

Egyptian Stories Recontextualized In Scripture

LDS Scripture Teachings

<https://www.ldsscriptureteachings.org/2018/03/05/5629-2/>

Luke's parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man is an excellent example of how a 1st century Jew wrote down the words of a parable of Jesus, a story which, when analyzed, is really a much older story from Egypt that was repackaged by Jesus to teach a spiritual truth.

The Story

The parable can be found in [Luke 16:19-30](#)

There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.

Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.

Jesus' listeners may have been familiar with an old Egyptian folk tale that had been brought to the Holy Land by Alexandrian Jews and altered to fit the Jewish culture. In the Jewish version of the Egyptian story, a rich publican and a poor rabbi both died and were buried. In paradise, the rabbi wandered along the beautiful streams, drinking his fill, while the publican stood helpless next to the water, parched; the more he sought to obtain refreshing and life-giving drink, the more it receded from him. 1

This story of the rich publican and the poor rabbi was probably a repackaged Egyptian story, known as the story of Setme and his son Si-Osiris. The story is a recontextualization, in my opinion, because the Egyptian story and the story told by Jesus, though referring to a reversal of fortunes in the afterlife, have differences between them that matter. The Egyptian story speaks of a miraculous reincarnated soul, for one thing. The contexts of both stories, while different in many aspects, have enough in common to

make scholars conclude that Jesus is probably borrowing from the older Egyptian tale. R.B. Bauckham tells us that this story is:

In a Demotic text written probably in the second half of the first century C.E., but, since Setme Khamuas was high priest of Memphis c. 1250 B.C.E., it is likely to be based on an older Egyptian tale. An Egyptian in Amente, the realm of the dead, was allowed to return to earth in order to deal with an Ethiopian magician who was proving too powerful for the magicians of Egypt. He was reincarnated as the miraculous child of a childless couple, Setme and his wife, and called Si-Osiris. When he reached the age of twelve he vanquished the Ethiopian magician and returned to Amente. But before this there was an occasion when father and son observed two funerals, one of a rich man buried in sumptuous clothing and with much mourning, the other of a poor man buried without ceremony or mourning. The father declared he would rather have the lot of the rich man than the pauper, but his son expressed the wish that his father's fate in Amente would be that of the pauper rather than that of the rich man. In order to justify his wish and demonstrate the reversal of fortunes in the afterlife, he took this father on a tour of the seven halls of Amente. The account of the first three halls is lost. In the fourth and fifth halls the dead were being punished. In the fifth hall was the rich man, with the pivot of the door of the hall fixed in his eye. In the sixth hall were gods and attendants, in the seventh a scene of judgment before Osiris. The pauper was to be seen, elevated to high rank, near Osiris. Si-Osiris explains to his father what they saw, and the fate of the three classes of the dead: those whose good deeds outnumber their bad deeds (like the pauper), those whose bad deeds outnumber their good deeds (like the rich man), and those whose good and bad deeds are equal. 2

It is noteworthy that Bauckham acknowledges the idea that Jesus is just repackaging one particular Egyptian story may not be the whole story. Jewish versions of this story existed at the time of Jesus, and he may have been drawing on ideas from both Jewish and Egyptian sources to tell the story we have in the book of Luke. Bauckham writes:

It is quite plausible that a version of the Egyptian and Jewish story was current in first-century Palestine and that Jesus would have known it. Thus (assuming the parable to be authentic) he could have borrowed the two motifs from it. On the other hand, he may well have known other stories which used one or both motifs. He could have known the motifs without consciously borrowing them from any one particular story. In any case, he has used them to construct a new story, which as a whole is not the same as any other extant story. 3

Why This Matters

Jesus was a real person, who lived in a time and within a certain culture. In his day, Jews repackaged, or recontextualized stories, scriptures, and poems to fit a certain particular point they were trying to convey. We see this throughout the New Testament, where authors take ideas and stories from the Old Testament, and recontextualize them to teach about Jesus. Jesus took this rather old Egyptian story to talk about the reversal of fortunes in the afterlife. He used this story to convey certain ideas that he wanted to emphasize to his audience. This is one way that Jewish prophets told stories, as is stated in 2 Nephi 25, they spoke after "the manner of prophesying among the Jews." We see this type of story

telling throughout scripture, from the creation accounts, to the stories of the birth of Moses and Jesus Christ.

Notes

Jay Parry, *Understanding the Parables of Jesus Christ*. See also: Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus*, 1978, p. 236.

Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1998, p. 97-98.

, p. 101.