

# Luke 16:19-31

## What do those who believe in psychopannychy/soul sleep do about the parable of Lazarus and the rich man?

Luke 16:19-31 is probably the third most consulted Bible passage as it concerns the discussion surrounding a disembodied afterlife prior to the resurrection. The reason this is the case is not terribly difficult to discern as it depicts what occurs to both the rich man and Lazarus after they die:

“Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom” (Luke 16:22-23, NASU).

Following the death of these two people, both are taken to *Hadēs* (ᾗδης) or the netherworld of the deceased, its Hebrew equivalent being *Sheol* (שְׁאוֹל). While *Sheol/Hades* can often be associated as being a place of punishment, Darrell L. Bock details how in much of Second Temple Jewish thought, “The righteous (2 Macc. 6:23; 1 Enoch 102.4-5) and unrighteous (Ps. Sol. 14:6, 9-10; 15:10) both reside there, though they are separated from one another (1 Enoch 22).”<sup>1</sup> That there is disembodied conscious activity occurring in this place is unavoidable, including some degree of discomfort for the rich man (Luke 16:24), and a degree of solace for Lazarus (Luke 16:25). The rich man begs Abraham for him to be returned to the world of the living, so that he might warn his family members what will become of them if they fail to repent of their sins and live uprightly (Luke 16:27-31).

Those who are psychopannychists or advocates of “soul sleep” have a definite problem with this parable—because it serves as Yeshua the Messiah’s clear usage of a disembodied afterlife before the resurrection to teach an important lesson to His hearers. Lazarus and the rich man both die, their consciousnesses are transported to another dimension, and life on Earth with the survivors they leave behind continues as normal. The location of these two is *Sheol/Hades*, with Abraham’s bosom serving as the side for the righteous,<sup>2</sup> separated from a side for the condemned, by a significant gulf (Luke 16:26). Angels take them both to this place (Luke 16:22). The afterlife venue of *Sheol/Hades* being divided into two compartments is witnessed in the works of the First Century Jewish historian Josephus (*Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades* 1, 4).<sup>3</sup>

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31 is by no means a Biblical passage that can have its entire meaning change by a word or two being translated differently. It is not like Paul’s remark in Acts 17:28, where paganism is being used as a communication reference point: “...even some of your own poets have said...” (NASU). **The location of the story is another dimension after death.** Those who challenge the idea of an intermediate, disembodied afterlife before the resurrection have no choice but to contest that the entire scene of Luke 16:19-31 is fictional. They have to suggest that Yeshua the Messiah used some kind of popular Jewish mythology to teach an important lesson about people living a life properly on Earth, and that the details of the

<sup>1</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke 9:51-24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1369.

<sup>2</sup> The testimony of *Testament of Abraham* 20:14 in the *Pseudepigrapha* is that Abraham’s bosom is definitely an extra-dimensional place where righteous persons go after death:

“Take, then, my friend Abraham into Paradise, where there are the tents of my righteous ones and (where) the mansions of my holy ones, Isaac and Jacob, are in his bosom, where is no toil, no grief, no moaning, but peace and exultation and endless life” (E.P. Sanders, trans., “Testaments of the Three Patriarchs,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1, 895).

<sup>3</sup> “Hades is a place in the world not regularly finished; a subterraneous region, wherein the light of this world does not shine...This region is allotted as a place of custody for souls, in which angels are appointed as guardians to them, who distribute to them temporary punishments, agreeable to everyone’s behavior and manners....[The righteous] do not go down the same way; but the just are guided to the right hand, and are led with hymns, sung by the angels appointed over that place, unto a region of light, in which the just have dwelt from the beginning of the world...[found there are] the countenance of the fathers and of the just, which they see always smiles upon them, while they wait for that rest and eternal new life in heaven, which is to succeed this region. This place we call The Bosom of Abraham” (*Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades* 1, 4; *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 813).

account of Lazarus and the rich man do not matter if the moral is heeded. Not only do psychopannychists who treat Luke 16:19-31 as largely fictional raise a number of critical questions about Biblical inerrancy and authorial intent, but if Lazarus and the rich man is to be taken as an *entirely fictional* account (notwithstanding fictional characters)—then this would be **the only scene** in the Gospels where an entirely fictional/mythological/fantasaical location is employed in Yeshua's teachings.

To the psychopannychist who believes that there is no conscious activity for the deceased between death and resurrection—anything that would imply some kind of post-mortem, conscious, disembodied intermediate state has to be ignored as either allegory or some kind of fiction. Did Yeshua the Messiah use non-Biblical concepts—such as a disembodied afterlife believed by many of His Jewish contemporaries—to teach Biblical lessons? *Unscriptural concepts employed to confirm Scriptural ethics...with the ends justifying the means?! If you think this is something quite disturbing, and that the Messiah would not willfully deceive anyone in His parables by employing some kind of fictional afterlife scenario, then you are not alone.*

Samuele Bacchiocchi, a Seventh-Day Adventist psychopannychist, argues stridently that “A literal interpretation of the parable...contradicts the uniform testimony of the Old and New Testaments that the dead, both righteous and ungodly, lie silent and unconscious in death...”<sup>4</sup> For him, at least, Luke 16:19-31 is just a story used by the Lord to teach, perhaps just to gain some kind of an audience who would not hear Him otherwise. He thinks it is mostly fiction, yet good fiction to spur on ethical maturation. But if Luke 16:19-31 employs a fictional setting with no conscious activity at all occurring in *Sheol/Hades*, then Yeshua of Nazareth could be legitimately accused of misleading or manipulating audiences with His words.

It is ironic, though, that in contrast to Bacchiocchi there are psychopannychist commentators on the Gospel of Luke—who while personally affirming that there is no conscious activity between death and the resurrection—say that the only way the account of Lazarus and the rich man can be at all understood is to affirm a disembodied intermediate state on literary grounds:

- E. Earle Ellis: “The picture of judgment and reward immediate at death is contrary to the usual New Testament understanding...Probably it should be understood simply as a part of the setting of the story.”<sup>5</sup>
- Joel B. Green: “[T]his text probably assumes an intermediate state...[T]he notion of the disembodied existence of a soul must be read into the story since the characters in Hades act as human agents with a corporeal existence.”<sup>6</sup>

If the account of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31 is just, in fact, Yeshua the Messiah reworking some of the mythology and misunderstandings that the Jews of His time had incorrectly adopted—then we need to seriously question the judgment of Luke for including this parable in his Gospel. (This would be especially true given the wide number of Greeks and Romans who would read it, including Luke's own patron Theophilus.<sup>7</sup>) If psychopannychy or “soul sleep” really is what the Scriptures teach, it would also be most appropriate for us to question the judgment of Yeshua Himself for speaking this parable, knowing how people for centuries to come later might be grossly confused into thinking that there actually is some kind of temporary, disembodied afterlife before the resurrection.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the Holy Scriptures, there are examples of the Biblical narrative deliberately subverting local myths. As in the case of the Exodus 15 Song of the Sea, forces of nature like water or wind or the habitation of a mountain are employed to affirm the God of Israel as supreme over the deities of Canaan.<sup>9</sup> Other forms of

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<sup>4</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study on Human Nature and Destiny* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1998), 174.

<sup>5</sup> E. Earle Ellis, *New Century Bible Commentary: Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 206.

<sup>6</sup> Joel B. Green, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 607 fn#343.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that D. Thomas Lancaster, *King of the Jews* (Littleton, CO: First Fruits of Zion, 2006), pp 129-130, who does not particularly affirm or subscribe to many evangelical Christian doctrines as they concern either salvation or the nature of Yeshua—and in some places is probably too overly reliant on the Rabbinic tradition—still has to conclude on Luke 16:19-31:

“Throughout the Gospels, Yeshua's statements regarding life after death—the immortality of the soul, the sentence of the soul, the angelic escort of the souls of the righteous, the immediate punishment and reward of the wicked and the righteous, and the presence of Abraham at the entrance to paradise—are in keeping with that of traditional Pharisaism. If Yeshua knew any of those beliefs were wrong, why would He endorse them by incorporating them into His teaching?...Yeshua does not tell this parable to teach us about life after death. He assumed that his listeners already understood those basic principles. He was speaking to a Jewish audience with general Jewish expectations.”

<sup>9</sup> Consult the article “The Song of Moses and God's Mission for His People” by J.K. McKee, appearing in the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper*.

subversion in Scripture occur where Biblical instruction runs in stark contrast to errant worldly philosophy, or where there is some degree of agreement between the Bible and pagan philosophy with one or two key areas of significant difference, with the Bible definitely having the upper hand.<sup>10</sup> The account of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31 bears no such subversion: both Lazarus and the rich man die and are transported to another dimension. An affirmation of an intermediate afterlife prior to the resurrection certainly finds support from this story used by the Lord. Yet, following the ascension of Yeshua into Heaven, Abraham's bosom was eventually vacated with the righteous saints going to Heaven with Him (cf. Ephesians 4:8-10) and with subsequent deceased saints now going to Heaven (cf. 2 Timothy 4:18).

If psychopannychists are correct, and if in the account of Lazarus and the rich man of Luke 16:19-31 Yeshua the Messiah really did employ *complete fiction* to teach ancient people a lesson—then it behooves us to consider other such possible examples within the Bible. When the possibility of other fictional settings and stories, and utter mythology, making its way into the Bible is evaluated—one section of material which *immediately* should be critically dissected for accuracy is Genesis chs. 1-11. This should then be followed by us being critical of the historicity and reliability of both the Exodus and Conquest records in the Tanach.

While there are a significant number of contemporary Christian psychopannychists who are either liberal theologians, or Left-leaning evangelicals—most of today's Messianic "soul sleepers" are frequently found to hold to a rather hyper-literal reading of the Bible. To their credit, they would have a great deal of trouble considering some of the early parts of the Torah to be Ancient Near Eastern mythology packaged into the Scriptures. A great number of today's Messianic psychopannychists hold to a rigid six 24-day Creation week from Genesis 1, and a 6,000-year old or so young universe—and from it they frequently make various end-time predictions and prognostications.<sup>11</sup> But they are grossly inconsistent in their literalness if they treat Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31 as being some kind of a local fairy tale that Yeshua used for His teaching.

If there is nothing factually reliable about Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31, then we have opened a dangerous door that questions Biblical inerrancy. We become liberal theologians who espouse things like: "*The Bible says many things, and gives us many points of view.*"<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. J.D. Charles, "Pagan Sources in the New Testament: Examples of Convergence Between Pagan and Early Christian Texts," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, pp 761-763.

<sup>11</sup> Consult the FAQ, "6,000 Year Teaching."

<sup>12</sup> For some further useful thoughts on Luke 16:19-31, consult Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), pp 65-68.