

The Rich Man, Lazarus, & the Afterlife by Samuel G. Dawson

Jesus' teaching concerning the Rich Man and Lazarus in [Lk. 16:19-31](#) has always been provocative. It's the main passage resorted to when striving to establish the concept of endless torturous punishment of the wicked after death. This punishment is usually thought to be in hell, though the Greek word for hell, *gehenna*, is nowhere in the passage.

Much of this story existed before Jesus taught it. Arguments have abounded for centuries on the subject of this passage, and still flourish over whether Jesus' teaching is a parable (which he doesn't call it) or reality.

My particular interest in this essay arose in response to another essay I wrote entitled "[Jesus' Teaching on Hell.](#)" It deals with the twelve passages in the Bible actually using the word *gehenna*, eleven of them on four or five occasions by Jesus to Jewish audiences, and also one by James to a Jewish audience. This essay is available in my book, [The Teaching of Jesus: From Sinai to Gehenna, A Faithful Rabbi Urgently Warns Rebellious Israel](#). In that essay, I affirm that (1) hell is not a translation of the word *gehenna*, but a substitution, (2) *gehenna* should never have been translated at all (since it is a proper noun, like Jerusalem or Ephesus), and (3) the popular concept of hell as a place of endless punishment has no scriptural basis whatsoever.

When I first came to my present conclusions on hell, I realized that probably 80 percent of Christians obey the gospel so they won't go to a place they were never threatened with anyway. I think that demands caution in dealing with folks. I've asked a lot of people why they obeyed the gospel. Most said, "to stay out of hell;" others said, because they loved God. Still others said because they wanted to do what was right, a loving response to the love of God, etc. As a reaction to that material on hell, many readers asked, "What about Luke 16? Where does it fit in?" Most of the questions I receive concern the destiny of the wicked; more particularly with the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Concerning Luke 16, let me offer the following comments from my letter to one such questioner:

I have questions about Luke 16 myself. Here's my present understanding of it. (1) It doesn't contain the word *gehenna*, so it teaches nothing about Gehenna (and this is why I didn't discuss the passage in my original essay, "Jesus' Teaching on Hell"). (2) It doesn't teach *anything* about the final punishment of the wicked, and your preacher doesn't think so, either. I'm sure he believes it to be an intermediate punishment before the final judgment, doesn't he? So, whether I know what Luke 16 teaches or not, I know it doesn't support the popular concept of hell. (3) I'm pretty sure we use these verses to teach something that is far from the purpose of the entire chapter.

The purpose of this present work is to effectively set forth what I believe Jesus taught in this passage.

The Context of [Luke 16:19-31](#)

To begin with, I suggest that the entire chapter is dealing with greed, or the love of money. To get an overall view of Luke 16, notice the five sections in it, then we'll briefly discuss the first four sections to develop the context of the fifth, concerning the Rich Man and Lazarus.

- vv. 1-8 – Commendation of the Greedy Unfaithful Steward
- vv. 9-13 – Jesus Applied the Story to His Greedy Audience
- vv. 14-15 – The Greedy Pharisees' Reaction and Jesus' Reply
- vv. 16-18 – A Faithful Steward—John the Baptist
- vv. 19-31 – The Rich Man and Lazarus

Each of these five sections contains a common theme, greed:

(1) the unfaithful steward acted out of greed, (2) Jesus applied this account to the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, and adhered to a common philosophy that riches imply righteousness, and (3) the end result of the Rich Man indicated that his wealth didn't work out like the Pharisees would have predicted. We'll now discuss these five sections in more detail and notice their common theme of greed.

vv. 1-8 – Commendation of the Greedy Unfaithful Steward

Jesus' telling of the unrighteous steward presents a troublesome story:

And he said also unto the disciples, There was a certain rich man, who had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he was wasting [squandering—NAS] his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, What is this that I hear of thee? render the account of thy stewardship; for thou canst be no longer steward. And the steward said within himself, What shall I do, seeing that my lord taketh away the stewardship from me? I have not strength to dig; to beg I am ashamed. I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses. And calling to him each one of his lord's debtors, he said to the first, How much owest thou unto my lord? And he said, A hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bond, and sit down quickly and write fifty. Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, A hundred measures of wheat. He saith unto him, Take thy bond, and write fourscore. And his lord commended the unrighteous steward because he had done wisely: for the sons of this world are for their own generation wiser than the sons of the light.

I first became aware of this passage when I was riding with an older Christian in an old pickup on a country road. He asked,

"How could the Lord commend a conniving, thieving steward?"

When I looked at it closely, I nearly fell out of the truck! I thought, as many do, that Jesus commended this unrighteous man, a fraud and a trickster; it presented an insuperable difficulty.

In simple terms, this story is about a master whose manager was misappropriating his money. It was such an open-and-shut case that he just called the manager in and gave him notice—told him to get his accounts together and leave. The manager didn't even contest it. Then he wondered what he would do to earn a living. He decided to cheat his master by calling in all his debtors and marking down their debts. By doing the debtors a favor, he hoped they would take care of him when he was cast out of his job.

It would be like a dentist's receptionist, who, learning she was going to be let go, called his patients and forgave half of their debts, so they would take care of her when she's out of a job. We would expect that dentist to get upset and perhaps file legal charges against her.

The question usually arises as to how the Lord could commend the unrighteous steward and use him as an example for us to follow. Not only had he already lost money for his boss, but he also deliberately cut the debts of his master's debtors. How shall we deal with this? One commentator said that no story of the New Testament has been discussed more and received more interpretations than this one. The steward has been taken to represent Pilate, Judas, Satan, Paul, and Christ himself.

Some have probably already noticed what the solution is, that it wasn't *our* Lord who commended the unrighteous steward, but *his* lord, in verse 8. *His* master commended the unrighteous steward for his clever skullduggery, even if it was directed against himself. Potentially, every person in the story is a huckster to some degree. Apparently, the unrighteous steward didn't feel any guilt for discounting his master's debts. Likewise, the debtors willingly took advantage of the unrighteous steward's plot to provide for himself at his master's expense. Even the master was worldly wise enough to appreciate the scheme, even when he was the victim!

In verse 9, Jesus said, "And I say unto you..." Notice the distinction between "his lord" in verse 8 and "our Lord" in verse 9. Jesus continued: "...Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness, that when it shall fail, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles.

The mammon of unrighteousness was money. Jesus' point was this: a poor money manager finally got wise when faced with the prospect of becoming homeless. If he could use his authority over his master's money to insure that he would be provided with shelter in his old age, how much more should God's children learn how to use physical resources (though honestly) to insure that they have an eternal dwelling place? Are we that wise? Do we manage our money to God's glory, not only by looking ahead and planning for our earthly futures, but even more so in planning for our final rest in heaven?

This problem goes away quickly when we carefully read and see that it wasn't Jesus who commended the unrighteous steward, but his own master.

Some say he was granting the debtors cheap grace, forgiveness of debt that wasn't his to forgive. At least, both here and in the following section, we see that the unrighteous steward was greedy to the point of systematically stealing from his master.

In the next section, Jesus applied this story to his audience.

vv. 9-13 – Jesus Applied the Story to His Greedy Audience

And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when it shall fail, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles. He that is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much: and he that is unrighteous in a very little is unrighteous also in much. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Jesus concluded his application in verse 13, teaching that men are incapable of serving two masters—both God and money. Literally, men don't have *the power* to serve two masters any more than a Volkswagen Beetle has the power to win the Indianapolis 500 Race. Obviously, the basic point of this first section is that a man shouldn't be a servant of money, which is greed; it matters not how little or much money a man might possess.

vv. 14-15 – The Greedy Pharisees' Reaction and Jesus' Reply

And the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things; and they scoffed at him. And he said unto them, Ye are they that justify yourselves in the sight of men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

Luke specifically noted that the Pharisees were lovers of money. They recognized that Jesus was addressing their greed, and ridiculed his lesson, but Jesus continued to rebuke them.

The Pharisees manifested an attitude toward riches that we should notice, because the Bible addresses it in many places. They thought that one's riches necessarily implied he was righteous and in favor with God. In our day, members of the Mormon church (and many others) share this belief. In the Old Testament, Job's three friends subscribed to it. Thus, when Job, a tremendously wealthy man at the outset of the book, suffered great calamity and loss of wealth, his friends automatically assumed he was not righteous but guilty of some horrible sin. When they came to him, he expected them to comfort him. Instead, they assailed his character. They thought they had to, since he was evidently, in their opinion, a great sinner. So they made speech after speech accusing him of guilt and demanding that he repent and *restore his righteous estate*. God had told Satan Job was righteous, and made it clear that Job wasn't suffering because he was sinning.

The Pharisees shared in this philosophy. They were greedy and thought riches signified they were righteous.

vv. 16-18 – A Faithful Steward—John the Baptist

Jesus then said:

The law and the prophets were until John: from that time the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and every man entereth violently into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one tittle of the law to fall. Every one that putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth one that is put away from a husband committeth adultery.

Several questions naturally arise at this point: Why did John the Baptist come into this passage, and why the verse on divorce, of all things?

Several years ago, when I was studying marriage, divorce, and remarriage seriously, I noticed [Lk. 16:18](#), "Everyone that putteth away his wife and marries another committeth adultery." Most of the time we view this verse as Luke's account of [Mt. 19:9](#) and [Mt. 5:32](#), but this is not the case. These two teachings took place at different times, in different places, for different purposes, to different people. At first glance, it's just one verse apparently snatched out of thin air to teach something about divorce. That may be true, or it might be about something else entirely. With help from William F. Luck's book, *Divorce and Remarriage: Recovering the Biblical View* [New York: Harper & Row, 1987], I considered the context of [Lk. 16:18](#), and it helped me with the context of the story about the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Luck observed that John was used as a contemporary contrasting example of a man who wasn't greedy, who wouldn't give cheap grace like the unfaithful steward, and knew it was not his role to forgive debts to his master without permission. In a widely-known case of the time, Josephus (*Antiquities*, Book 18, chap. 5:1, 5:4) said that Herod made a pretense at least of living under Jewish law. His family was intermarried with Simon the High Priest's family, and Herod went to Jerusalem for feasts to offer sacrifices to God. Everybody in this story was at least claiming to live under the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Law was why it wasn't lawful for Herod to have Herodias, although the Mosaic Law would have permitted her to remarry had she been scripturally divorced. However, Josephus said that Herodias hadn't been scripturally divorced, and she was his brother's wife, violating [Lev. 20:10](#). Notice what John said: "It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife."

John didn't forgive Herod; he didn't give cheap grace to his master's debtor. Herod couldn't buy him off, and his preaching cost him his life, as Herod had him beheaded. Unlike the unfaithful steward, he was faithful to his master to the point of death.

Verse 18 illustrates John's lack of greed. Divorce was the subject of John's preaching against Herod, not an abbreviated account of Jesus' teaching on divorce (i.e., [Mt. 5:32](#), [19:9](#)), but part of his discourse against greed.

Obviously, John wasn't a mercenary prophet, he didn't preach for money, and he wasn't greedy.

vv. 19-31 - The Rich Man and Lazarus

While Jesus gave these lessons and applications on greed, he introduced the Rich Man and Lazarus. The main controversy with these verses for ages seems to be whether they constitute a parable. I've made most of the arguments on both sides of this question, so I know you can take either side and be a fine fellow. The problem is, fine fellows can be dead wrong.

Those who argue that it's a historical account of what happens after death claim that these verses are not called a parable (although others which are clearly parables are not called such, either), or that they speak of a "certain" rich man, which indicates a historical individual.

The word "certain" is translated from the word *tis*, an enclitic *indefinite* pronoun, which *may* indicate some or any person or object. The word "certain" doesn't necessarily indicate a definite person or object. A number of passages illustrate the word may mean "any old one," and not a definite one at all. For example, in [Mt. 18:25](#) ff, the parable of the talents begins with "a certain king," not speaking of any particular king, as his identity has no bearing on the story. In [Mt. 22:2](#), the parable of the marriage feast begins with "a certain king." Who the king was matters not, nor does it matter who was getting married. The point of comparison was on something else entirely. In [Lk. 7:41](#), we read of "a certain lender." Do we wonder who he was? We never have, because the story doesn't depend on who he was, and the indefinite nature of the pronoun permits that conclusion.

William Robert West answered the argument some make that the use of Lazarus' name proves it is a historical account of real people:

The objection of others is that parables do not use proper names. "And he took up his parable, and said, 'From ARAM has BALAK brought me, the king of MOAB from the mountains of the East: come, curse me JACOB, and come, defy ISRAEL'" [[Numbers 23:7](#)]. Not one but FIVE PROPER NAMES are used in one parable. "SATAN" [[Mark 4:14](#)] "THE SON OF MAN" [[Matthew 13:37](#)]. (William Robert West, *If the Soul or Spirit Is Immortal, There Can Be No Resurrection from the Dead*, Third Edition, September 2006, originally published as *The Resurrection and Immortality* [Bloomington, IN: Author House], p. 229.)

Thus, we see that proper names don't necessarily imply real people.

In [Lk. 10:3ff](#), in the parable of the good Samaritan, a "certain" man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves. We then read of a "certain" priest passing him by. Did you ever wonder who this Samaritan was? I doubt that you did until I just mentioned it. Now that I have, you realize it doesn't matter who he was, because his identity has no pertinence to the story, does it? Wonder who the priest was? Me neither, as it has nothing to do with the point of the story, and the use of the indefinite pronoun doesn't require that it's speaking of a historic individual at all. The parable of the pounds ([Lk. 19:12ff](#)) uses the indefinite pronoun to speak of a "certain" nobleman.

You might be thinking, "Well, if Sam doesn't think it's historical, he must think it's a parable teaching what happens after death."

I don't believe these verses are a parable, either. It's not a parable because it contains no comparison, which is the essence of a parable (lit., *para-bole*, "to throw along side" for the purpose of comparison). If we go fishing together, I'll naturally throw my fish down alongside yours to show how much better fisherman I am than you. This lack of comparison is at the basis of the plethora, no, blizzard of interpretations that people offer. Folks are trying to interpret something they think is a parable, which contains no comparison at all.

I am going to demonstrate that it's not historical, because (1) it's of pagan origin, and (2) it's not true, as we're about to see.

Some Things to Notice About This Legend

This is the main passage in the Bible used to teach conscious suffering after death.

This is not New Testament teaching. It's a Jewish story from beginning to end. Abraham is made to say, "They have Moses and the prophets," not "They have Jesus Christ and his apostles."

No allusion to its "doctrine" exists in the rest of the New Testament.

No New Testament writer ever alluded to it—"Remember what Jesus said about the Rich Man and Lazarus."

But in this legend, "they have Moses and the prophets," yet Moses and the prophets taught none of this!

These Jews knew the point of the legend was greed.

They knew it wasn't about the state of the dead, or they would have challenged Jesus' differing with the Old Testament teaching on the subject.

This is not Old Testament teaching on the state of the dead.

No such thing as Abraham's bosom exists in the Old Testament.

No great gulf fixed exists in the Old Testament, even to keep those in Abraham's bosom out of torments!

No endless torment exists in the Old Testament.

No conversations among the dead exist in the Old Testament.

No knowledge among the dead exists in the Old Testament.

No consciousness among the dead exists in the Old Testament.

No praying to Abraham exists in the Old Testament. (Perhaps we shouldn't criticize Roman Catholics for praying to Mary!)

No Abraham hearing the prayers of the wicked exists in the Old Testament, as we presume the Rich Man to be praying to.

Nowhere is Lazarus said to be righteous.

Nowhere is the Rich Man said to be wicked.

This story is not about their character, but their economic standing.

Not a word is said about the spiritual condition of either one of them. They may both have been righteous, or wicked. As far as the legend and Jesus' use of it is concerned, it's not about religious status, but riches.

It's not about the punishment of the wicked, but about the legendary fate of a legendary rich man, and the legendary fate of a legendary poor man.

Neither the soul or the spirit of either the Rich Man or Lazarus is mentioned.

The Pagan Origin of the Legend of the Rich Man and Lazarus

We'll see shortly that the Old Testament taught nothing like the Jewish concept of Hades, and we'll also see that before the intertestamental period, Jews didn't believe any stories like that of the Rich Man and Lazarus. However, before looking at those specific legends, let's notice some general legends about Hades and life after death.

Legends of Hades

On the origin and spread of pagan concepts of Hades into the Jewish world between the testaments, read closely the following quotations (all cited by Al Maxey in the *Al Maxey-Thomas Thrasher Debate* available at www.zianet.com/maxey) and note their sources:

The Greek word "hades" came into biblical use when the translators of the Septuagint [the Greek Old Testament—SGD] chose it to render the Hebrew "sheol." The problem is that hades was used in the Greek world in a vastly different way than sheol. Hades in Greek mythology is the underworld, where the conscious souls of the dead are divided in two major regions, one a place of torment and the other of blessedness. This Greek conception of hades influenced Hellenistic Jews, during the intertestamental period, to adopt the belief in the immortality of the soul and the idea of a spatial separation in the underworld between the righteous and the godless. (Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi, [*Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study on Human Nature and Destiny*](#), p. 170.)

Notice that Bacchiocchi admits that we can't read anything like the two compartments of Hades in the Old Testament. The concept arose during the period between the close of the Old Testament and the coming of the New, when God was silent as far as prophets were concerned.

Look further at the finer detail of the questionable source of the doctrine of two compartments in Hades as time between the testaments went on:

The literature of the intertestamental period reflects the growth of the idea of the division of Hades into separate compartments for the godly and the ungodly. This aspect of eschatology was a popular subject in the apocalyptic literature that flourished in this period. Notable is the pseudepigraphical Enoch (written c. 200 B.C.), which includes the description of a tour supposedly taken by Enoch into the center of the earth. In another passage in Enoch, he sees at the center of the earth two places— Paradise, the place of bliss, and the valley of Gehinnom, the place of punishment. The above illustrates that there was a general notion of compartments in Hades that developed in the intertestamental period. (*The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 3, p. 7.*)

In the intertestamental period the idea of the afterlife underwent some development. In Jewish apocalyptic literature Hades was an intermediate place (1 Enoch 51:1) where all the souls of the dead awaited judgment (22:3f). The dead were separated into compartments, the righteous staying in an apparently pleasant place (vs. 9) and various classes of sinners undergoing punishments in other compartments (vv. 10-13). (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 2, p. 591.*)

Under the influence of Persian and Hellenistic ideas concerning retribution after death the belief arose that the righteous and the godless would have very different fates, and we thus have the development of the idea of spatial separation in the underworld, the first instance being found in Enoch. (Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. 1, p. 147.*)

Nowhere in the Old Testament is the abode of the dead regarded as a place of punishment or torment. The concept of an infernal "hell" developed in Israel only during the Hellenistic period. (*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, p. 788.*)

All these scholars make the point that all these doctrines originated among pagans, particularly among Egyptians and Greeks; and later, the Jews assimilated these doctrines. These Jews couldn't have found such concepts in their Old Testaments to save their lives!

In truth, the Pharisees of Jesus' time had access to all kinds of legends like these.

J. W. Hanson, universalist, which this author is not, said:

The Jews have a book, written during the Babylonish Captivity, entitled *Gemara Babylonicum*, containing doctrines entertained by Pagans concerning the future state not recognized by the followers of Moses. This story is founded on heathen views. They were not obtained from the Bible, for the Old Testament contains nothing resembling

them. They were among those traditions which our Savior condemned when he told the Scribes and Pharisees, "Ye make the word of God of none effect through your traditions," and when he said to his disciples, "Beware of the leaven, or doctrine of the Pharisees." (J. W. Hanson, *The Bible Hell* [Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1888], p. 43.)

Consider a few examples of Hanson's from the Talmud, the authoritative body of Jewish tradition (Italics used for emphasis—SGD):

(1) In Kiddushin (Treatise on Betrothal), fol:72, there is quoted from the Juchasin, fol:75, 2, *a long story about what Levi said of Rabbi Judah: "This day he sits in Abraham's bosom,"* i.e., the day he died.

Note that this wasn't the Bible saying anything about Abraham's bosom, but Jewish tradition. Hanson continued:

There is a difference here between the Jerusalem and *the Babylonian Talmuds*—*the former says Rabbi Judah was "carried by angels"; the latter says that he was "placed in Abraham's bosom."*

We can't find anything in the Old Testament about anyone dying and being carried by angels to Abraham's bosom, but we can certainly find it in Jewish tradition before the time of Jesus.

(2) There was a story of a woman who had seen six of her sons slain (we have it also in 2 Macc. vii.). She heard the command given to kill the youngest (two-and-a-half years old), and running into the embraces of her little son, kissed him and said, *Go thou, my son, to Abraham my father*, and tell him: Thus saith thy mother, Do not thou boast, saying, I built an altar, and offered my son Isaac. For thy mother hath built seven altars, and offered seven sons in one day, etc. (Midrash Echah, fol:68. 1)

(3) We have examples also of the dead discoursing with one another; and also with those who are still alive (Berachoth, fol. 18, 2—Treatise on Blessings). R. Samuel Bar Nachman saith, R. Jonathan saith, *How doth it appear that the dead have any discourse among themselves?*

(4) Then follows a story of a certain pious man that went and lodged in a burying place, and heard *two souls discoursing among themselves*. "The one said unto the other, Come, my companion, and let us wander about the world, and listen behind the veil, what kind of plagues are coming upon the world." To which the other replied, "O my companion, I cannot; for I am buried in a cane mat; but do thou go, and whatsoever thou hearest, do thou come and tell me," etc. The story goes on to tell of the wandering of the soul and what he heard, etc.

(5) *As to "the great gulf,"* we read (Midrash [or Commentary] on Coheleth [Ecclesiastes], 103. 2), "God hath set the one against the other (Ecc. vii. 14) that is Gehenna and Paradise. How far are they distant? A hand-breadth." Jochanan saith, "A

wall is between." But the Rabbis say "They are so even with one another, that they may see out of one into the other."

Of course, a lot of these expressions about Abraham's bosom, angels taking the righteous there, conversations between the dead, sending children to make requests of Abraham, etc., seem familiar to us now. Assuredly, had we lived under the Old Testament, we would never have heard such concepts in inspired teaching.

Alan Burns, author of *The Rich Man and Lazarus*, commented on these quotations:

The traditions set forth above were widely spread in many early Christian writings, showing how soon the corruption spread which led on to the Dark Ages and to all the worst errors of Romanism. The Apocryphal books (written in Greek, not in Hebrew, Cents.i. and ii. B.C.) contained the germ of this teaching. That is why the Apocrypha is valued by Traditionists, and is incorporated by the Church of Rome as an integral part of her Bible. (All these quotations are from Alan Burns, *The Rich Man and Lazarus* [Santa Clarita, CA: Concordant Publishing Concern, n.d., available at www.concordant.org].)

In my earlier work, "Jesus' Teaching on Hell," we comment extensively on the origin of the concept of eternal torment and the outright substitution (not translation) of the word *hell* for the Greek *gehenna* to create the Roman Catholic concept of hell which was unknown to the Old Testament, the teaching of Jesus, or the New Testament. Please see Chapter 11, "Jesus' Teaching on Hell" in *The Teaching of Jesus: From Mt. Sinai to Gehenna, A Faithful Rabbi Urgently Warns Rebellious Israel* [Amarillo, TX: Gospel Themes Press, 2004] or on the [truthaccordingtoscripture](http://truthaccordingtoscripture.com) website ([click here](#)).

Thus, between the Egyptians and Greeks originating the concept of conscious unending torment, a part of Hades, then Roman Catholicism adapting it in about the 14th century and substituting (not translating) the word "hell" for Gehenna in English translations, it's difficult to wade through all the debris and recover the Bible's teaching on the punishment of the wicked. Shortly, we'll see that Jesus took a then-current pagan legend, that of the Rich Man and Lazarus, and used it to show the greedy Pharisees that even according to their own legend, the possession of riches didn't ensure God's approval. However, first, let us consider the origins of the specific legend of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Legends Concerning the Rich Man and Lazarus

Concerning the origin of the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus, J. F. Witherell wrote in his 1843 book *Five Pillars in the Temple of Partialism Shaken and Removed*:

It may be proper to remark in this place, that this story was not original with the Saviour, but was simply used by him to illustrate his subject. The story was probably familiar to his hearers and our Saviour for that reason took occasion to make a practical application of it. In "Paige's Selections," we find the following from Dr. Whitby—"That this is a parable, and not a real history of what was actually done, is evident

(1) Because we find this very parable in the Gemara Babylonicum whence it is cited by Mr. Sheringham, in the preface to his Joma.

(2) From the circumstances of it, viz. The rich man's lifting up his eyes in hell, and seeing Lazarus in Abraham's bosom, his discourse with Abraham, his complaint of being tormented with flames, and his desire that Lazarus might be sent to cool his tongue; and if all this be confessedly parable, why should the rest, which is the very parable in the Gemara, be accounted history!"—end footnote Annot in loc. (J. F. Witherell, *Five Pillars in the Temple of Partialism Shaken and Removed* [Concord: Published at the Balm of Gilead Office, 1843], Placed into electronic format by Gary Amirault [Hermann, MO: Tentmaker Ministry, January 1997].)

While I doubt that "this very parable" is found in the Gemara Babylonicum, I would agree that the essential story is there, and that it had been adapted by the Greeks and Jews, and Jesus adapted it further for his use in Luke 16. Thomas B. Thayer, in his classic *The Origin & History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, ascribed the legend to the same origin:

It must also be remembered that this is only a parable, and not a real history; for, as Dr. Whitby affirms, "we find this very parable in the Gemara Babylonicum." The story was not new, then, not original with Christ, but known among the Jews before He repeated it. He borrowed the parable from them, and employed it to show the judgment which awaited them. He represented the spiritual favors and privileges of the Jews by the wealth and luxury of the rich man, and the spiritual poverty of the Gentiles by the beggary and infirmity of Lazarus; and while the former would be deprived of their privileges and punished for their wickedness, the latter would enjoy the blessings of truth and faith. *The Jews accepted this picture of Abraham's bosom very much like many Christians accept the idea that the Apostle Peter supposedly sits at the Heavenly Pearly Gates, with the ledger of the faithful dead, and the keys of admission to bid them enter.* (Thomas B. Thayer, *The Origin & History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment* [Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1855], p. 57.)

Al Maxey, a minister in churches of Christ who has written and debated this subject extensively, cited several sources to this same effect in the *Al Maxey-Thomas Thrasher Debate* available online at www.zianet.com/maxey.

It seems appropriate to reopen this question and ask: Where should the origin of this parable be placed? (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 4, p. 267). *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* informs us that "much of the study of the parable of Lazarus and Dives (Latin: 'rich man') in the 20th century has focused on possible literary antecedents." (pp. 796-797.)

This parable is not theology. It is a vivid story, not a Baedeker's guide to the next world. Such stories as this were current in Jesus' day. They are found in rabbinical sources, and even in Egyptian papyri." (*The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8, p. 290.)

Similar stories existed in Egypt and among the rabbis; Jesus could easily have adapted this tradition to his own purpose. (*The Jerome Biblical Commentary*.)

This parable follows a story common in Egyptian and Jewish thought. This parable does not intend to give a topographical study of the abode of the dead, it is built upon and thus confirms common Jewish thought. (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 3, p. 94.*)

The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 1 (online version) states that the imagery of this parable "is plainly drawn from the popular representations of the unseen world of the dead which were current in our Lord's time."

Jesus told this story to reinforce the fact that the riches of the Pharisees were not necessarily a sign of God's approval. Some interpreters suggest that the kernel of the story was a popular story of those times and possibly derived from an Egyptian source. (*New Commentary on the Whole Bible*, based on the classic commentary of Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown.)

Josephus (a Jewish historian, c. 37-100 A.D.), in his work *Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades* (in which he notes that the concept of a soul being created immortal by God is "according to the doctrine of Plato"), presents a very similar story to that of our Lord's, including many of the same figures Jesus employed. Yes, he may have borrowed from the Lord's parable, but it is equally possible both were aware of such stories current in their culture.

Finally, Maxey (*Ibid.*) cited several other references on this point:

Several good reference works document and describe in some detail a good number of these stories that our Lord may have adapted to His own needs. (*Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 797; Dr. James Hastings, *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels, Vol. 2*, p. 18; *The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 8*, p. 289; *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 4*, p. 267; Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Book IV*, pp. 280-281; Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection? — A Biblical Study on Human Nature and Destiny*, pp. 174-176.)

Then he concluded:

My own personal conviction is that Jesus used or adapted a popular folktale well-known to His hearers for the purpose of conveying, by a means they would best comprehend and most easily remember, an eternal truth.

The obvious eternal truth was that riches do not assure a successful end. Dr. James Hastings, in his famous *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, wrote:

Jesus was accustomed to speak the language of His hearers in order to reach their understandings and hearts. And it is noteworthy how, when He employed Jewish imagery, He was wont to invest it with new significance (James Hastings, *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels, Vol. 2*, p. 18.)

Sidney Hatch, in his book on conditional immortality, wrote:

In the story, then, of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Jesus has put them down with one of their own superstitions. He used their own ideas to condemn them. It is simply a case of taking what others believe, practice, or say, and using it to condemn them. "Since the elements of the story are taken from the Pharisees' own traditions, they are judged out of their own mouths." (Sidney Hatch, *Daring to Differ: Adventures in Conditional Immortality*, p. 91.)

If the Story Were Pagan, Didn't Jesus Still Endorse Its Teaching?

If Jesus' use of this legend were the only example in his ministry, this question might have some validity to it, but consider that Jesus (and New Testament writers, as well) used a number of such allusions to pagan concepts. For example, in Mt.

10:25 and 12:24-27, Jesus answered charges that he was working miracles by the power of Beelzebub, the Philistine god of flies. When Jesus mentioned Beelzebub, he said:

It is enough for the disciple that he be as his teacher, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more them of his household!

But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This man doth not cast out demons, but by Beelzebub the prince of the demons. And knowing their thoughts he said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand: and if Satan casteth out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then shall his kingdom stand? And if I by Beelzebub cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? therefore shall they be your judges.

When Jesus referred to Beelzebub, do you suppose he knew the legend about Beelzebub was false, but still endorsed its teaching? Surely not. He was not trying to teach about Beelzebub to answer their argument. He was showing that even if they were right about the existence and activity of Beelzebub, they were still wrong about his miracles, and that their argument was no good.

Likewise, when Jesus spoke of the god of Mammon in [Mt. 6:24](#), he wasn't endorsing Mammon's teaching or admitting his existence. As in the case of the Rich Man and Lazarus, he was using a legend that was popular in his time and place as an illustration we might use in our own teaching to illustrate his point.

Recall Thayer's comment earlier about the Jews' acceptance of this legend:

The Jews accepted this picture of Abraham's bosom very much like many Christians accept the idea that the Apostle Peter supposedly sits at the Heavenly Pearly Gates, with the ledger of the faithful dead, and the keys of admission to bid them enter. (*The Origin & History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment* [Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1855], p. 57.)

Suppose you overheard me admonish someone in sin, "If you think Peter's going to welcome you in the pearly gates with this kind of behavior, you've got another think coming." Would you deduce that I accept and endorse the doctrine that Peter actually sits at pearly gates? Most people would recognize that I spoke in terms of a popular folktale or legend we know about Peter's admitting people to heaven.

James MacKnight, the well-known Scottish Presbyterian commentator, realized Jesus' use of pagan sources, when he wrote:

It must be acknowledged, that our Lord's descriptions (in this parable) are not drawn from the writings of the Old Testament, but have a remarkable affinity to the descriptions which the Grecian poets have given. They, as well as our Lord, represent the abodes of the blessed as lying contiguous to the region of the damned, and separated only by a great impassable river, or deep gulf, in such sort that the ghosts could talk to one another from its opposite banks. The parable says the souls of wicked men are tormented in flames; the Grecian mythologists tell us they lie in Phlegethon, the river of fire, where they suffer torments. If from these resemblances it is thought the parable is formed on the Grecian mythology, it will not at all follow that our Lord approved of what the common people thought or spake concerning those matters, agreeably to the notions of the Greeks. In parabolical discourses, provided the doctrines inculcated are strictly true, the terms in which they are inculcated may be such as are most familiar to the ears of the vulgar, and the images made use of such as they are best acquainted with. (James MacKnight, cited by Thomas B. Thayer, *The Origin & History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, p. 60.)

Notice that MacKnight said, "Our Lord's descriptions are not drawn from the writings of the Old Testament." In our essay "Jesus' Teaching on Hell," we've investigated the writings of Moses and the prophets on this subject, and they nowhere taught endless torment.

The Relationship of Jesus' Teaching to the Old Covenant

Jesus, a faithful rabbi correctly interpreting and applying the Law of Moses to the Jews of his age, promised he wouldn't teach them anything different from that law. In [Mt. 5:19-20](#), in discussing the law and the prophets, he said:

For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, *and shall teach men so* [Emphasis mine—SGD], shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Do we think Jesus pronounced such woe on those who didn't teach what Moses and the prophets taught, and then taught differently himself? It's interesting that on the subject of divorce and remarriage, most people think he taught something just twelve verses later in [Mt. 5:31-32](#), that was different from what Moses taught, after giving this warning in [Mt. 5:20](#). Do we think he contradicted himself just seconds after pronouncing this woe? How about on our current subject,

the state of the dead? After promising to be true to Moses and the prophets, did he then teach something directly contradictory to Moses and the prophets on our present subject?

Either the Old Testament teaching on the subject was true, or the legend of the Rich Man and Lazarus was true, but they both certainly cannot be true.

Now that we've seen the origin of legends like that of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we notice that these legends are not true, but that Jesus was merely taking a popular traditional teaching of the Pharisees, itself taken from Greek and Egyptian origins, and using this (about to be seen) false legend against them in teaching them about the perils of greed, or of trusting in riches.

The Legend of the Rich Man and Lazarus Isn't True

I affirm that it's not true for this reason: The Old Testament's teaching on the status of the dead is taught in verses like these:

For there is no activity or planning or wisdom in Sheol where you are going. ([Eccl. 9:10](#))

The dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward." ([Eccl. 9:5](#))

Further, it is declared of man: His breath goeth forth, He returneth to his earth. In that very day his thoughts perish. ([Ps. 146:4](#))

and,

In death there is no remembrance of Thee. In the grave who shall give Thee thanks? ([Ps. 6:5](#))

Had we lived in the Mosaic Age, and someone asked us about the state of the dead, what would we have told them? Surely we would have told them exactly these things, would we not? We'd have said that the dead don't plan, they don't exercise wisdom, they're not active, and they don't know anything. And we'd have been correct, for that's exactly what the Bible says.

However, when we come to the Rich Man and Lazarus, should we then throw all that overboard and accept down to the smallest detail on what happens after death (even though we don't believe a lot of those details ourselves) a legend of highly dubious origin? Why not accept it as pagan teaching assimilated by the Jews between the testaments, as it contradicts everything the Old Testament taught about the consciousness, memory, etc. of the dead?

If this is true, then as we've noted, Jesus was teaching in the entire chapter, Luke 16, against greed to Pharisees who needed that very teaching. In the course of his teaching, Jesus used a story pervasive in their time to illustrate that wealth didn't indicate one was righteous, or that he would have good fortune.

Conclusion

We've seen why the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus is in Luke 16, in the context of Jesus' teaching on greed to greedy Pharisees. It has nothing to do with the fate of anyone, righteous or wicked, after death. It has nothing to do with the final destiny of the wicked. Any understanding of the chapter that doesn't account for the context of the entire chapter falls short. In the Rich Man and Lazarus, Jesus merely used a story current in their time to illustrate that just because one was rich (whether righteous or unrighteous), that didn't guarantee a favorable outcome. Therefore, love and trust in riches was not a wise course to choose through life.

Samuel G. Dawson

A physics and mathematics graduate from Texas Tech University, Samuel G. Dawson did research in celestial mechanics and intercontinental missile guidance in the aerospace industry before preparing to preach the gospel of Christ. In twenty-two years of public teaching, he did extensive live call-in radio work daily for eight years and participated in a number of religious debates. Sam's scientific background has given him an inquisitive, logical, and thorough approach to the scriptures and a reputation for making Bible students re-think teaching they've taken for granted.

Sam drew on decades of experience working with local congregations to write *Fellowship: With God and His People: The Way of Christ Without Denominationalism; Denominational Doctrines: Explained, Examined, Exposed;* and *Christians, Churches, & Controversy: Navigating Doctrinal & Personal Clashes.*

In *Marriage, Divorce, & Remarriage: The Uniform Teaching of Moses, Jesus, & Paul*, Sam demonstrates how Moses, Jesus, and Paul all taught the same thing about this controversial subject. It deals frankly with issues confronting many Christians today and the people they are trying to teach.

The Teaching of Jesus: From Sinai to Gehenna: A Faithful Rabbi Urgently Warns Rebellious Israel shows how many people take Jesus' teaching out of the context of the people he preached to and misapply it to our day. His sixth book, *How to Study the Bible: A Practical Guide to Independent Bible Study*, helps students avoid depending on professionals for their Bible knowledge.

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All of Samuel Dawson's Books are available @ www.Amazon.com

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