

Layering the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

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Throughout the ‘hell debates’ of recent years, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) has repeatedly begged our attention, especially in Q&A times following the documentary, *Hellbound?* The dialogue has urged me towards a sharper focus on the layered functions of the parable than I offered in my contemplative read in [Her Gates Will Never Be Shut](#).¹ Herein, I will introduce an outline that I hope invites fuller treatment.

False functions

First, we ought to dismiss the false functions of the parable as assigned by traditional (but sloppy) literalism. Readers often imagine that Jesus’ intent is to describe the nature of divine judgment and the state of the damned—or ‘hell’ (lit. *hades*), defined as an inescapable place of fiery judgment. The symbolic nature of parables is frequently negated and the passage treated as a revelation of the afterlife.

Briefly, interpreting the story of Dives (Lat. ‘rich man’ in the Vulgate) and Lazarus as descriptive of ‘hell’ ignores the difference between *hades* and *paradise* vis-à-vis *heaven* and *hell*, both biblically and theologically, even by literalist standards. The text says the rich man is in *hades*, borrowed from Greek language and mythology to correspond with the Hebrew *Sheol*—the place of the dead or the grave *prior to* the final Day of Judgment. This is confirmed by the rich man’s desire to send a warning to his brothers *before* it is too late. Thus, whatever the rich man is suffering, it is a precursor to the Day of the Lord and distinct from the infernalist’s typical everlasting ‘lake of fire.’

Moreover, aspects of the story make a crass literalism awkward: how does the rich man communicate with Abraham across the chasm? Does everyone there have a direct line to the patriarch? Does someone being incinerated in a furnace care about thirst? Are these literal flames? And since *hades* precedes the resurrection of the body, do we have literal tongues with which to feel thirst? Is this also the literal Abraham? Do the millions in his care take turns snuggling with him? Or is his bosom big enough to contain us all at once? How big he must be! And so on into implausibility.

Taking the parable seriously means we mustn’t take it so literally. Rather than text-mining for the architecture of the underworld, we ought to be digging for the intended message of Jesus. He is using the afterlife to illuminate some truth about this life. If we read carefully, we begin to see hints of the rich strata of meaning that beckon us deeper beneath the surface. I will propose three such layers here.

1. Jesus’ use of the parable – economic inversion

¹ [Brad Jersak, Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell and the New Jerusalem \(Wipf & Stock, 2009\)](#), Excursus 1: The Rich Man and Lazarus.

Gospel scholars usually agree that Jesus' parables often employ Second Temple Jewish beliefs precisely in order to challenge them.² Christ enfolds their religious assumptions into his parables, then immediately moves to invert or subvert them. In his portrait of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus neither composes nor endorses the narrational stage on which he makes his point. Rather, this parable exemplifies Jesus' use of popular first-century imagery in order to challenge his opponents' rutted mindsets.

So, Jesus' use of *hades* and 'Abraham's bosom' is not tacit agreement with rabbinical speculation concerning the hereafter. In fact, the various Jewish traditions span a vast spectrum over many centuries amidst much in-house debate.

The biblical prophets primarily describe divine judgment in terms of *this life*. Jeremiah forecasts the flames of national destruction in the *Valley of the sons of Hinnom* (Gk. LXX - *gehenna*), south of Jerusalem. Isaiah envisions the corpses of dead bodies outside the walls of the New Jerusalem. Malachi prophesies the wicked reduced to ashes to be trampled underfoot. *Gehenna* was a prophetic symbol for the fiery demolition(s) of earthly Jerusalem.³

The Hebrew *sheol*, on the other hand, is predominantly thought of as the grave—where the righteous and wicked alike sleep in the dust—or at most, it's a place of silence and oblivion where one may have a shadowy existence in either peace or gloom.⁴

Intertestamental apocalyptic authors like Enoch, Esdras and Judith went further: they conceive *gehenna* as an afterlife of retributive punishment in furnaces beneath the earth, where angels inflict punishment. A few passages describe eternal torment, others annihilation and still others a temporary purgatory. By the first century, Rabbis were deferring and transposing national destruction texts (e.g. Zech. 13:8) into an otherworld judgment. *But* this judgment could have a time limit (most commonly one year), after which the wicked were either consumed or their purification was complete. One could escape if, for example, they had given alms to the poor during their life or if their family was faithful with the liturgical prayers of their mourning period.⁵

Regardless, Jesus' purpose in this parable was *not* to bring the definitive revelation on the nature of *hades*. What exactly is he up to? He is incorporating some contemporary Jewish imagery to make a profound and prophetic ethical point.

From the beginning of Luke 16, the immediate topical context of Jesus' discourse is the management of wealth, the idolatry of mammon and the perilous state of the rich. That is, we have a series of messages that address the ethics of worldly wealth. Jesus, following the Hebrew prophetic tradition, confronts those who are rich and powerful now. They

² E.g. Derek Flood, "The More I Follow Jesus," *Huffington Post* (09/21/11).

³ For a full study, cf. Jersak, *Her Gates*, chapter 3.

⁴ For primary sources, Jersak, *Her Gates*, 17-18.

⁵ For primary sources, Jersak, *Her Gates*, 46-51.

will be pulled down and weep later while those who suffer poverty now will be lifted up into comfort.

This is a recurring theme in Luke, as we recall the *Magnificat* of Mary (esp. Luke 1:52-53) and Jesus' Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-26). Both passages describe the rich toppled from power and prosperity while the poor are lifted into abundance. At the eschatological banquet, contrary to expectations, the wealthy will find themselves excluded from table and the poor granted a place of honor for the feast.

In this parable, Jesus specifically targets some sneering Pharisees who, we're told, loved money (16:14). When he tells them the story, Jesus is not spiritualizing riches and poverty here. He quite literally means that the rich and poor in this age will see a reversal of fortunes in the next. In light of this sobering revelation, Jesus is *not* asking, "So, are you rich or poor?" No, he is saying, rather, "You are rich. Period. Now ask yourself, who is the poor man at your gate? Moses and the Prophets and now I exhort you to treat him with justice, mercy and compassion, lest you follow the fate of the rich man of this tragic story."⁶

Luke's use of the parable – social inversion

A second layer of meaning may suggest itself as Luke applies the parable to the social context and concerns of the early church. Some textual clues point to this secondary exhortation, challenging either Christian Judaizers who marginalized Gentile believers (as in Galatia) and/or Jewish leaders (especially Pharisees) who expelled Jewish Christians from their synagogues. Again, the story presages a coming upheaval of fortunes, when insiders with perceived leverage lose their place of favor to those outside the gates.

How is Jesus' message transposed from rich-poor to Jew-Gentile in the text? Possible intimations of this move include the following:

- The Hellenized name, Lazarus, may recall Eleazar (Hebrew for 'God is my help') of Damascus—the Gentile servant of Abraham. As Abraham's faithful steward, Eleazar had been heir to the patriarch's estate (Gen. 5:2-3) but was de facto disinherited through God's covenant to grant Abraham and Sarah a son. All of Abraham's wealth, reserved for Eleazar for many decades, was left to Abraham's flesh and blood heirs (Isaac, Jacob and their progeny – Gen. 15:4-5; 24:36), effectively leaving Eleazar with nothing. He and his children would remain servants ('beggars at the gate'), dependent on the family's charity. This may be why we see Lazarus with Abraham in the parable and why the rich man acts as if he is still on call for errands in Abraham's service—and his own, for that matter.
- Lazarus is said to beg outside the rich man's gate (v. 19). He longs to eat even the rich man's table scraps. This is reminiscent of the Gospel story in which Jesus

⁶ This punch-line was suggested to me by Scott McKnight.

reserved his healing ministry for “the lost sheep of Israel” but a Canaanite woman appealed: “*Even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.*” Note the multiple allusions with Lazarus, who “... longed to eat *what fell from the rich man’s table*” and “*Even the dogs came and licked his sores*” (v. 21).

- Uncircumcised Gentile proselytes of Judaism were referred to as “*gate proselytes*” or “strangers *inside* the gate.”⁷ They enjoyed certain rights and privileges under the Mosaic Law. Is the parable condemning the rich man for leaving Lazarus *outside* when the Law obligated Jews to provide for foreigners *inside*? Or more shocking, is Jesus saying that even those legally *outside* the gates (*non-proselyte* Gentiles) may displace Abraham’s sons in paradise!⁸
- Further, we are told *the rich man has five brothers* (v. 28). Judah, like the rich man, had five brothers (Gen. 35:23). Historically, the Jewish temple and priesthood (*‘dressed in linen’*) as well as her throne and king (*‘fine purple’*) were centered in Judah’s capital, Jerusalem (v. 19). They were graced with the oracles of God (*‘They have Moses and the Prophets’* – v. 29). But even then, rather than making God’s temple “a house of prayer for the Gentiles / nations,” a corrupt priesthood had turned it into “a den of thieves” (cf. Jer. 7).
- Some even see the ‘great gulf’ as a symbolized reference to the Jordan Rift Valley⁹ (including the Dead Sea – i.e. ‘the lake of fire’¹⁰), dividing Abraham’s Promised Land from the Gentile territories. Maybe – but we do know that crossing the Jordan into Canaan became a metaphor for salvation. If so, again, the rich man and Lazarus—as Jew and Gentile—have undergone a surprising reversal of spiritual locales.

Did Jesus intend this secondary application of his parable? Perhaps. Did Luke import the story into the Jew-Gentile tensions he regularly encountered while traveling with Paul? Very likely, given their confrontations with both Jews and Judaizers throughout the missionary journeys. In any case, the inversion has occurred and recurred as prophesied on many catastrophic occasions. In Romans 11:17-21, Paul warns the Gentiles against arrogance, because the reversal can work both ways. “If God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either” (21). As such, the parable stands as a portent to all who perpetrate racial exclusion—or erect any other “wall of partition which Christ died to break” (Eph. 2:14).

⁷ *Ger toshav* (Hebrew: גֵר תוֹשָׁב *ger* “foreigner” + *toshav* “resident”).

Exodus 20:9-10, Deut 5:13-14, 120-29, 16:10-14, 24:13-14, 26:11-12, 31:11-12.

⁸ Matt. 8:11-12 “I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

⁹ The Jordan rift valley stretches south from Mount Herman, through the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba.

¹⁰ Jersak, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut*, ch. 5.

Punch line of all parables – Jesus death and resurrection

Speaking to a third and ultimate layer, I believe the fullness of Christ's parables were veiled throughout his life and ministry because beneath and beyond his ethical-prophetic message lay a deeper meaning. Namely, the parables of the Kingdom of God only find their *telos*—their punch line—in Christ's death and resurrection. Joseph Ratzinger suggested this in *Jesus of Nazareth* (vol. 1):

It is on the Cross that the parables are unlocked. In his Farewell Discourse, the Lord says, apropos of this: “I have said this to you in parables [i.e., veiled discourse]; the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in parables but tell you plainly of the Father: (Jn 16:25). The parables speak in a hidden way, then, of the mystery of the Cross ... they becomes stations on the way to the Cross.”¹¹

What teasers of Jesus' death and resurrection are insinuated in the tale of Dives and Lazarus?

- *Good Friday*: The suffering of Lazarus foreshadowed *Christ's passion*. Ratzinger sees two clues:

Do we not recognize in the figure of Lazarus—lying at the rich man's door covered in sores—the mystery of Jesus, who “suffered outside the city walls” (Heb 13:12) and, stretched naked on the Cross, was delivered over to the mockery and contempt of the mob, his body “full of blood and wounds”?¹²

- *Holy Saturday*: *Hades* and *the chasm that can never be crossed* conceal what is only revealed through Christ's *descensus* on Holy Saturday. In death, Christ *does* cross the chasm, descends into *hades*, evangelizes the dead (*nekrois euēngelisthē*)—those who were judged in the flesh (1 Pet. 4:6 – *krithōsi men kata anthrōpous sarki*)—makes them alive in the spirit (1 Pet 3:18–21 – *zōopoiētheis de pneumati*) and leads a parade of captives out of captivity into paradise (Eph 4:8–9). Where the gates of *hades* were previously impenetrable, Christ now holds the keys (Rev. 1:18). He will, in the end, throw death and *hades* into the lake of fire (Rev. 21:14) and so death will die. Richard Baukham says this drama was common in early Christian proclamation:

“Jesus breaks down the gates of the underworld (Odes Sol 17:9–11; *Teachings of Silvanus*, NHC 7.110.19–34; Tertullian, *De Res. Carn.* 44), releases the captive dead (Odes Sol 17:12; 22:4; *Acts Thom* 10), or destroys death or *Hades* (Melito, *Peri Pascha* 102).”¹³

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007), 190-91.

¹² Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007), 216-17.

¹³ Baukham, “Descent to the Underworld,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Eerdmans, 1993), 157

- *Easter Sunday*: The parabolic Lazarus and Lazarus of Bethany become precursors of Christ's archetypal resurrection. Again, Ratzinger:

He, the true Lazarus, *has* risen from the dead—and he has come to tell us so. If we see in the story of Lazarus Jesus' answer to his generation's demand for a sign, we find ourselves in harmony with the principal answer that Jesus gave to that demand. [cf. Matt 12:39ff; Luke 11:29ff]...

He, crucified and risen, is the true Lazarus. The parable is inviting us to believe and follow him, God's great sign. But it is more than a parable. It speaks of reality, of the most decisive reality in all history.¹⁴

Having failed to hear Moses and the Prophets, Abraham tells the rich man, *even if someone* were to rise from the dead, his brothers would not be convinced to repent (Luke 16:30-31). And so it was: first Lazarus of Bethany is raised, then Christ himself returns from *hades*, yet the Temple establishment / Sanhedrin still refused to believe.

Summary

Thus, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus stands, not as a cosmological lesson, but as a three-fold somber warning and encouragement for today:

First, to those with worldly wealth—*us!*—to the first world west that consumes four times more than the global average, be warned. Take note of the poor at your gates—treat them with equity and charity—for the days are coming when you too may sit outside their gates and thirst for a drop of justice or a crumb of mercy.

Second, to those with social capital within the church—*us!*—to those whose idea of holiness or protocol bars the door or excludes from the table those for whom Christ died, be warned. The Spirit of Christ broke the dividing wall between Jews and Greeks, males and females, freemen and slaves. He's probably not done. Don't get crushed in the rubble.

Finally, let's rejoice in the redeeming power of Christ's death, descent and resurrection, through which he has freed us from the dominion of *hades* and gathered us with him into the bosom of his Father. What the covenant people of God once failed to perceive, let us excel not fail to boldly proclaim in our time: "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007), 216-217.