

“The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) - A Narrative Criticism” - Ivan Tsao (MCS1)

Introduction

Parables are short stories with two levels of meaning which combine the qualities of narrative, metaphor, and brevity.¹ Notably, in both the Greco-Roman and rabbinic literary traditions, parable has a broader meaning and is not limited to narrative and may also include riddle, comparison, proverb and allegory.² Jesus frequently used parables in his teachings about the coming of the kingdom of God which was a central theme in His ministry. Jesus' parables were not sophisticated discourse but rather they were simple stories of everyday life yet thought provoking. And as always, the challenge of the parable is “Whoever has ears to hear, let that one hear.”³

Over the years, there have been numerous methodologies developed and applied to the interpretation of Jesus' parables. Amongst these are the earliest allegorical approach, later existentialist, structuralist and literary approaches, and recent comparisons between Jewish parables and Jesus' parables.

This study adopts the narrative criticism model to interpret the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) focusing on narrative features including structure, rhetoric, setting, characterization, and plot.

Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism has developed within the field of biblical studies and is based on ideas that have been used in the study of secular literature. A “window” and a “mirror” have often been used to compare historical critical method and narrative criticism respectively. Although metaphorically the key difference between these models is on which side of the “window” and “mirror” the meaning the text lies, in fact what is actually distinguished is the relationship between the reader and the text which in turn impacts on the meaning of the text. In the historical model the reader looks through the “window” into another time and another place, the meaning of the text therefore lies on the other side of the “window”. The relationship between the reader and the text in the historical model is minimal in that historical circumstances on the other side of the “window” is given more importance. By contrast, the narrative critical approach treats the text as a “mirror” and the meaning of the text lies on the reflective side of the “mirror” between the text and the reader. Meaning is therefore produced in the encounter of the reader with the text itself. The focus of narrative criticism is therefore a more text-centered approach and pays attention to the finished form of the text as well as its narrative character rather than the historical

¹ K. R. Snodgrass, “Parable,” *DJ&G*, 591. B. B. Scott proposes a definition for parable as a *mashal* that employs a short narrative fiction to reference a symbol and has devoted a whole chapter in his book to discuss the meaning of parables. See B. B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 7-62.

² See also David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus: Pictures of Revolution* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 12. The Greek word (*parabolh*) and the Hebrew and Aramaic word (*mashal/mathla*) have a wide meaning and includes pictorial sayings and stories of all sorts.

³ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 425.

circumstances of the actual readers for whom the text was originally intended.

There have been numerous discussions about the pros and cons of narrative criticism,⁴ and it must be emphasized that no one method of biblical exegesis holds the master key to interpretation. Rather, as Mark Allan Powell skillfully describes:⁵ “Different methodological approaches to exegetical study may be linked to a set of keys on a ring. The various keys open different doors and grant access to different insights.” In applying narrative criticism to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, it is hoped that some doors will be opened.

Implied Reader

In narrative criticism, the reader is an implied reader who is presupposed and construed by the text itself and is not to be confused with the original, historical or contemporary readers. The implied reader is a hypothetical concept which is a principle that sets the criteria for interpretation.⁶ Wolfgang Iser defines the implied reader as:⁷ “He embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader.”

Whilst it is acknowledged that the gospels are narratives in the context of 1st century Palestine, and that extrinsic information such as geography, history, cultural and anthropological backgrounds may provide insights, the questions which need to be addressed are: who is the implied reader and how much extra textual knowledge should an implied reader possess.

As the parable of the rich man and Lazarus appears within the context of the Gospel of Luke, the implied reader of the parable is necessarily the same as that of Luke. In his book *Images of Judaism in Luke-Acts*, Joseph Tyson⁸ draws an analogy between the implied reader and the “Godfearers” described in the Acts. In constructing the profile of the implied reader from Luke-Acts, Tyson has considered the implied reader’s knowledge of locations, person, languages, events, measurements of money, religious practices and literature. As a result, a profile of the implied reader of Luke-Acts is constructed to include features such as: being a generally well-educated person with basic knowledge of eastern Mediterranean geography, history, society and culture; only understands Greek but is comfortable with foreign terms and names; and has a limited knowledge of both pagan and Jewish religions but is familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures in their Greek translations. In this study, Tyson’s profile of the implied reader as Godfearer is adopted for the interpretation of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Given that some idea on the general cultural, political and historical context contributes to understanding any narrative as a story, the question is how much extra-biblical background should the

⁴ Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 85-101. See also D. Rhoads, “Narrative Criticism: Practices and Prospects,” in *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism*, eds D. Rhoads and K. Syreeni (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 2004), 265-285.

⁵ Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 101.

⁶ Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 21.

⁷ Joseph B. Tyson, *Images of Judaism in Luke-Acts* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina, 1992), 21, quoting Wolfgang Iser, “The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response,” (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), 34.

⁸ Tyson, *Images of Judaism*, 19-41.

implied reader know. It is submitted that some insights into the social system of 1st century eastern Mediterranean which was also the social context of the New Testament cannot be negated in the understanding of the parables.

Lukan Parables

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus appears in Luke only and not in the other Gospels, and in light of the emphasis on the unity of the text as a whole in narrative criticism, it is necessary to examine the parable within the context of Luke.

Scholars have attempted to categorise and classify Lukan parables in order to establish some kind of structure of the parables. Interestingly, the classification of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus differs. There have been suggestions that it falls into the parables about salvation, Joachim Jeremias categorizes the parable under “the challenge of the hour”, and B. B. Scott groups the parable under “Family, Village, City, and Beyond” to tie in with his analysis of the social and cultural context of the parables.⁹ David Wenham puts the parable under “Bad News for the Establishment” in his book.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the general consensus appears to be that there are overarching themes in Luke which includes concern for the poor¹¹, the right use of wealth¹² and reversal of situations.¹³ All these features are found in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. However, having said this, what then is the relation of this parable to its context in Luke. It is submitted that the context of Jesus’ conflicts with the Jewish authorities namely the scribes and Pharisees which are evident throughout Luke is a key to understand the parables in Luke. Notably the parables contained in chapters 14 to 16 are primarily addressed by Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees in light of the issues of conflicts that have been building up between them so far.¹⁴ These parables have a commonality of a strong contrast between rich and poor and are tailor-made by Jesus for the distinctly Jewish audience being addressed. Hence it is in this context that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is considered.

Story and Discourse

The parable is a story about a rich man and a poor man called Lazarus. The rich man enjoyed life everyday whereas Lazarus was hungry and dejected. However, their fortunes are reversed after death.

The structure of the parable is divided into two parts based on two spatial settings i.e. a life setting (16:19-22) and an afterlife setting (16:23-31). The rhetorical devices echo the structural organization and includes a narration in the first part and a dialogue in the second part. The use of Abraham’s dialogue in the second part of the parable is a powerful rhetoric device by which God’s evaluative point of view is made. The parable also makes reference to Moses and the Prophets i.e. the Hebrew Scriptures which

⁹ M. C. Parsons, “Landmarks Along the Way: The Function of the “L” Parables in the Lukan Travel Narrative,” *SWJT* 40, no.1 (Fall 1997): 34-36.

¹⁰ Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*.

¹¹ R. C. Tannerhill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, Volume 1: The Gospel According to Luke (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 127-128.

¹² Snodgrass, “Parable.” *DJ&G*, 600.

¹³ Tannerhill, *Narrative Unity*, 109-110.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 185

count as Word of God, hence the reader is expected to accept that God's point of view is true and right and furthermore God's point of view can be expressed via prophets and Scripture.¹⁵

Narrative criticism is interested in characterization i.e. the process through which the implied author provides the implied reader with what is necessary to reconstruct a character from the narrative.¹⁶ The characterization of the rich man and Lazarus employs both telling and showing. The description of the rich man's life style in the first part and his dialogue with Abraham in the second part are key means of showing his characterization.

Structure and Rhetoric

The parable begins with a narration¹⁷. The pattern of introduction of the rich man and Lazarus in the first part of the parable (16:19-21) ("Scene 1") contains a parallel arrangement¹⁸ and sets up contrasting pictures of the rich man and Lazarus:

- A a rich man was rich 16:19
- B a beggar by the name of Lazarus 16:20
- A he put on purple and fine linen 16:19
- B he was covered in sores 16:20
- A he feasted sumptuously 16:19
- B he desired to eat 16:21

Line A refers to the rich man and Line B refers to the poor man.

In the second part of the parable (16:24-31) ("Scene 2"), the narration pattern changes to a dialogue between the rich man and Abraham as the settings changes from life to afterlife. Sandwiched between the two scenes and prior to the start of the dialogue are 16:22 which relates to the death of the two men followed by the switch of settings from life to afterlife which is introduced by 16:23 beginning succinctly with the words "In hell".

The dialogue in Scene 2 is constructed of parallels and echoes the parallelism Scene 1:

- A he called to him, 'Father Abraham'
- B Abraham replied, 'Son'
- A he answered, 'Then I beg you, father'

¹⁵ Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁷ The parables found within the Gospels are, in effect, stories within stories. Jesus might be identified as the narrator and his audience the narratee. On another level, in the context of Luke, it may be that both Jesus and his audience are characters in a story being told to Theophilus by an unnamed narrator. See Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 27.

¹⁸ For a different arrangement, see also Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 146-147.

- B Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets'
- A he said, 'No, father Abraham'
- B Abraham said to him, 'If they do not listen'

Line A belongs to the rich man, Line B belongs to Abraham.

It is observed that there is a further chiastic pattern. In 16:19-22, the conditions of the rich man and Lazarus in life and at death are repeated in reverse order:

- A rich man dressed in purple and fine linen, feasted sumptuously
- B poor man thrown at gate, covered in sores and longing to be fed
- B' poor man died and carried by angels
- A' rich man died and buried

Similarly in 16:25 the rich man and Lazarus conditions in afterlife are repeated in reverse order and parallels the life pattern:

- A rich man received good things in lifetime
- B Lazarus received bad things in lifetime
- B' Lazarus comforted
- A' rich man in agony

These two sets of overlapping chiasms bring two separate worlds together i.e. life and afterlife. The interlocking pattern ties in with the theme of reversal of the parable.

Scene 1 (Luke 16:19-22)

Characters

The parable opens with the narrator speaking directly to the reader and presents the implied author's view of the rich man and Lazarus.

The rich man. The reader is blatantly told about that the man is rich, and his richness is further defined by his attire of purple and fine linen and his daily lifestyle of feasting sumptuously.

Lazarus. Set in contrast with the rich man is a beggar whose name is Lazarus. Notably, this is the only character in Jesus' parables that has a name. The question which then follows is why the name Lazarus? Many reasons have been given for the name. One way of looking at it is the literal meaning of

'Lazarus' which is derived from the Hebrew name Eleazar meaning "he whom God helps"¹⁹ and it has been suggested that the name serves to contrast the status of the two men, the rich being full of possessions and Lazarus has nothing except for a name which holds out a promise.²⁰ Interestingly, Richard Bauckham offers another explanation. In his view, the name is only necessary by virtue of the way the story is told, for in the second dialogue part of the parable, it would be cumbersome to address him if he had not been given a name.²¹

The better explanation appears to be that it goes to show that the rich man not only recognizes Lazarus but also knows him by name. Furthermore, it serves as powerful negative impact in relation to the rich man as he has no excuse and he cannot deny Lazarus' existence.

Lazarus is described as 'poor' twice (vv.20, 21). It appears that the 'term' poor may have many meanings in the Lukan world which was an honor-or shame-based peasant societies and may have a wider interpretation than pure economic condition. However, Lehtipuu's understanding of the term 'poor' as a symbol that can refer to different aspects in different contexts is correct.²² In this parable, 'poor' is understood as someone who is helpless and in need of help from others or from God. Hence this is a contrast with the rich man who has more than enough resources and does not need help from other people.

Dogs. The dogs here are not the domesticated pets but rather the scavengers and wild dogs viewed by the Palestinian Jews as if they were rats or unhealthy creatures. They were unclean and would have stung Lazarus' sores.²³ Hence, the dogs contribute to the mood of the story in intensifying Lazarus' extreme deprivation²⁴ and also to arouse the readers' sympathy. However, the role of the dogs may be understood in another way, in that they were Lazarus' companions.²⁵

Spatial Setting

There are two spatial settings in this parable, a life setting and afterlife setting. There is hardly any description of either settings and is left to the implied reader's imagination. However, the narrator does provide specific information on the life setting and they call for special attention for they serve particular roles within the parable: a "gate" at the rich man's house; the "*purple and fine linen*" worn by the rich man; and "*the crumbs from the table*".

¹⁹ However, Lehtipuu argues that as there is no proof that Luke knew Hebrew, and even if he did, his Greek speaking audience would certainly not have know Hebrew. And if the etymology of the name was important, it would have been explained explicitly by Luke as he has done elsewhere e.g. in Acts 4.36; 13.8. See O. Lehtipuu, "Characterization and Persuasion: The Rich Man and the Poor Man in Luke 16.19-31," in *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism*, eds D. Rhoads and K. Syreeni (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 2004), 90.

²⁰ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 149.

²¹ "The explanation may lie purely in the exigencies of the telling of the story. Since the theme of reversal of fortunes requires us no longer to regard the rich man as rich and the poor man as poor after his death, they cannot be designated as 'the rich man' and 'the poor man' after v.22. The nature of the narrative after v.22 makes any designation for the erstwhile rich man unnecessary (apart from Abraham addressing him as teknon, v.25, corresponding to his addressing Abraham as pater). But some way of referring to the erstwhile poor man becomes necessary (vv.23, 24, 25), and very cumbersome expressions would be required if he had not been given a name." See Richard Bauckham, "The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels," *NTS* 37 (Apr. 1991): 244.

²² Lehtipuu, *Characterization and Persuasion*, 86-87.

²³ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Illinois: IVP, 1993), 236.

²⁴ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 151.

²⁵ Lehtipuu, *Characterization and Persuasion*, 89.

Gate. There is no description of the rich man's house at all and the only piece of architectural element we are told about his house is that there is a "gate". This gate as a prop has a special role which is to serve as boundary between an inside setting where the rich man "lived in luxury everyday" and an outside setting where Lazarus laid hungry for "he longed to eat what fell from the rich man's table".

There is an element of irony here, although the inside may carry connotations of protection or security and the outside of danger respectively²⁶, the parable suggests that this may only be a false impression. For the inside protected setting in life is no guarantee of a similar setting in afterlife.

Further, despite the physical and invisible barrier created by the "gate", it is possible at least for the rich man to break the barrier. B. B. Scott is of the view that the rich man is potentially a patron in a limited-goods society where the places of rich and poor are fixed. Nevertheless, there remains an expectation that the rich man will become the poor man's patron²⁷ as Lazarus was put at the rich man's age which shows people's expectation of the rich man.

Purple and fine linen. The dress code of the man exemplifies his richness and his position in society. Purple and fine linen clothing is a sign of wealth and the colour purple also implicates royalty or official power. According to B. B. Scott, purple and fine linen place the man among the elite and among the top of the social scale.²⁸ In stark contrast to the rich man's costume is Lazarus' sores, although there is no mention of Lazarus' articles of clothing, it is submitted that the skin acquires the role of costume in this context in order contribute to the character contrasts.

Crumbs from the Table. Like the gate, the crumbs are props of the setting. According to Keener, the crumbs here may be regarded as regular crumbs or the pieces of bread used to sop up the table and these crumbs which fell from the rich man's table would have been sufficient to sustain Lazarus.²⁹ The crumbs contribute to the mood of the parable, the reader's sympathy is aroused for Lazarus did not expect much from the rich man but only crumbs for mere survival. The rich man's table where Lazarus has no fellowship is contrasted with God's table in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:30). This image of a table where bread crumbs fall is set in contrast with God's banquet as depicted by the use of the term 'Abraham's bosom' later on.

Temporal Setting³⁰

In 16:19 "every day" is a chronological reference to time. According to Resseguie³¹, what characters do on a daily basis highlights what is important or what they value. The rich man is described as feasting sumptuously "every day" and serves as a powerful indication of how the rich man lives out his life.

There is a typological reference³² in 16:22 indicating that "the time came" when the beggar died and

²⁶ Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism*, 70.

²⁷ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 149-151.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁹ Keener, *IVP Bible Commentary*, 236.

³⁰ Mark Allan Powell identifies two types of temporal settings: chronological and typological. See Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 72-73.

³¹ Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of NT*, 109

³² Typological reference indicates the "kind of time" in which an action takes place, and may be symbolic. See Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of NT*, 109.

then later the rich man also died. It is submitted the use the words “the time came” is filled with symbolic temporal notations, in that inevitably the time will come for everyone, it is a just matter of how soon.

Social Setting

It appears that in an honour-or shame-based society such as 1st century Palestine, the concept of rich and poor has a broader meaning that just economic conditions.³³ Further, it appears that the term “poor” has many meanings in Luke, it may be linked to physical conditions such as imprisonment, hunger, and mourning and may also refer to the spiritual meaning of being in need of God.³⁴ Hence, it is submitted that in the context of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, it would be reasonable to interpret the terms ‘poor’ and ‘rich’ as symbols of contrast between someone who is in need of help and someone who has sufficient resources and can survive without help from others.

According to Resseguie, the meal is one of the most common and important settings in the New Testament. Furthermore, table fellowship not only shapes community identity but also creates social boundaries.³⁵ Here, the social status between the rich man and Lazarus is further contrasted, the boundary created by the gate in the architectural setting is elaborated by the boundary in the social setting of table fellowship.

In 16:22, the beggar’s death is also contrasted with the rich man’s death. It is not clear whether Lazarus received a burial or not, but according to Judaism custom, every person, no matter how poor, was to receive a burial a lack of which seen as terrible was a scandal and curse.³⁶ Nevertheless, Lazarus was carried by angels to Abraham’s bosom, seemingly a much better place than where he was in life. The bosom of Abraham has several meanings, B. B. Scott suggests that the ‘Abraham’s bosom’ is a metaphor suggesting a child at a mother’s bosom or an honorary place for guests at a banquet.³⁷

The above completes the contrast between the rich man and Lazarus which is the plot of Scene 1. Interestingly, the implied reader is only told that Lazarus ended up in Abraham’s bosom after he died, but he/she is however left in suspense as to where the rich man went, the last event narrated is his burial. In verse 23, the narrator succinctly tells us where the rich man is as he opens with the words “in hell” and sends waves of shock to the audience of Jewish authorities. Given that there are no moral judgments on either the rich man and poor man, why the reversal of their fortune? What is the charge against the rich man? The scribes and Pharisees no doubt would have been provoked by this reversal.

Scene 2 (Luke 16: 23-31)

³³ Lehtipuu, *Characterization and Persuasion*, 86 quoting B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World*: 105-106.

³⁴ Lehtipuu, *Characterization and Persuasion*, 86-87.

³⁵ See James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 110-111.

³⁶ Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 152. See also Keener, *IVP Bible Commentary*, 236.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Characters

Notably, as the settings change from life to afterlife, the references to the characters similarly change. The key terms of 'rich man' and 'poor man' are no longer used in afterlife, instead 'rich man' is referred to as 'son' by Abraham and Lazarus is called by name.

Lazarus. Like in Scene 1, Lazarus remains passive in Scene 2. For Tyson, his view is that Lazarus as a character shows that, for Luke, poor and oppressed Jews will have a special place in the coming judgment.³⁸ It is however submitted that despite the fact that Lazarus is a background figure, the silence and passivity are powerful symbolic devices. The inference which may be drawn is that it actually reflects life situations in that the poor and dejected easily recede into the backdrops of life. They may be passive but they may also be in close proximity and the question is: do we see them or are we blind? His passivity may also indicate that it is God (with His angels) who will be his ultimate patron.

Rich Man. In Scene 2, the rich man's characterization is further developed and the narrator continues to paint a negative picture of the rich man in his dialogue with Abraham. Note that the rich man's first utterance in the parable is 'Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.' It is evident that the rich man is still holding on to his social status here, whilst addressing Abraham honorably as Father, he thinks that he can still order Lazarus (the beggar lying outside his gate) around to perform menial tasks for him.

Abraham. The Judaism culture forms the backdrop to the conversation between the rich man and Abraham. The conversation between Abraham and the rich man is set in a distinctively Jewish perspective. From the dialogue, it appears that there is a special relationship between them as they address each other as father and son. Lehtipuu suggests several roles for Abraham in the afterlife serves as a fitting spokesman for God, to be a companion and consoler to Lazarus, being a child of Abraham means belonging to God's family and as an authoritative voice in the story who mediates God's judgment.³⁹ It is submitted that Abraham's primary role serves as a rhetoric device to explain God's point of view and Jesus' point of view, which is what the implied reader should understand and hence a key to the interpretation of the parable.

The rich man is a descendant of Abraham who is a respected figure representing the historic basis of the Jewish and it is a privilege to be called the son of Abraham. However, to the disappointment of the Jewish audience, calling Abraham a father seemingly does not help the rich man. Lehtipuu again is quick to point out that the rich man's address of father to Abraham should remind of the reader of the words of John the Baptist in Luke 3:8: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."⁴⁰

The rich man's brothers. Lehtipuu is of the view that the brothers do not serve to add complexity to the rich man's characterization, rather they function as a device to move the story along.⁴¹ It is submitted that the brothers invite empathy from implied reader. Another interesting observation is whether the

³⁸ Tyson, *Images of Judaism*, 72.

³⁹ Lehtipuu, *Characterization and Persuasion*, 99-100.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 98

⁴¹ Lehtipuu, *Characterization and Persuasion*, 93.

scribes and Pharisees empathized with the brothers for after all they were Jesus' target audience.

Spatial Setting

According to Powell, in the synoptic gospels, the narrator's perception is limited spatially and temporarily to earthly realm. Hence descriptions of heaven and hell are offered only by characters in the stories, never by the narrators themselves.⁴²

Hence, in the afterlife setting, the narrative does not provide an image of Hades, the great chasm and where Lazarus is. The reader is only told that where Lazarus is there is water and the water is cool, but there is fire in Hades⁴³ where the rich man is in anguish and torment.

The only landscape depicted in afterlife is "a great chasm" which separates Hades and Abraham and Lazarus. It is submitted that the great chasm is symbolic and serves to contrast the dual function of the "gate" which can let in and keep out, the boundary created by the "great chasm" cannot be crossed. There are times when things can be crossed and there are times when they can no longer be.

Temporal Setting

In 16:25 there are two typological references to time in scene 2 and they represent the "kind of time" in which an action takes place. In his "lifetime" the rich man received his good things and this is contrasted with not only Lazarus is being comforted "now" but also the rich man is in agony "now". The significance of these temporal settings further develops and elaborates the reversal theme of this parable.

The Plot

The plot of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus appears to be a masterplot⁴⁴ in that it deals with the question of where one is going and pivots upon the reversal issue after death. However, the plot requires one to ask why do things happen as they do?

Why the reversal? Nowhere in the story is moral judgment passed or standards of judgment provided. Lazarus is not characterized as pious, nor is the rich man described as ungodly. The explanation for the reversal of fortune is given by Abraham in 16:25 which is that the rich man received good things in life and Lazarus received bad things. The cause and effect in verse 25 is not adequate nor satisfactory and would certainly not have satisfied Jesus' Jewish audience. But the narrative does indicate that the condition of the rich man 'now' could be avoided if had done things differently 'then'. That is why he proposed to go back to his five brothers to be a witness to them so that they could avoid this future pain (16:28).

Scholars have drawn similarities between this parable and a rabbinic story of uncertain date.⁴⁵

⁴² Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 26.

⁴³ Jewish literature often portrayed hell as involving burning. See Keener, *IVP Bible Commentary*, 236.

⁴⁴ Masterplots are "recurrent skeletal stories, belonging to cultures and individuals that play a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and the understanding of life." See Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of NT*, 203.

⁴⁵ Keener, *IVP Bible Commentary*, 235.

Jeremias Joachim argues that in order to understand the parable as a whole, it is essential to recognize that the first part (Scene 1) derives from well-known folk-material concerned with the reversal of fortune in the after life.⁴⁶ The lack of emphasis on the rich man's guilt is explained by the fact that Jesus was drawing on material which was well known to his hearers. However, it is submitted that this extra textual information should not be imputed into the implied reader in the context of narrative criticism.

What would the rich man tell his brothers if he were allowed to go back? The sequence of the narrative suggests that rich man never got the point. However, in response to his appeal for his brothers, Abraham says, "They have Moses and the Prophet; let them hear them." Given that the audience of the parable are the scribes and Pharisees, and that the latter claim to be conversant with the Torah, are not the demands of the law and prophets for compassion amply spelt out? And if only one would refer to a few passages in the Old Testament (Moses and the Prophets), is not the answer stunningly clear?

"If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs...There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land." (Deuteronomy 15:1-11)

"Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Isaiah 58:7)

Conclusion

Interestingly, in spite of the clarity of the Moses and the prophets, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus suggests the Pharisees have misread and misinterpreted the scriptures. To conclude, Tyson's question is posed for reflection: "It seems more appropriate to think of any wealthy persons who, though they know the scriptures, nevertheless reject Jesus, and it is difficult to say whether it is wealth or misinterpretation of scripture that is the more serious impediment."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke, revised 3rd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2003), 182-187. This is the Egyptian folk-tale of the journey of Si-Osiris, the son of Setme Chamo" is to the under-world, which concludes with the words: 'He who has been good on earth, will be blessed in the kingdom of the dead, and he who has been evil on earth, will suffer in the kingdom of the dead.' Alexandrian Jews brought this story to Palestine, where it became very popular as the story of the poor scholar and the rich publican Bar Ma'jan. That Jesus was familiar with the story is proved by the fact that he has used it in the parable of the Great Supper.

⁴⁷ Tyson, *Images of Judaism*, 73.