

In trying to unpack the understanding of the afterlife found in the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, it is important to realize that Luke presents the story as a parable - a simple, imaginative story meant to illustrate a deeper spiritual lesson. It is not a literal description of reality.

It is true that Luke does not actually call it a parable, but that's true of most of the parables Jesus tells in this Gospel. This section of Luke's narrative is chock-full of parables - twenty two of them, in close proximity. A number of them begin with the words "a certain man" did such and such. That is the case of two immediately preceding passages: the parable of the prodigal son in 15:11 and of the parable of the dishonest steward in 16:1. And it is true of this very story in 16:19.

Since the account is a parable, an imaginative tale meant to emphasize a point, it would be wrong to press its details for literal descriptions of what awaits people in the afterlife, with bodies in flame, horribly dry tongues, fingers dipped into water, and communications between people in Hades and those in paradise. It is fictional story meant to convey a lesson. The lesson may be rooted in a certain conception of life after death, but it is designed to teach people how to live in the present. In this case the lesson involves one's relation to wealth.

Some readers have assumed that the parable is ...

The rest of this post is for blog members only. If you're not one of the chosen few, why not join? It won't cost much, you get tons for your money, and ever penny goes to charity.

Some readers have assumed that the parable is not about wealth per se, but about being a good or bad person. In that reading, the rewarded Lazarus was righteous and the rich man a sinner. It is striking, however, that the story says nothing about that. What it emphasizes is their wealth and poverty, not their sin and righteousness. Still, some scholars have thought that sin is the ultimate point, and have appealed to other stories from the ancient world in support, other fictional accounts of the reversal of fortunes of the rich and poor. The best known - among historians of religion, at least - is an Egyptian tale of a man named Setne and his adult son Si-Osire.[\[1\]](#)

In the story the two of them are looking out the window of their house and see the coffin of a rich man being carried out to the cemetery with great honors. They then see the corpse of a poor beggar carried out on a mat, with no one attending his funeral. Setne says to his son: "By Ptah, the great god, how much happier is the rich man who is honored with the sound of wailing than the poor man who is carried to the cemetery." Si-Osire surprises his father by telling him that the poor man will be much better off in the afterlife than the rich one. He surprises him even more by proving it.

He takes Setne down to the underworld, where they see how the unrighteous are punished, including some who are in dire hunger and thirst with food and drink just out of reach above their heads. In particular, they see a man lying on the ground before a great hall with a large gate; the hinge of the gate is fixed in the man's eye socket, swiveling as the gate opens and shuts, with the man pleading and crying for help. This, as it turns out, is the rich man they had seen being taken off for burial with great honor. When he arrived in the underworld the judges weighed his misdeeds against his unrighteous acts, and he was found seriously wanting. The gate in the eye socket is his punishment.

Setne and Si-Osire also see the rewards of the righteous, including a very rich person finely

clothed, standing by the god Osiris. This is none other than the poor man they had observed, unattended at his burial. When his life had been judged, he was found to have done far more good deeds than wicked, and so was rewarded with the very garments the rich man had been wearing at his burial.

Si-Osire sums up the situation: “Take it to your heart, my father Setne: he who is beneficent on earth, to him one is beneficent in the netherworld. And he who is evil, to him one is evil. So it is so decreed and will remain so forever.” Far better, that is, to be dirt poor and righteous than filthy rich and wicked. Eternal life hinges on it.

In my next post I’ll return to Lazarus and the Rich Man and summarize what I think it can tell us about Luke’s view of the afterlife.

[1] For the translation see Miriam Lichtheim, [Ancient Egyptian Literature: The Late Period](#), vol. 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). In places the manuscript she is translating has small gaps; I have taken her reconstructions without enclosing them in parentheses here. [\private]



[What’s the Story of Lazarus and the Rich Man All About? Heaven, Hell, and the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man](#)