

Appendix I: The Rich Man and Lazarus

It cannot be without significance that the entire premise of the story of The Rich Man and Lazarus is in total disagreement with the testimony of the Old Testament Scriptures which come before it. It is certain that there is a reason why the Lord utilized such conflicting ideas here, and when the Pharisees are examined more closely, a plausible reason appears.

According to the historian Josephus, who was himself a member of the sect from the age of 19, the Pharisees believed in the immortality of the soul and a conscious intermediate state between death and resurrection. "They...believe that souls have an immortal vigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards and punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again"¹.

Now when we recognize that concepts like "Abraham's Bosom" and consciousness after death were established traditions of these Jews in New Testament times, the close parallels suggest that Jesus Christ was simply echoing their tradition when he spoke to them that day - and echoing for a specific purpose. When we are aware of the Pharisees' detailed views concerning (what they called) "The Hereafter", and the contradiction of such ideas by the Old Testament Scriptures, it becomes somewhat easier to perceive the Rich Man and Lazarus as something more strategic than it initially appears. The Lord did not actually promulgate eternal existence and conscious punishment in a plain, straightforward, or formal manner here. Rather, he only used them within a cryptic story, or parable and he did not proceed to explain the story, thereby establishing its basis in fact. This ambiguity allows doubt as to whether the Rich Man and Lazarus was truly intended to depict an after-death reality...but more importantly, it also permits us to view the story as the Lord's very artful and deliberate method of indicting the Pharisees with their own erroneous beliefs.

Going back to the text, we have seen that when members of the sect derided the Lord in **Luke 16.14**, he responded to their ridicule with a sharp condemnation of their self-righteousness. In a move which was intended to "put them in their place" on more than one count, he rapidly changed subjects and condemned them a second time for their doctrine on divorce. Then, following that, the Lord changed the subject yet again, and began a third condemnation of the Pharisees, this time in regard to their doctrine concerning the dead. He phrased his indictment as a story involving the fictional characters of The Rich Man and Lazarus, resourcefully working in all the false components of the Pharisaic teaching. Jesus Christ, then, was already in the midst of condemning these men for erroneous practices when he began to utter his tale; he merely continued his attack by the use of a clever maneuver that was intended to further accuse those Pharisees who were listening that day.

That Jesus Christ was capable of such irony is demonstrated by his sarcastic remark after The Unjust Steward was completed [**Luke 16.9**]. These words were not intended as actual advice, and neither was his story to the Pharisees intended as actual instruction for his disciples that day. Both are examples of the Lord's skill in the use of words and language, while The Rich Man and Lazarus had the particular design of a shrewd parody of the Pharisaic beliefs...Those who listened to the Lord in his own day were doubtless aware of the distinctive Pharisaic doctrine, and therefore recognized his cutting irony toward the "vipers" who sat "in Moses' seat".

¹ *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, Chapter 1, 3; see Berakhot, *The Talmud of Babylonia*, Ch. 3; *Midrash Rabbah Ruth*, Ch. 3; *Lamentations Rabbah*, Ch. 1; *Exodus Rabbah*, Ch. 31; *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, Ch. 12.

ASLEEP IN CHRIST by Helaine Burch

And indeed, sectarianism within Judaism reveals that not all of the Jews were in agreement as to how the Holy Scriptures were to be understood. All three of the major sects of Christ's time departed from the Scriptures as differences arose regarding numerous aspects of the law, worship, and doctrine. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection or eternal life of any kind, and therefore did not favor the concept of an immortal soul...The Essenes and the Pharisees, however, both favored the immortality of the soul, a belief that had grown and undergone development among the Jews during the intertestamental period. Most unfortunate, however, is the strong likelihood that the true origin of the belief came in part from the immensely popular teachings of the Greek philosopher Plato (428/7 – 348/7 B.C.). In Plato's writing can be found many dramatic ideas of inherent immortality, but in the Bible itself the words "immortal" and "soul" are never put together in order to describe mankind. In the end, one has only to look back to the Jewish and Greek converts to the early church in order to understand how the doctrine of the immortal soul entered into the Christian faith.

[The story] also contains other aberrations which tend to flag it as a condemnation of the Pharisees, rather than as a warning of their possible future fate in hell. According to the story, judgment of persons is obviously given immediately upon death, and then torments are applied without delay. (For in order to determine which side of the gulf each soul should be sent to, and who is worthy of "comfort" and "torments", judgment would have to be executed first in order to make such an assessment.) But other portions of scripture repeatedly teach that there is to be a *future* "day of judgment" (**1 John 4.17**; **2 Peter 3.7**), and this is surely to be *after resurrection*, as **Revelation 20.4** and **20.12** describe. It is also notable that the idea of punishment before the day of judgment is not mentioned in other (more straightforward) scripture, and in fact, the opposite is true [**2 Peter 2.9**]. Discrepancies such as these tend to confirm the likelihood that the Lord was using the Pharisees beliefs to make his condemnation of them more biting, for such teachings of immediate "rewards and punishments" "under the earth" were certainly theirs [Josephus, *Ant.* Book 18, Ch. 1, 3].

And faith is an issue here, as well, because if The Rich Man and Lazarus truly teaches a factual scenario for man, then it also appears to oppose all that the Lord Jesus Christ has said about faith as the basis of salvation [**Rom 5.17**]...The poor man is "comforted" after death in Abraham's Bosom [because] he suffered a life of poverty (**Luke 16.25**); nothing is said about whether he was a God fearing man of faith or not. [The Rich Man] failed to do a good work, but again, there is no mention about whether or not he was a man who had faith in God...Faith appears to be a non-existent issue, leaving us to question whether this scenario and this story are even loosely based on the facts of Scripture.

[Furthermore], if *sheol/hades* is truly a spiritual realm where the people of God were once housed prior to the ascension of Christ, it is questionable what kind of comfort they actually would have experienced there if they were made to reside in plain view of the unsaved...As the Lord's story illustrates, unsaved family and friends would have undergone a terrorizing suffering within visible distance and earshot of the saved, and would have called out to them continually for merciful favors and relief. If this – or anything like it – is what God has elsewhere referred to as the "sleep" of death (**Deuteronomy 31.16**; **John 11.11**), then such slumber must have been characterized by a nightmare of the most horrible magnitude for the early peoples of God. It may indeed be no coincidence that the term "Abraham's Bosom" occurs only once in the entire Bible, and this while the Lord is actively engaged in a criticism of Israel's "blind guides". This view of an afterlife belongs to the tradition of men...

The fact that [the story] deviates so greatly from the body of Scripture surrounding it should be a testimony **in itself that it is not teaching, but false doctrine held up to the faces of those who invented it. This may be a bitter pill for some to swallow, but those searching for the truth will find confidence**

when they begin to embrace all of the teachings of the Bible – both Old Testament and New Testament, from beginning to end.

Coming as it does, after the parable of the Unjust Steward and after the Lord's direct criticism of the Pharisees, it seems to give an example of how the Pharisees themselves were unjust stewards – not with material goods, but with the word of God, which had been entrusted to them as the spiritual leaders of their people. That the Pharisees had not been wholly faithful to God's word is evident by the Scriptures, and their doctrine concerning the death state was the Lord's case in point. His inclusion of a prophetic note makes it all the more interesting: for when a real Lazarus would rise from the dead some time later [John 11 only], the event would fail to persuade the nation of the authenticity of Jesus Christ, just as "Abraham" predicted that the raising of the fictional Lazarus would not convince the rich man's brothers.

Thus, after condemning the Pharisees with their own beliefs, he tells the disciples that it is better to be dead than to be found guilty of placing doctrinal stumbling-blocks in front of other people [Luke 17.1-2]. These are harsh words, but they demonstrate to us how strongly God feels about those who teach from the wisdom of oral tradition which contradicts the word of God.