is quite wholistic in nature. In the creation of humanity God formed the man from the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man *became* a living soul (שָׁרָף), not *received* a living soul (Gen 2:7; cf. Eccl 12:7). When a person dies their thoughts perish (Ps 146:4).⁶⁵ They no longer exist as a soul because the building blocks of that entity have come apart with the non-sentient “breath of life/spirit” returning to God and the dust returning to the ground. Thus, death is described as a sleep (Mark 5:39; John 11; 1 Thess 4:13–18).⁶⁶

⁶³ Ibid., 229.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ The word “thoughts” in some translations is from חַוְוָּ meaning “plan, opinion,” the idea of the term having roots in the mind. The LXX uses διαλογισμός meaning “reasoning, opinion, thought.”

⁶⁶ In the ancient world “to fall asleep” was a euphemism for “to die.” However, several New Testament texts illustrate how the New Testament writers take this euphemism and invest it with new meaning. In Mark 5:39 Jesus accosts the mourners at Jairus’ house with the words, “Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping.” They laugh at him. For them, his comment would either mean that the girl has not died but is just asleep in natural sleep (which they all know is not true), or it would mean that he was speaking nonsense in speaking of a dead person. To put it in a form that conveys this nonsensical concept to the modern reader, it would be like saying, “She has not died, she has passed away.” But Jesus is saying that the little girl has not died so as not to be capable of a return to life. Because he is the life-giver, death is but a sleep to him. And he proceeds to call her back to life.

A similar expression regarding death occurs in 1 Thessalonians 4:14. The thought of this verse is often rearranged for a smoother English translation, such as the ESV, “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.” In this reading “fallen asleep” could just be a

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This very bodily sense of what a person is and lack of existence apart from a body finds affirmation in the New Testament. The apostle Paul sees future existence in a very body-based form. In 1 Corinthians 15 he argues elegantly for the resurrection of the body. And throughout the New Testament this teaching is tied to the Second Coming of Jesus (John 5:25–29, 11:23–26; 1 Cor 15:35–57; 1 Thess 4:13–18; Rev 20, cf. Luke 20:34–36). If the soul were to go to heaven at death, there would be no need or urgency for the Second Coming of Jesus.⁶⁷

This same sense of the necessity of bodily existence for life is found in Luke-Acts. The resurrection of Jesus is expressly stated in bodily form as the risen Christ insists before His disciples that He is not a spirit but has hands and feet, can be touched and eats food (Luke 24:36–43). Furthermore, in Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost he very clearly notes that David’s description of not being left in Hades refers not to King David but rather to the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:25–35). As Peter clearly states, “For David did not ascend into the heavens” (Acts 2:34 ESV). If he were a spirit or eternal soul that would not be the case, he would have ascended.

It is eminently clear throughout the New Testament, including Luke-Acts, that the reward of the saved and the damned comes at the Second Coming of Jesus. Numerous passages among a variety of authors confirm this. Matthew describes the gospel mission and its culmination in the parable of the weeds (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43). The Lord indicates that the harvest represents the end of the world. “The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. . . . the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Matt 13:41–43 ESV).⁶⁸

euphemism for death. But the order of the sentence in Greek is somewhat different. It reads, “For if we believe that Jesus died and arose, so also God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus.” Note the A B B A pattern of the text. Jesus died (A) and arose (B), followed by God will bring with Him (B) those who have fallen asleep through Jesus (A). That is to say, “fallen asleep” applied to the Christians parallels “Jesus died” in the first part of the verse. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the assurance that the dead in Christ (1 Thess 4:16) will also be raised.

⁶⁷ Thus, it is not surprising that for those Christians who believe that a believer goes to heaven when they die, the Second Coming of Jesus does not hold that all-consuming passion that we see reflected in the New Testament. Without the Second Coming, things are not complete (cf. Heb 11:13–16, 39–40).

⁶⁸ Matthew has a theme of the righteous and wicked together until the end as seen in the parable of the weeds (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43, noted above), the parable of the net

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In similar form, Matthew 24:29–31 and Mark 13:24–27 indicate that the Son of Man at his return will send his angels to gather the elect from the ends of the earth.⁶⁹ Luke 12:35–40 likens disciples to people awaiting their master and describes the reward of the faithful. In 12:41–48 Jesus expands the picture to include those who fail to be ready. He describes the fate of the wicked in 13:22–30 (cf. Luke 10:13–15, 11:29–32). Jesus also describes clearly his return and the fate of the righteous and wicked in Luke 17:20–37 (cf. 19:11–27 the parable of the 10 minas and 21:25–28 the coming of the Son of Man and redemption drawing near). Jesus refers to the resurrection of life and the resurrection of judgment in John 5:25–29, clearly a reference to the reward of the righteous and wicked. He promises to come back for his own in John 14:1–3.

The Apostle Paul describes the reward of the righteous and wicked in eschatological terms. In Romans 2:6–16 he notes that God will render to each according to his works and references the judgment (note the future tense “will be justified” 2:13). In Romans 6:5–11 the apostle speaks of our union with Christ in the resurrection and in 8:18–25 he refers to the eschatological freeing of all creation at the Eschaton (again notice the future tense “will be set free” 8:20). We have noted above Paul’s argumentation in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4. To these may be added passages such as Philippians 3:10–21 concerning the resurrection, 2 Thessalonians 2 concerning the man of sin, Titus 2:11–14 concerning salvation and the blessed hope, Hebrews 11 and 12 that present the receiving of the promise and kingdom by all God’s people together, the warning to the rich of judgment in James 5, the promise of salvation and the warning of damnation in 1 Peter 1 and 4 and 2 Peter 3, Jude’s stark warning of judgment on ungodliness and the great controversy sweep of Revelation’s visions.

All of these passages imply or expressly state that the final determination of salvation and damnation occurs at the end of the world. Combined with the biblical teaching of death as a sleep, and the very clear teaching that existence is bodily in nature, it is clear that the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus does not teach life after death in some

(Matt 13:47–50), the people of Noah’s day versus Noah (Matt 24:36–39), the reference to two men together, two women together, in each case one taken, the other left (Matt 24:40–42), the parable of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1–13), the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30), and the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31–46).

⁶⁹ Gathering the elect implies that the wicked are not gathered for salvation.

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intermediate state, but rather warns of unethical behavior in the present world.⁷⁰

Since the time of Hans Conzelmann, a number of scholars have seen in Luke-Acts a redefinition or weakening of the sense of the imminent return of Jesus into an emphasis on personal eschatology.⁷¹ This perspective is well expressed in the words of C. K. Barrett,

Luke saw that for the individual Christian death was truly *an ἔσχατον* (though not *the ἔσχατον*); it was therefore not wrong to think of it . . . in eschatological terms. Thus the death of each Christian would be marked by what we may term a private and personal *Parousia* of the Son of Man. That which was to happen in a universal sense at the last day, happened in individual terms when a Christian came to the last days of his life.⁷²

The texts typically used to support such a view in Luke-Acts include our passage, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, as well as the story of the Thief on the Cross (Luke 23:39–43) and the story of the Stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:55–60).⁷³ It is striking that these texts are all narrative in nature, not a dominical teaching such as the Sermon on the Plain.⁷⁴ We are discussing the Rich Man and Lazarus in this study, but we can make a brief response on the death of Stephen and the thief on the cross.

Regarding Stephen, the claim is made that the Son of Man stands up to receive his servant and Stephen when dying says, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit (πνεῦμα)” (Acts 7:59 ESV). But as Lehitpuu points out, the standing up of the Son of Man occurs before Stephen dies, which suggests more of an affirmation of Stephen’s indictment of the religious leaders.⁷⁵ We also note that “receiving the spirit” does not suggest a

⁷⁰ The narrative analysis in part two of this study will focus on this.

⁷¹ See the discussion in Lehitpuu, *The Afterlife Imagery*, 250–64.

⁷² C. K. Barrett, “Stephen and the Son of Man,” *Apophoreta* FS Ernst Haenchen, BZNW 30 (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1964), 35–6.

⁷³ On Stephen’s death and the Thief on the Cross see the discussion in Lehitpuu, *The Afterlife Imagery*, 253–5.

⁷⁴ In the Jewish exegesis of Jesus’ day Old Testament law was not superseded by the stories of the Old Testament. *Halakah* cannot be superseded by *Haggadah*. See D. M. Cohn-Sherbok, “An Analysis of Jesus’ Arguments concerning the Plucking of Grain on the Sabbath,” *JSNT* 2 (1979): 31–41. Hence, in a similar manner, arguing Lukan theology from narrative over against dominical sayings is suspect.

⁷⁵ Lehitpuu, *The Afterlife Imagery*, 254.

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sentient soul ascending to God since in the immediately following verse (Acts 7:60) Luke reports that Stephen “fell asleep,” the very common euphemism for death in the Greco-Roman world but also interpreted by Christians as what Jesus reverses in resurrecting the dead (John 11:11–14; 1 Thess 4:13–18; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52–55).⁷⁶

But what about the thief on the cross and Jesus’ promise to him in Luke 23:43? Is this a reference to an intermediate state similar to what a number of interpreters see in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus? It is often interpreted in that way.⁷⁷ But it is a question of the translation of the verse. The Greek text is *καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ἀμὴν σοι λέγω, σήμερον μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ*. In the first century Greek was written all in capital letters with no punctuation or even division between words. The comma in the sentence could be placed either before or after *σήμερον* (“today”).⁷⁸ Placed after it, the text would read, “And he said to him, ‘Truly I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise.’” Jesus himself did not ascend to heaven that day as John 20:17 ESV indicates, “I have not yet ascended to the Father.” If that is the case, it is reasonable to consider Jesus’ promise to the thief to be eschatological in nature, pointing to his return in glory and promising the thief entrance into his kingdom.

⁷⁶ It is challenging to imagine that if the “spirit” here is sentient that resurrection would be necessary. Nor would the Parousia be necessary—Stephen would already be with the Lord.

⁷⁷ Cf. Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 404, “The thief asks to be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom. He is likely referring to the resurrection of the righteous at the end of time, as was the common Jewish view. Jesus’ reply is more than what the thief requests, since Jesus assures him that even in this very day he will share in the life to come: ‘Today you will be with me in paradise’ (23:43).” Cf. Alexey Somov, *Representations of the Afterlife*, 181–5). Though note Somov’s statement on p. 184, “. . . in contrast to pagan and Jewish accounts dealing with the immortality of the soul as a real and desirable form of afterlife existence, Luke makes use of the notion of immortality in order to demonstrate that risen people have eternal life. . . . in Lk. 16:19–31, it is unclear whether Luke has in mind a shadowy existence of the disembodied soul, or some other type of immortality. In these passages he prefers to deal with more general ideas of the afterlife without emphasizing any particular form of it. However, it remains unclear whether he refers to the final destiny of Lazarus, the rich man, and the repentant criminal, or to their intermediate state.”

⁷⁸ *Σήμερον* (“today”) is used 20 times in Luke-Acts. In a number of these uses “today” goes with the first part of the sentence. Examples include Luke 2:11; 12:28; 13:32–33; 22:34, 61; Acts 4:9; 19:40; 20:26; 26:29, half the uses not counting Luke 23:43. Hence, it is not out of the ordinary for “today” to be connected with the first phrase in the verse.

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Thus we note that the supposed inconsistency within Luke-Acts concerning eschatology and the supposed teaching of an intermediate state between death and the resurrection are unnecessary to make sense of the theology of Luke-Acts. Indeed, when these three stories (the parable, the thief on the cross, the death of Stephen) are recognized as not teaching life after death, Luke's theology of death, resurrection and eschatology becomes internally coherent and is consistent with the teaching of the rest of the New Testament.

Conclusion of Part One of the Study

Let us review the findings of this study. The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is filled with the marks of it being a parable. It begins like other parables ("There was a certain rich man") but especially it is filled with hyperbole like other parables (the deep contrasts both before and after death, much like hyperbole in other parables). These details suggest an "eschatological comedy" genre of the story consistent with it being an imaginative story.

The imaginative nature of the story is also affirmed by its parallels and contrasts to other stories in the Greco-Roman world concerning visits to the realm of the dead. Where these other stories have a living person visit the dead or someone calls up the dead, the parable contains no necromancy (because the dead "know nothing" Eccl 9:5), no living person visiting the realm of the dead and no explicit explanation for the contrast between the fates of the two men.⁷⁹ Bauckham is right when he says, "The story in effect deprives itself of any claim to offer an apocalyptic glimpse of the secrets of the world beyond the grave."⁸⁰

Seeing the parable as imaginative in nature is also consistent with the wider New Testament and indeed Lukan teaching regarding death and resurrection and the bodily nature of existence the Scriptures consistently teach. Luke is recognized as a consistent writer instead of inconsistent and incoherent.

We conclude, therefore, that the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is clearly a parable, one that utilizes an imaginary conversation between a man in Hades and a patriarch in heaven, not to explain what happens when you die, but rather to teach how you should live in the present life.

⁷⁹ See the narrative analysis in the second part of this study for more explanation regarding the significance of the fact that no explicit reason is given for the fates of the two men.

⁸⁰ Bauckham, "The Rich Man and Lazarus," 245.

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The long history of seeing the parable as teaching an intermediate state between death and resurrection owes its origin to the concept of an immortal soul imported from Greco-Roman culture rather than inherent in biblical theology. But if the parable is not teaching an intermediate state, just what is its point? That question is where we turn in part two of this study.

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