

DOES THE LUKE 16 STORY SAY YOU CAN GO TO HELL FOREVER AT DEATH?

The Rich Man, Lazarus, and Abraham by Steven Cox

First of all read Luke 16:19-31

Cox tries to get around Jesus' statement in the tale that people go to Hell at death forever. He assumes that the rich man is the Jewish High Priest Caiaphas which is an odd deduction to make.

The Rich Man in Hell

The story becomes even more 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. But 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 Hell?

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

'Hell' in the English Bible can be 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 the 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.

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)

What the Pharisees did NOT teach

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 people quote the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus as proof of the doctrine of 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.

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 creates an even bigger problem: Surely Jesus would not approve false teaching?! - 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 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".

So we have to conclude that Christ had a good reason to do so.

An Unacceptable Solution

Another answer is: "Christ was accommodating himself to his listeners to get the message across". But this also will not do. Admittedly there are examples of Christ speaking to the poor and the simple in terms that they would understand. But never to the disciples, and certainly not to the Pharisees, did Christ '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)

Yet we still have to explain why the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is so badly at odds with the rest of the Bible.

If I drive out demons by Beelzebub...

The answer 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. 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 if Jesus makes use of Pharisee beliefs in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus we need to ask; 'Does Jesus confirm them, or ridicule them?'

Jesus contradicts 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.

Jesus Ridicules False Teaching

There is only one solution left that will explain why Jesus should deliberately choose to tell a parable drawn from the Pharisees' superstitions. 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.

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.

Even without these 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.

Steven Cox

MY COMMENT: The booklet rationalises away the teaching that the dead are alive before the resurrection. Jesus was preaching to simple people and would not have expected them to take such a complicated and far-fetched interpretation like the booklet does. The booklet doubts that the story really is a parable and outlines how it differs from the other parables. It does not have their characteristics. In that it is correct. It is a narrative not a parable.

If Jesus told the story just to indicate that those who are well off on earth can end up bad after they die then why all the details that could have been left out? Why bring in random stuff and be confusing? It is obvious the whole thing is a true story in Jesus' mind.

The story shows that Jesus did in fact mean Hell as in a place of suffering after death. Scholars have tried to read something different into the other references to it as if it meant the dump beside Jerusalem.

It is true that the Pharisees thought nobody went to Heaven but that is irrelevant.

The parable is in fact not a parable at all.

